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Questions on Queer Game Design: An interview between Jess Marcotte and Kara Stone

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community organizing intersectional feminism practitioners interview praxis-focused research queer game design

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This co-interview between game designers and scholars Jess Marcotte and Kara Stone takes up questions about queer game design as a critical and reflective scholarly practice, and the ways in which we represent sex and sexuality in videogames. In it, we take turns asking each other questions on the respective videogames that we have designed, our approaches to art-making, community organizing, and the way queer and feminist theory influence us, while also interrogating what it means (for us) to be queer game designers and pondering the future of queerness and games. In so doing, we explore our paths into this art form and provide insight into how our trajectories were influenced by initiatives with the goal of bringing in new voices and fostering inclusion in the field of games. As artist-scholars, we provide perspectives on how our differences of positionality bring difference to our art practices, community organizing efforts, and design approaches. Alternative design practices in non-commercial spaces can provide the conditions needed for experimental work that may fail" by industry standards, but that pushes games into new, exciting, and queer territories.

Jess Rowan Marcotte is a queer nonbinary game designer, writer, intersectional feminist, and PhD candidate at Concordia University. Their work has been showcased at IndieCade, E3, and Ars Electronica. Some of their games include "TRACES", "In Tune: a game about navigating consent", "rustle your leaves to me softly," "The Truly Terrific Traveling Troubleshooter" and

"transgalactica: A Tune Your Own Adventure." Their dissertation explores physical-digital hybrid game experiences from intersectional feminist and critical design perspectives. They are a QGCon (The Queerness and Games Conference) co-organizer.

Kara Stone is an artist and scholar interested in the affective and gendered experiences of mental illness and healing as it relates to game design. Her artwork has been featured in *The Atlantic*, *Wired*, and *Vice*. She is a member of the Different Games Collective. She holds a BFA in Film Production and master's degree in Communication and Culture from York University, and is currently a PhD student in Film and Digital Media with a designated emphasis in Feminist Studies at University of California at Santa Cruz.

Introduction

This co-interview between game designers and scholars Jess Marcotte and Kara Stone takes up questions about queer game design as a critical and reflective scholarly practice, and the ways in which we represent sex and sexuality in videogames. In it, we take turns asking each other questions on the respective videogames that we have designed, our approaches to art-making, community organizing, and the way queer and feminist theory influence us. We ask each other questions and trade answers on the theories we find most inspiring, how we consider representing sex and intimacy in a participatory, playful media like videogames, and how we understand queerness as embedded in a playful, reflective design process. It is our hope that this conversation provides one (or two) possible blueprints for designing queer games, designing games queerly, and designing for queer communities, while also bringing light the confusing, murky and contradictory aspects within finding queerness in gamesAs artist-scholars, we provide perspectives on how our differences of positionality bring difference to our art practices, community organizing efforts, and design approaches. The received norms and best practices" of the industry suggest a somewhat rigid way of approaching design in order to maximize monetary interests which can lead to risk-averse practices (for a thorough discussion, see: Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's *Games of Empire*). Alternative design practices in non-commercial spaces can provide the conditions needed for experimental work that may fail" by industry standards, but that pushes games into new, exciting, and queer territories.

Kara: To begin, I'm very curious about how you "came to" making and studying games. We have both starting making and studying games before the prevalence and popularity of game

design programs in universities, and we are both now not in departments specifically focused on videogames. How did you come to games, and do you feel like you are "in games"?

Jess: Up until 2013, the closest that I came to designing a game (outside of childhood play) was designing and writing adventures for tabletop games to play with my friends. When I was writing my Master's thesis (a creative writing thesis about short stories, scuba diving, and accessibility of specialized language through contextualization), I was offered a small contract to write some games' journalism for the lab that I now study at (TAG lab). Simultaneously, I made my first game in a group while covering Global Game Jam 2013 (it was really pretty awful, and the group was far too large for a jam), and made my first solo game while writing about my experience in the Pixelles Montreal follow-along program [1]. That was the first year that the Incubator ran, so it was really very fortuitous. From there, there always seemed to be another chance to learn more about designing and making games. My first game design class was with Pippin Barr, and it was all about making curious games" — small game projects that sort of ran counter to industry best practices and teased rather than pleased." So, Pippin ruined me forever for AAA games.

So now, I've been making games for around six years. I don't really feel like I'm in games" — maybe that's partially just an image thing, when I think of my friends in mainstream studios and AAA, and what their companies are making. I feel like I make games but I'm not in games" — I think what I do is closer to somewhere between interaction design and interactive art, maybe? I definitely think that there are other people who are making things that look like what I'm making, but none of them are in mainstream games. I guess this also has something to do with commercialization of a product, to a degree.

How about you, Kara? If I remember right, you started to make games through a similar initiative to Pixelles in Toronto, right? How did you come to games and where do you situate yourself?

Kara: It was also in 2013 when I started. What a big year! I was already in my masters then. Someone in my program heard I liked videogames and invited me to a talk on feminism in games at Toronto's Vector Festival. The panel consisted of Alison Harvey, Cecily Carver, Sandra Danilovic, Cindy Poremba[2], Rachel Weil, and Emma Westecott – all feminist games people that have continued to inspire me! Up until then, I had been in various art schools for 10 years already, but no one once talked about videogames as a possible medium, so when Cecily Carver, then of Dames Making Games, a not-for-profit organization for marginalized identities to make games similar to

Montreal's Pixelles, spoke about non-men making games, I immediately wanted in. I went up to her right after and asked her how to join DMG, where I then made my first game *Meditation Meditation*. *Medication Meditation* was received much better than I would have expected; an article about it was published in The Atlantic, which pulled me into the indie games scene – which I just learned existed. I "pivoted" my masters thesis from mental illness in experimental video to mental illness in videogames and have continued with that path ever since. Most of my artistic and academic practice is concerned with psychosocial disability, sexuality, and politicizing "feelings."

I wonder about this question of "belonging in videogames" because of the way games culture pushes non-white men out. There are systems at play that are supposed to make us feel like we don't belong, which is possibly all the more reason to state "I belong!". And yet the only time I feel as if I belong in games is when I am at academic feminist games conferences, never industry events and rarely in community organizations – though even that is only sometimes because I am much more familiar with feminist theory and cultural studies than I am with game studies "canon." (I taught a game studies course before I ever took one!). I have very rarely struggled with feelings of non-belonging; I felt like I belonged in theatre, in experimental video, in art galleries, and in all the different departments of my three degrees. This is largely in part due to cis and white privilege, that those spaces have already been carved out for white cis women like myself. What does it mean for me to not belong in games, when I have made games that have been critically received, displayed at festivals and art galleries, have spoken at huge industry events, and am in a collective organizing for social justice in videogames (the Different Games Collective)? A sense of non/belonging is quite fundamental (or at least very common. I wouldn't say it is necessarily inherent!) for the queerness; feeling different, excluded, and in search of a queer community that is sometimes never found.

Have you found a sense of belonging in queerness, and how does that sense inform your approach to game design, game studies, and community organizing?

Jess: I've absolutely found a sense of belonging in queerness that I didn't expect. I mean that in a very personal way: embracing my queerness helped me feel like I belonged to myself. By claiming my queer identity, I was able to more fully allow myself to be who I am. I was able to claim a greater sense of agency and control, and more fully resist certain expectations of who I ought to be and who I ought to like. That has been an amazing experience.

That change has reflected positively in almost every area of my life. That renewed sense of agency has been important to me. Knowing how powerful it can be to be able to have that, I want it for

others as well. Wanting to create spaces where other people can feel recognized and called to drives a great deal of my approach to design, game studies, and community organizing.

In my creative work, I see this manifesting in the kinds of games that I make. I want to facilitate reflection, moments of questioning, and conversations. I try to do that by creating games about topics that matter to me (usually from an intersectional feminist perspective) where the difficulty of the mechanics or interactions in the game isn't a barrier to engaging with the work as much as possible (unless that difficulty is part of what is being explored). That's one of the reasons why I often work with alternative control schemes (although I also just find alt controllers, their materiality, and the possibilities that they open up for different kinds of interactions compelling). This has been the case from when I first started making games, but I was introduced to a framework called Reflective Game Design" (created by my supervisor, Dr. Rilla Khaled) when I started my doctorate that formalizes and puts into words some of the theory behind those impulses. My work in game studies is deeply entangled with my design work, because I write largely about design.

In terms of finding queer community and community organization: I don't think that I have found a community in a traditional, stable sense. My community isn't bound to one geographical location, and we don't have a meeting spot like a church or a sports stadium. The faces in the spaces that I have been organizing change all the time. There's a fluidity to the composition of the community, and I think that's okay. People need different things at different points in their lives. I think that what is particularly enduring with events like QGCon (one of the events that I co-organize) is the idea of a space where, even temporarily, and even if only within a very limited scope, we can suspend many of the norms and rules imposed upon us from the kyriarchy and agree to behave a certain way toward each other, with a certain set of agreed-upon values and a certain vulnerability. Many of the community spaces that I have been in have not been able to sustain themselves indefinitely (such as the Mount Royal Games Society, which I co-organized Princess of Arcade for) because they rely on labours of love from a small group of people whose circumstances eventually change.

But these initiatives and communities are no less valuable for their ephemerality, and I've noticed that new community spaces and groups emerge from the needs of the community. I never intended to become a community organizer, but I have often stepped up when I have felt able to assist and accomplish a task. That often winds up translating into eventually stepping into an organizational role. So, I guess allowing initiatives to end when they can no longer be sustained, seeing what

events and opportunities emerge that match my values, and seeing where I am able to assist, is my queer way of community organizing.

In your own community organization roles and creative collaborations, have you ever found your queer, intersectional approach to organizing and designing created friction between succeeding" by hegemonic, capitalist metrics and preserving your health and values?

Kara: Ha! Yes, and recently. It is possibly impossible to do anti-capitalist work at or with the university as it has become a corporate for-profit business, even at public universities I've attended, where they expect all non-academic organizations to feel indebted to them, where they don't understand non-hierarchical collective models, nor social justice inclusive practices. I personally think it is ok to make temporary coalitions with institutions where we can agree on some terms and goals, but never be fully consumed by it. This means that they often dissolve, like you said, when it becomes unable to make affordances that compromise the group's ethics. In my current departments, I'm lucky enough to be surrounded by those who are "working from within" but that means they are constantly *working against*, which is exhausting. That working against is necessary and when one is a community of those working against, it is transformative. When it is an individual working against, it is debilitating. In a way, it is productive to not belong, to not be assimilated into the institution or dominant culture, but I find there is a necessity to finding a community to make it bearable.

Your points about designing for belonging and reflection really resonate with me. I wonder if we have a diverging outlook on how we approach our art. Let me explain:

There is belonging through community as we have spoken about but you also point to belonging through witnessing and participating in the art piece itself; in other words, art can be a mode of belonging. Of course, representation is massively important in this: to see yourself as an identity represented on the screen. Representation doesn't necessarily have to be bodies, it can also mean representing an outlook or experience that one identifies with. Beyond representation in those forms, the design structure and mechanics contribute (but do not solely create!) the meaning of the piece. Bo Ruberg's [2017] work on queer mechanics and queerness inherent in games is a great explanation. My first game *Medication Meditation* portrays daily minutiae of living with psychosocial disability, though there is no character in it with psychosocial disability – no characters at all. It is designed so that there is no winning, no losing, no score, no defined progress.

Figure 1. Screenshots of three levels from Medication Meditation. Source: Kara Stone.

This was important to me as for most of us with psychosocial disability, there is no winning or overcoming, and being concerned with "score" or improvement actually negatively affects us. *Medication Meditation* was my first art piece that was successful, as I mentioned. It led to me receiving emails from strangers telling me about their experience with mental illness, or their brother's, or how the game helped them. It was the first time I realized that if I am more honest and emotional and pour that into my work, the more possibility of affective resonance the audience has. I did not and still do not set out thinking about the audience. I know that's a very looked-down upon thing in game design! I'm really not player-focused. I've even released a game with zero play-testing. It's possibly because I come from the arts where art is most often still viewed as personal expression, not design. I want my idea to be somewhat communicable and interpretable by the audience, but it's almost secondary to me.

My process of creating now has been about self-reflection and exploration of ideas I don't understand yet. It is not demonstrative, not "I know this or experience this and now I am creating this piece to represent that knowledge." It is difficult to explain as it is not the norm, where we view art as communicating something already known. I fall back on the notion that the artist knows already before the art is formed. Even if you look above at me talking about *Medication Meditation*, I do this. But really, I did not know all of that before making it! I came to know it through the process of making it. There are ideas. in the game I did not realize until well after it had been released. I write about this phenomenon in my article *Time and Reparative Game Design: Queerness, Disability, and Affect* (2018). *the earth is a better person than me* is clear example of being selfish in the design process. It's a highly personal game – though not specifically about me, I'm not a character in it, and not all the experiences in it have happened to me. I drew from myself, as well as friends, as well as stories, and took them to a fictionalized but what I see as natural conclusion. The process was incredibly personal. I made it alone, so the writing, art, and programming was all myself. I did it not to demonstrate an idea or experience, nor to make other people belong, but to reflect and understand myself and the world better. But the feedback I received for it was amazing. People wrote long letters about how they related to Delphine, the main character, to her fear of her own sexuality, her suicidality, her masochism, her self hatred. The piece

worked to give people a sense of belonging, a “I feel that way too!”, as it expressed things that are rarely expressed in media. It doubles back to me too; when someone says they relate, I think “Wow! I’m not alone!”.

I wonder, does it make a difference if I am not player-oriented when I am designing if the outcome of belonging and recognition is the same? Or is the belonging and recognition even more powerful because it is so personally and inwardly focused? Am I right in the assumptions I make that distinguish between art and design? What is your relationship to the player in your design process? Furthermore, would you describe your design process as queer (and how do you understand queerness?) As playful?

Jess: I think that deeply personal work is more likely to find deeper resonance with some particular people than something that we design that’s meant to appeal to everyone. When I said that the accessibility of the controls was important to my games, that’s also because the themes and subjects that I’m exploring often ask players for a little extra work when it comes to engaging with them, so that’s the tradeoff. Committing in good faith to having a sensual (through partially fictionalized) experience with a plant, like Squinky and I ask players to do with *rustle your leaves to me softly* (2017) or being asked to speak vulnerably about one’s personal experiences with oppressive forces like in *Flip the Script!* (2018) is not the usual ask for games. I think, as you rightly point out, these practices have a fair bit more in common with artistic performances. Because my work often deals with these physical, embodied experiences with control, with components that might need to be repaired or that players might need guidance about, I’m also usually present when my games are being shown. So, I almost have to watch players engage with my work, or in some cases outright facilitate like a gamemaster for a tabletop RPG. I can’t seem to avoid them!

Figure 2. The puppets of Flip the Script! and a plant interface from rustle your leaves to me softly. Source: Jess Marcotte and the TAG Research Lab.

At the same time, while I do wonder about and take into consideration whether my games will be accessible to players (via their controls, or via the language I choose to explain myself), I never wonder if the topics will be of interest to anyone else. I sort of trust that if it's interesting to me, that it will call to someone else, too. In that way, my practice is also inward-looking. I usually make games about topics that I have questions about or want to work through ideas about — so, it seems like we share that in common! I think my most didactic-feeling games are *In Tune* (2014), *The Truly Terrific Traveling Troubleshooter* (2017) and *Flip the Script!* (2018). They're also games that I worried the most about when playtesting because they ask players to trust that I know what I'm doing as a designer when in fact these are definitely my (well-considered, hopefully well-researched) best guesses about how to make a game about consent, or emotional labour and active listening through divination, or intersectionality with puppets.

You were one of the first players to play *The Truly Terrific Traveling Troubleshooter* at QGCon 2017, and that playthrough necessarily made me change how we had been planning to present it. I had to rethink how I was introducing the game and what my role as the designer was. Ever since, the experience involves more gamemastering" and my showperson patter. Having the opportunity to adjust play experiences on the fly for these kinds of physical-digital hybrid games is another reason why eventually I have to turn my attention to players and the play experience.

I've had so much trouble defining queerness because it's such a messy, satisfyingly ambiguous term. I think of queerness as being about our desires for ourselves and our own bodies as well as our desires for others. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2007) does some definitional work that I really appreciate around queerness as an orientation — and as a re-orientation of normative desires.

She talks about queerness as a matter of sexual orientation and sexual practices as well as a matter of deviation and obliqueness.

At a very basic level, I think my design process is queer by virtue of the fact that the approaches and results do not look very much like normative game design practices. The subject matter definitely plays into that — making a game about consent isn't very much like making a first person shooter game. I think the subjects I'm dealing with demand new mechanics and new ways of approaching the design work because the experiences I'm aiming for are not the usual fare. My goals are also different: I have the privilege of, at least for now, designing games without worrying about their commercial viability, and that's very freeing in terms of subject matter and form — like the way that I am constantly making bespoke, handmade custom controllers that are not easy to replicate or share (I'm a bit annoyed at myself for that). It is really only in the past two years that my games have had explicitly queer content — the ecosexuality" of *rustle your leaves to me softly* or the trans space traveler in *transgalactica: A Tune Your Own Adventure* (2018). My current work-in-progress is about trans time travelers coming to a world and time something like ours.

Figure 3. Screenshots from transgalactica: a tune your own adventure. Source: Jess Marcotte and Dietrich Squinkifer.

As to whether my design process is playful, I would say that there are periods of playfulness, such as when designing puppets or a controller, and periods of very serious, almost sombre work, where I work through a lot of fears and doubts, such worrying about whether my games might cause harm to people if I haven't designed them well or fail to facilitate them well, or worrying about my own ability to complete the work that I set out for myself. The resulting games usually have a lot of inherent humour to them coming out of the play, and humour is such a helpful way of disarming people, helping them feel comfortable, and facilitating discussions on difficult topics.

If I'm not mistaken, I think that we both claimed" our queerness and became more open about it well into adulthood. How does this change the way you consider your work in hindsight" if at all, and are there revelations that came out of that? How do you define queerness and do you think of your own design practice as queer? How do you feel about the potential for expansiveness (maybe over-expansiveness?) in the term?

Kara: "Well into adulthood" meaning in our twenties! I knew I liked women and wanted to date women since I was 14, but actively avoided labels including straight. I still do! When being asked about my sexuality and identity, a large part of me is like, "it's not your business, butt out!" I suppose that is why I like the term queer, because it is blurry and vague and all people really know from it is that I'm not straight. I image that without queer theory I would never identify myself or my work as queer, as I came to feel theoretically and politically aligned with queer theory the more I learned of it, forming queerness as an orientation towards something and away from others, like you mentioned. There are still things in my sexuality and my work on sexuality that are currently "inexpressible" – and I think there is power in keeping it opaque. And not letting it be fully defined by popular notions of queer identity. Though I am hesitant to divorce it from the sexual and the gendered, and definitionally move it to something as broad as "the non-normative." I understand the rhetorical device to argue queerness in everything, to make it natural and indestructible, but in a practical way I worry it falls apart. If queerness is opened up to be non-normative, that includes quite a few cis straight men indie game designers, and I worry that will then make people be act as if, 'well it's already queer so no reason to include other people.'

This question about hindsight is really interesting because we eternally the "most right" in the present. Here I automatically thought of *Sext Adventure* (2014), a game where the player sexts with a fake chat bot. There is no real chat bot, I wrote all the paths, but it's portrayed as if it is a procedurally created individualized experiences.

Figure 4. Screenshot of Sext Adventure. Source: Kara Stone.

That fiction purposefully breaks down as the narratives continues; the bot confuses gendered body parts, accidentally sending you a harry, masculine chest, rather than full breasts. The bot character sometimes tries to assert its own sexuality, or expresses frustration at being overworked. It doesn't understand humanness. At the time, I was engaging in an imaginary conceptualizing of what robots would make of human sexuality and gender, trying to de-naturalize it. Now, I can see it simultaneously as an expression of my queerness and sexuality at the time: not fitting nicely into the hetero/homo dichotomy, being confused about myself, and frustrated at others' expectations of me. When we are open and honest and genuine, things seep out we don't realize, or may never realize. I did not realize that *Sext Adventure* could be interpreted as an expression of my own sexuality until Bo Ruberg interviewed me as research for a book on queer games. This does not mean it is the most "right" interpretation, but one that resonate in this moment – and is open to change.

My work is predominantly concerned with psychosocial disability, but of course it's a mistake to view psychosocial disability as divorced from queerness – or from race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Oppression operates in part by debilitating lives. *Sext Adventure* and *the earth is a better person than me* are explicitly about sex, and queer sexual desire. *Ritual of the Moon* contains a queer romance narrative. Regardless of content or representation, my process of designing has queer theory weaved into it. I am working on what I call *reparative game design*, a way of orienting game design towards healing, healing as a process and never an end-goal. This is based off queer theorist Eve Sedgwick's reparative reading, which argues that the dominant mode of analysis in academia is paranoid, and focused on pointing out more queer wounds rather than healing them. I

would never say that videogames can heal people; at least not more than other forms of art can! Art can contribute to a paradigm shift that aligns people with healing practices and orientations. When thinking about queerness is this intrinsic way, I want to be careful not to suggest that everything I do is queer because I am queer, or I am trying to form a queer practice. There are times in which I may re-inscribe heteronormativity if I'm not conscious and careful, as heteronormativity is so pervasive we need to be constantly tearing it down.

You wrote above on the sensuality of your work, particularly *rustle your leaves to me softly*, and the materiality of *The Truly Terrific Traveling Troubleshooter*. Can you speak more about how you conceptualize sensuality and materiality, and why it is important to your work? Is there something necessarily sexual in the sensual? From there, I'm interested in this move of queer theorists such as Carla Freccero and Mel Chen to study the non-human. Artists Beth Stevens and Annie Sprinkle described themselves as once lesbians and now eco-sexuals. What's going on here? What's the connection between queerness and the non-human? How did you and Squinky engage with these ideas in *rustle your leaves to me softly?*

Jess: There's a lot to unpack here! I take each project in its own terms when it comes to both sensuality and materiality, but if I had to give one major conceptual opinion about them, it would be that both are under-utilized in mainstream game design. Materiality in particular demands that either the designer reframe and recontextualize existing materials that are commonly-found in games, or that they make something custom. So I understand why this is the case, but it is still disappointing. As to sensuality, I do think that vulnerability and a certain kind of intimacy is necessary to allowing ourselves to experience the sensual openly, but there's nothing necessary sexual in the sensual. I think that the two may be often conflated because many people only allow themselves that kind of vulnerability and intimacy when it comes to sex and romance. The word definitely shows that in its connotations, but it is certainly not inextricable. Each of these concepts becomes important to the current project that I am making as I develop the project in context — so, I would say that in that way, materiality and sensuality are important to that specific project, not to my work globally. But then, because that keeps happening project after project, I can no longer say that they're not important to my work generally. It took awhile for me to embrace that particularity of my practice as it is now, along with the frequent need for human facilitation. That is how I wound up studying hybrid games.

Before making *rustle your leaves to me softly*, I had read Karen Barad's Posthuman Performativity", and Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, but I hadn't read books like Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet,* or Mel Chen's *Animacies,* for example, which I have read since. *rustle your leaves to me softly* sort of came partially out of secondhand accounts of the theorists that you've mentioned — a friend and fellow designer and student, Ida Toft, was very interested in designing games for non-human entities, and we had some discussions about the topic. It was intriguing to me even though I didn't know much about it — so I made a game with Dietrich Squinkifer to explore some ideas and thoughts about it!

Squinky and I made this game for Global Game Jam 2017, and our local site was sponsored by a Sustainability Action Fund, so there were a lot of plants hanging around as we brainstormed. Another designer, who ultimately couldn't continue the jam with us brought in the idea of ASMR (Auto-Sensory Meridian Response), and we decided to think about what kind of ASMR a plant would enjoy and want to share with their partner (in this case, a human).

I think that the non-human helps us to conceptualize needs and desires outside of our own, which we might otherwise tend to universalize. I think also it is important to recognize that in popular culture, particularly in games, queerness is often dehumanized, or figured as monstrous (inhuman or non-human). There is excellent work on how disability, mental health, and queerness is figured as monstrous in Adan Jerreat-Poole's introduction to their First Person Scholar issue, Mad/Crip Games and Play" — and, what's more, it uses plant-femme Poison Ivy as a key touchstone (2018).

I think that there is also something to be said about how plant metaphors are used in poetry as sensual and sexual metaphors — this is something that I was playing with when writing *rustle your leaves to me softly*. Words like root", stem", nectar", and bud" have long been sensualized, way before the term eco-sexual came into vogue. Maybe there is also something to be said about how many humans relate to ecological milieus as sensory/sensual places. Maybe the idea of raw, untouched nature", which is obviously a construct, helps us to access our desires for our own bodies outside of the contexts and structures that might otherwise normally bound and restrict us. The human body in nature"…we can almost pretend that we are leaving certain structures behind. But even the idea of nature" and the natural, of the nature preserve, is a product of those structures. National Park systems, like Canada's, for example, restrict indigenous people from using their own land as they would have traditionally, because for example, you cannot set up residence in a national park for longer than a certain amount of days, and certain traditional activities are

considered illegal. So, they're inherently bound by colonialist rhetoric about humans and human activities as separate from nature.

Kara: Can you talk about the reception to your videogames on queer and trans experience? What has the feedback been like? In what capacity and to what audience do you find them best shown?

Jess: For those games (and I'm thinking specifically of *In Tune*, *transgalactica* and *rustle your leaves to me softly* as having the most explicit trans/queer content), I've been able to share and showcase them in vastly different ways. For example, *transgalactica* is one of my few recent games that is completely digital, so we were sort of able to share it widely on the internet. I think that's how that particular game is best — at home, alone, where you can take your time with it and there's no pressure for how long you take with each message. There's no pressure to even continue on to the ending at all if you don't want to (although I hope people do, because I'm proud of the writing). Multiple players have told us that they spent a lot of time just losing themselves in the sounds and in Squinky's music. Generally, I think that it's a game about affirmation, humour, and being tired, and people seemed to respond to that on a personal level. It was shared widely on Twitter, for example.

It also recently got written up as part of a preview for this year's QGCon arcade in *RockPaperShotgun*. I think most arcades would not have suited this game, but QGCon's context is friendly and experimental and, well, super queer. I left a notebook there over the course of the weekend for people to write comments in, and people wrote down their favourite radio stations — their own messages to other players and to us.

rustle your leaves to me softly is an installation game, so in most cases, I have been present for its major showcases (which have been a lot fewer since it involves live plants). For some people, the ASMR effect is really strong, and coupled with the words that the plants are saying, I've seen quite a few blushes and giggles. People tend to want to talk about it afterwards if I'm hanging around. Mostly, in game contexts, the response has been surprise to the sincere intimacy of the context.

Recently, *rustle* went to Linz this past September for *Ars Electronica*, which is a large electronic arts festival in Austria, as part of the Taking Care" exhibit at AECampus that was curated by the Hexagram Network here in Montreal. There was a lot less surprise in that more arts-focused" context — (but it was also a harder context because of the particulars of the setup — short plinths,

no seats, and some technical issues at first). We also left it alone most of the time, though I popped in to watch people play out of habit.

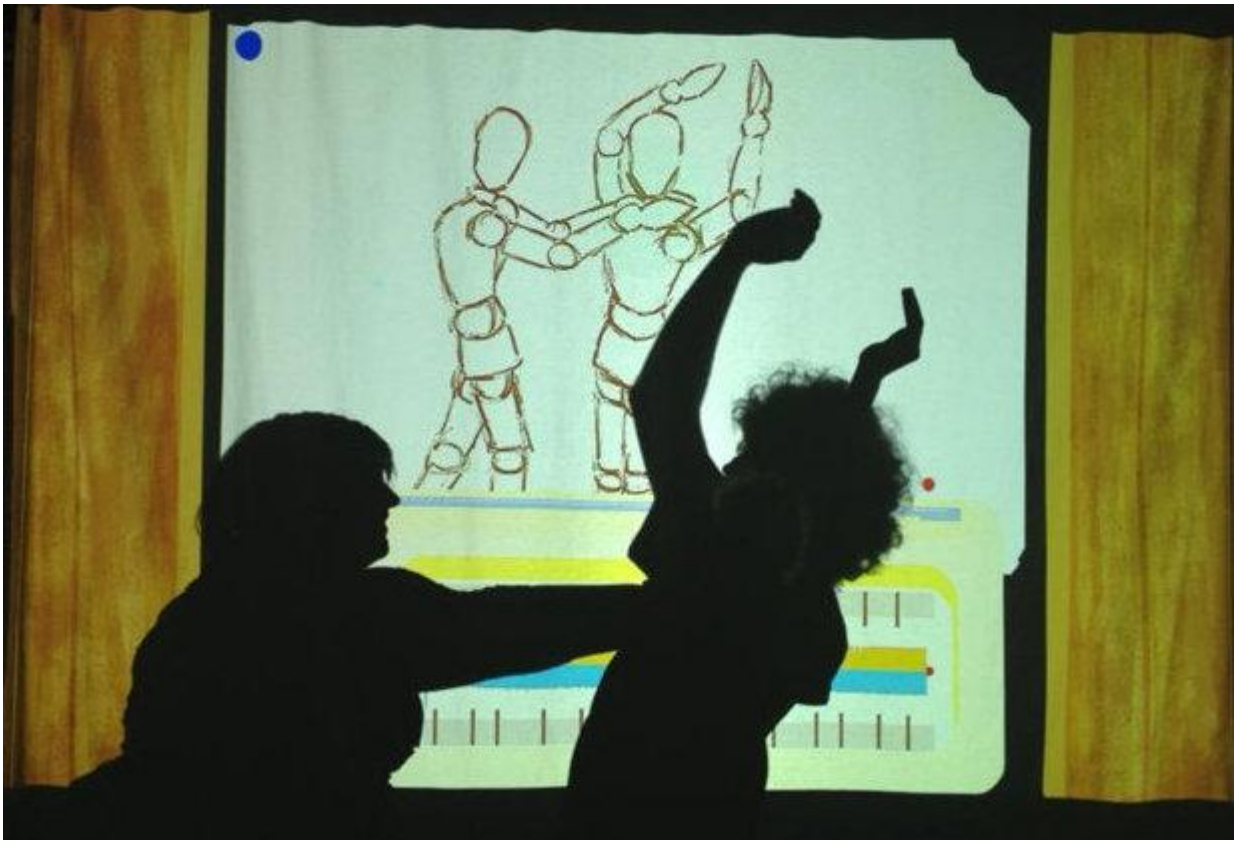

Figure 5. Allison Cole and Zachary Miller play In Tune (ca. 2015). Source: Source: Jess Marcotte.

In Tune has had the most press of any of my games — it's easy to understand by watching and it came out at the right time. Plus, Allison Cole, who I made it with, took the lead on making sure that we applied to *everything* with it, which takes a lot of energy, but definitely had results. It had a decent festival run (Indiecade @ E3, Indiecade Night Games, Indiecade East Night Games, Come Out and Play, Montreal Joue, academic conferences, etc) and generally it has been contrasted to the many, many VR experiences that are usually available next to it. Austin Walker said it made him feel human again at E3, which is honestly a comment about my work that I'll probably never forget. I think what surprises people the most about *In Tune* is that it's actually engaging, fun and even funny, but doesn't disrespect the subject matter (consent and intimacy).

Over the years, because of the kind of game I make, I have had to watch a lot of people react to my games and also frequently facilitate them. So, I have an intuitive/practiced sense of how people are reacting to the work. My work does get some press attention, but mostly I don't think people know it exists until they run into it at a festival or conference context. I do know that for those that do discover it, it sometimes has deep and personal meaning, which is kind of what keeps me going. I

recently got a message from someone I met once, a few years ago, playing *In Tune* in a parc in Culver City for Indiecade Night Games, wondering if I remembered her. Recently, someone also mentioned to me the impact that playing *The Truly Terrific Traveling Troubleshooter* had on bringing them closer to a partner. Although getting press is affirming and helps when applying for grants and proving one's legitimacy (always an awkward prospect for me), it's the one-on-one relationship that people form to the work that I think has meant the most. It's also a little bit fun to watch people blush when a plant whispers in their ear.

Figure 6. Some of the interface and materials for The Truly Terrific Traveling Troubleshooter. Source: Mattias Graham and Jess Marcotte.

I'll show my games to anyone who is willing to take them on their own terms and commit sincerely to playing! I think they do well in very busy contexts where the noise is practically its own privacy screens, or in private playthroughs. I rarely get the chance for private playthroughs, so places where you can't eavesdrop on other people's intimate conversations are probably best.

What has the reception to your work, particularly sex/ual games like *the earth is a better person than me*, been like? What has surprised you the most?

Kara: I spoke above on the responses to my games more clearly about mental illness, like *Medication Meditation*, where people identified and opened up to me. That was by far the most surprising response, since it had never happened to me before then. *Sext Adventure* was one of my next projects and was, on the surface, quite different. The first iteration of the game was an actual texting game, where one pays 5 dollars and gets the number for a hotline to text, and the sext bot sexts them back and sends them glitchy nudes.

Figure 7. Promotional image of Sext Adventure. Source: Kara Stone.

In the promotional material I played up the expectations of what a sexting bot would be like and who it would be created for. Most people would assume that a sext bot would be created by straight men for straight men – for good reason, as that model still dominates both the porn and videogame industries. I am clear in the blurbs about the game that the bot subverts those expectations, so I have something to point to when people ask for a refund!

That texting version was shown at Indiecade in Los Angeles and Vector Game Art Festival in Toronto, as well as a few other shows. Media outlets such as Wired, Vice, and Polygon wrote about it as it has a very sexy hook. It's by far my most "successful" game, in its media coverage and sales. After the texting version became unsustainable financially, I made it into a twine and called it *Cyber Sext Adventure*. That was about 4 years ago and still people purchase the game almost every single day. It's likely that very few of those people are satisfied, which brings me a little joy. Every once in awhile I still receive emails saying it wasn't what they wanted, or how to make the sext bot a woman.

To: "sextadventurehelp@gmail.com" <sextadventurehelp@gmail.com>
Subject: Sext bot

Hello

How can I make sexy bot a woman

Thanks

Figure 8. Email from Sext Adventure Player. Source: Kara Stone.

The responses to *the earth is a better person than me* are a bit of a mix between *Sext Adventure* and *Medication Meditation.* The game is advertised as about having sex with the earth, though in a somewhat dark way, and people seem more scandalized and shocked about that then a sexting bot, I'm sure in part because it's a woman protagonist and the earth characters are not physically anthropomorphized. Though there are very graphic sex with the earth in the game, but visual and written, it's not often done to titillate the player. Sometimes the sex is very sad or messy; sometimes it's done before a bittersweet goodbye. It's always filled with confused feelings about desire, queerness, and mental illness.

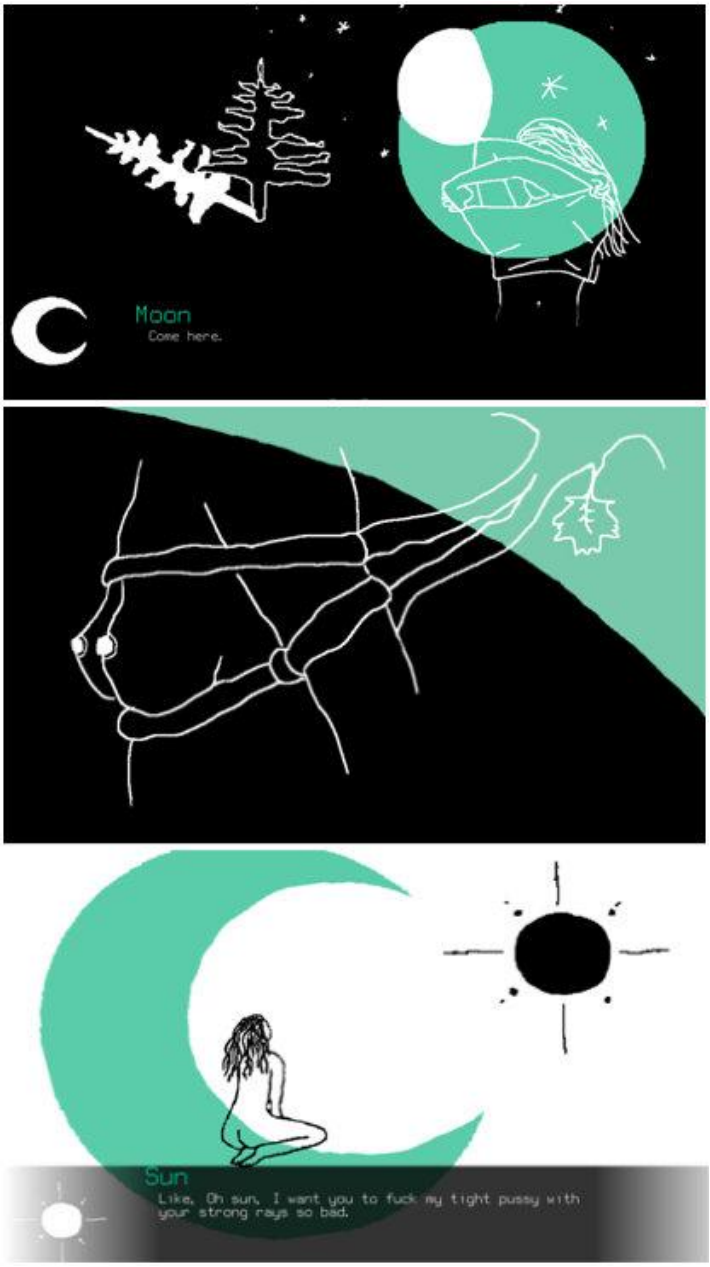

Figure 9. Screenshots from the earth is a better person than me. Source: Kara Stone.

Many, many less people have played *the earth is a better person than me* for a few reasons: *Sext Adventure* came out 5 years ago, and *earth person* has been out for only a few months. It's a visual novel and a lot of people don't like those. It takes over an hour to play whereas *Sext Adventure* is under 10 minutes. Straight men think *Sext Adventure* is to sexually excite them. There is a lot of "Haha what???" sort of responses to hearing the idea of the *Earth Person*, but once it has been played, the responses are more of identification and sadness. I've received emails from people saying how similar their emotional experiences are to Delphine's – which is nice, because Delphine's emotional experiences are close to my own. A microcosm of this is seen in the youtube comments for a Lets Play of *the earth is a better person than me* done by ProJared Plays! I did not

know this stream happened until one of its audience members emailed me saying how much they identified with the game (and later, asked me if I wanted to be friends.)

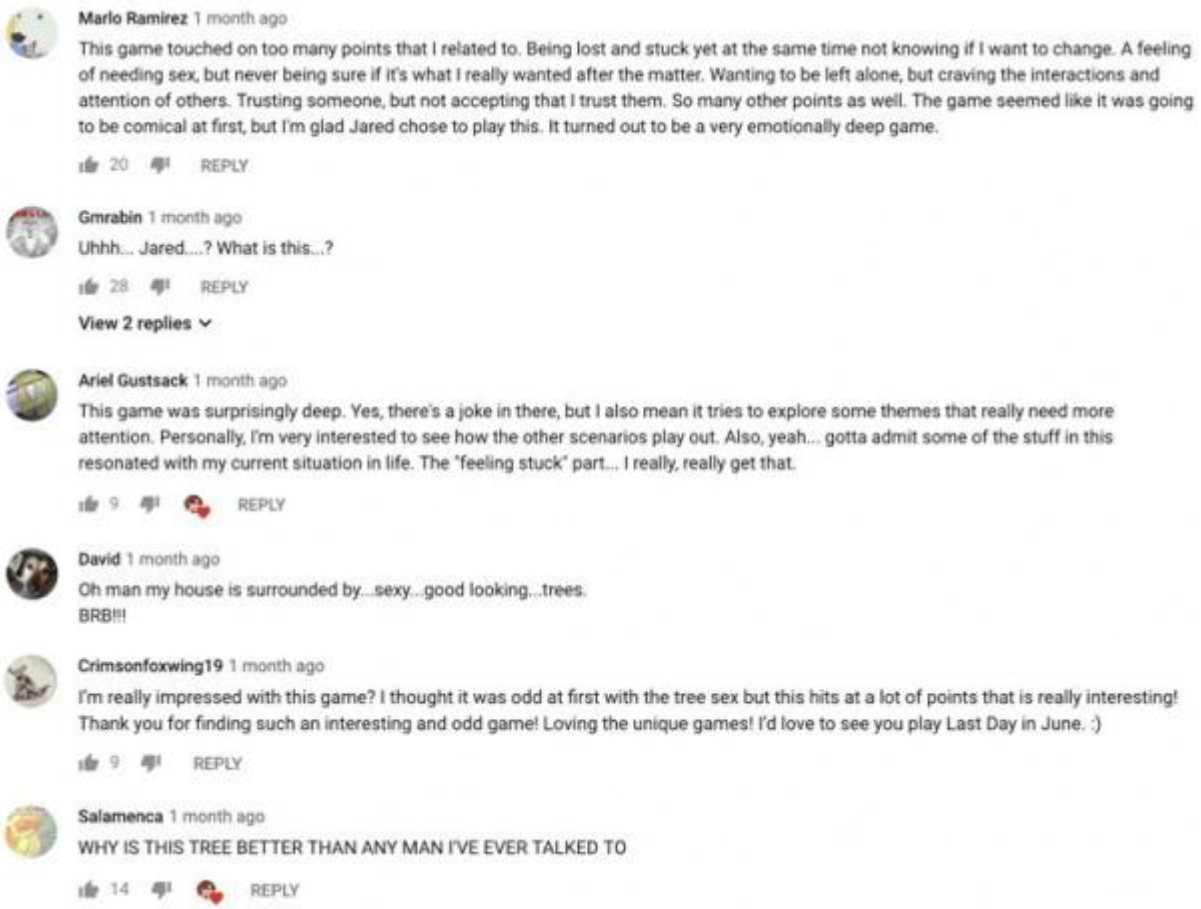

Figure 10. Youtube comments on BANGIN' TREES | ProJared Plays. January 4, 2019. Source: Kara Stone.

As a side note, this Lets Play has over 12,500 views and 240 comments, though led to a total of 3 more game purchases than average.

Jess: You talked about the difficulty and vulnerability of writing *the earth is a better person than me*. You also talked about wanting to avoid definitions of queer design that would position every action that you take as a queer person as also queer. You also mentioned that inscribing actions as queer could be viewed as a protective move, since if we position queerness everywhere, it makes it harder to erase and destroy. Given the current political climate and the dangers that marginalized people are facing right now, what are your hopes for the future of queer design?

Kara: I don't want queerness to be assimilated into the games industry, as a face of a company or a product to be sold. I want queer design to be anti-capitalist, non-homonormative, difficult, sexy, weird, utopian, negative, questioning, and messy. I hope designers think about queerness and feeling queerly when designing. I hope games are made to explore feelings that are common in the queer experience and queer media like desire, shame, and hope. As an artist, I think of queer design as a way I can learn more about myself, others, the world, and the way it all works, so in that way I view it as a research tool and form of knowledge building. It also works as community building and recognizing shared experiences, realizing "oh, I'm not the only one that feels that way?", or opening up ways in which we *could* be.

What about you? What are your hopes for the future of queer game design?

Jess: What you said about queer design as a mode of interrogation really speaks to me — I also hope queer design will forever be perpetually questing, questioning, and seeking rather than turning into something settled and set. I hope for queer design to continue to be entangled, messy and unsettled. I also hope that queer game design will continue to be a place where people can hail each other and discover that they aren't alone in their desires for themselves and for others.

I hope that the future of queer design is more visible and louder than ever before, and I hope it disrupts settled narratives — I hope it makes people a little uncomfortable, and that from that discomfort, come questions about the way that things are.

Closing thoughts?

Jess: We've covered a lot of delightfully messy ground of our own in this conversation, but I think that we probably both still have a lot to say. I hope we'll be able to continue this conversation with each other and with other designers in our queer future! There's a special issue of Game Studies about Queer Game Studies that came out on December 31st, 2018 that might be of interest to anyone who wants to learn more about these topics. Kara and I both have articles about queer game design in the issue, where I think we expand on some of these thoughts about our own design work.

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Notes

[1] Pixelles Montreal is a not-for-profit organization that runs inclusive programs, with a particular focus on women in their main programming.

[2] Before becoming a designer, Jess took a Game Studies class with Cindy Poremba at Concordia University called, awkwardly, Video Games And/As Literature." Jess is teaching that same course in Winter 2019.