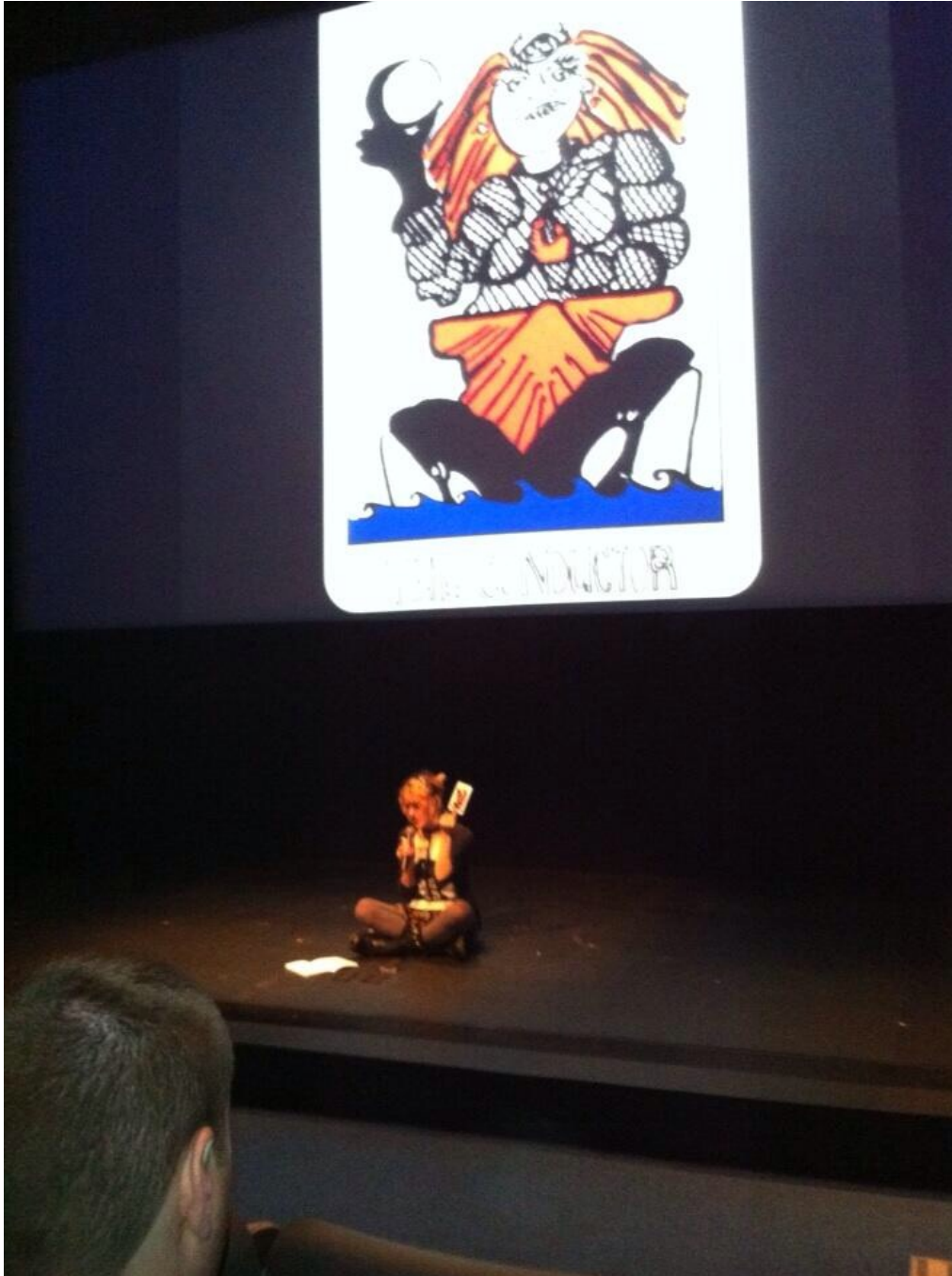


I'm a Transsexual Witch Poet Gamecrafter and You Can Too

merritt kopas, 2014

I gave this talk at Indiecade East in February 2014. I switched between two modes: a tarot reading in which I sat cross-legged in the center of the stage and read the fortune of digital games, and a more traditional lecture component which I read while standing. The tarot deck I used was the Collective Tarot.





1. ~the conductor~

The Conductor, also known as the Chariot.

In the warrior's right, gloved hand, the hand associated with "left-brained" creative thought, she holds the waxing moon of rising power. In her left, the hand linked to "rational" thought, she holds a feather, representing air and the intellectual power of the mind.

The Conductor is victory, steadfastness, control, direction.

But as time goes on, that control can become harder and harder to maintain. In the worst cases, the conductor crashes. Beware of overconfidence – the vehicle may tip.

2. videogames are killing play

We are the inheritors of a form that is inescapably tied to rationalizing modes of thought, the binary logic of computation, and the machine of late capitalism.

And we seem content to leave these ties unexamined as digital games have developed into a massive business - "the industry" in which many of us participate in fact if not in name.

The language of "indie" and "mainstream" for the most part serves only to obfuscate, allowing for the

maintenance of a fantasy of resistance and independence when in reality the differences between independent and traditionally-produced videogames are, on the whole, mainly quantitative rather than qualitative.

Regardless of how we describe ourselves, the industry has shaped our assumptions about digital play. We have become convinced that play happens mostly in games – highly structured pieces of programming and audiovisual work which can be marketed and sold as products.

We continue to fixate on this model of digital play despite the fact that material conditions have changed – we no longer require physical media or store shelves to distribute our work. There is no reason for this fixation other than the fact that our entire discourse about play has been adapted and coopted to fit the needs of an industry.

In a 2013 piece titled *Games Without Gamers*, Robert Yang sketched out possible alternatives to the market model of games as products consumed by self-described hardcore gamers. He offered the possibilities of games as couture, made to order experiences for events or people, games as murals or community developed-art, and games as handmade craft gifts intended for specific, limited audiences.

In a 2009 article in *New Literary History*, David Golumbia described modern online roleplaying games and first-person shooters as “games without play”, pointing to their lack of player choices, repetitive actions, and lack of any kind of meaningful winners or losers. According to Golumbia, many programs we consider “games” are in fact more like work than play.

And in a 2012 talk, Karen Sideman, the former Projects Director of Games for Change, argued that a narrow focus on games as reward systems in gamification projects risks missing the more meaningful aspects of play.

To me, all of these accounts point towards an uncomfortable truth: the product model of videogames that so many of us take for granted has led us to think about play in increasingly restrictive terms, and we need to begin imagining alternatives.

In other words: VIDEOGAMES ARE KILLING PLAY

The chariot is getting away from us but we refuse to acknowledge it.

3. ~intermission~

Intermission speaks to action suspended, the moment before whatever you do what you're about to do. Often appears as an epiphany – the querent isn't aware that they are tied up at all.

The Intermission card puts you face to face with your own agency and self-awareness.

4. WE'RE ALL TIED UP, IT'S JUST THAT SOME OF US KNOW IT

I started making digital games in 2012 after reading Anna Anthropy's book *The Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*. At that time, a confluence of factors including the publicizing of accessible tools for game creation like Twine and the growth of supportive communities made it possible for people like me to start experimenting with digital game creation. This was despite our lack of technical education and the fierceness which with we have been kept out of digital games communities.

As outsiders making games, many of us saw the established videogame media apparatus and decided to

start engaging with it, to start interfacing with the industry. After all, many of us love games even despite their apparent intent to repel us. And while most of our work has gone ignored, some of us have received attention and support from those structures and seen the beginnings of incremental change.

But here again I'm worried about the way the industry shapes our assumptions and work. I've found myself holding back on releasing small, poetry-like projects for fear that they aren't "game-like" enough. Even as I recognize that those ideas are harmful, I can't deny that they've infiltrated my thinking. And I'm not alone – when I hosted the Naked Twine Jam last month, an event where participants created games using only the base Twine software, many came to me afterwards admitting that they'd struggled to make their past work public out of a fear that it wasn't technically complex or polished enough.

POLISH IS POISON

We've become so focused on a narrow idea of games that we're ignoring work that doesn't look like what we expect. And much of this work is being done by marginalized authors – women, people of color, queers. If we want digital games to be a more inclusive space, it is not enough to encourage nontraditional authors to become involved in traditional game production.

We need to acknowledge that nontraditional artists don't always make traditional-looking games, and that the reasons for this aren't solely to do with access to skills or technologies. Maybe many of us just aren't as invested in creating product-like games that indulge power fantasies or form complete, representational worlds where the designer is god. And maybe that is something to be celebrated and supported, rather than ignored.

I submitted this talk under a call for accounts of "being indie." For me, "being indie" doesn't look like working on a single involved project for years and aiming to get it on Steam or a console marketplace. For me, play is something I weave into my life. It intersects with witchcraft, poetry, and kink dynamics and expresses itself in a variety of ways. I've realized that this is why I'm so uncomfortable with the title of "game designer" – because for the most part, I'm not interested in creating the kinds of work that the term calls to mind for me.

Even so, I'm grateful to many people working in games for the support and guidance they've provided me. And I've been happy to use the resources that are available around videogames – but there are many more people out there doing similar things whose work we're still, for the most part, ignoring.

So, here is the critical juncture that Intermission speaks to: we can continue down the road we've been going, ignoring new forms of play that new voices are creating and valuing them only insofar as they fit an image that we're used to. That's the easy road to follow, and there's certainly a lot of financial and cultural pressure to stay on it. Or, we can try and step off the path we've been building and see what's going on out in the rest of the world.

5. ~death~

The closure of what exists, making possible new feelings, patterns, relationships, opportunities and ideas. This card signals the end of stagnation, routine, or lack of movement.

Endings do not have to be scary. Sometimes they are necessary to allow growth to happen, like pruning a tree so it can bear more fruit. If you are afraid of change, ask yourself why. Try to avoid letting fear keep you from moving through change. Ultimately, it can help you to grow in ways you've never imagined.

The snake shedding its skin is leaving part of its old shell behind and is moving towards a new self. This is a death of the former self and transition into something beyond what was previously possible. With death, there is a birth of transformation.

6. play without games

Maybe videogames as we know them need to die so that new forms of play can flourish.

The question then becomes, what will play look like when not shoehorned into games as products?

There are already indications, if you know where to look. My project forest ambassador represents one effort to decentralize mainstream ideas about games and to refocus on short, accessible experiences.

forest ambassador is explicitly not about getting outsiders “into” games. The name is kind of a hint – it’s one of the few indie games sites that doesn’t have “indie” or “games” in. The works I curate are not short or easy to play as a kind of training for “real” videogames. Instead, I’m trying to assemble a picture of what digital play could look like for people who are alienated by the assumptions and baggage of mainstream games.

The games I collect on forest ambassador invite engagement without demanding repetitive investment. Many of them are often discussed in terms of what they are about, as many of them deal with topics unusual for videogames – three-partner relationships, police interrogations and false confessions, the realities of contemporary warfare). But what they are about is less important than what they do.

Lydia Neon’s Player 2 encourages reflection on our relationships to each other by inviting the player to think through an incident in which another person, their “Player 2”, hurt them or let them down.

Diego Garcia’s Ultimate Flirt-Off makes us laugh by putting us into the situation of talking to a stranger at a party and transforming this anxious and awkward scenario into an amusing one.

And Amy Dentata’s 10 Seconds in Hell scares us, not with monsters or lighting effects but the all-too-real abuse sometimes visited on us by those closest to us.

These and the other games on forest ambassador do a myriad range of things and they do them in an extremely brief period of time by the standards of modern videogames, and often with minimal technical polish. They provide a counterpoint to the ideas that games must either be slow and long-lasting or else massive, “immersive” worlds that demand extreme investments of time in order to receive any real kind of satisfaction from the experience.

The games I curate at forest ambassador are just a handful of indications of what digital play might look like outside of a product model. But my goal is not to supplant one monolithic ideal of play with another. I think the forms of play exposed by forest ambassador represent exciting and useful developments for digital games. But there are other models. Ultimately, we need to move to rediscover a plethora of possibilities of play that are being choked out by the predominance of the product model.

We can think about play as looseness or give, in the sense of a rope not pulled taut. At its best, this kind of play allows players to express creativity and develop a sense of responsibility towards other players. Think of street games, J.S. Joust, and other works that encourage players to negotiate and play with the structure of the game. These games need not be seen as opposed to games focused on personal expression and sociocultural commentary. Analog story games like Liam Burke’s Dog Eat Dog explore complex topics like the process and legacies of colonialism through rules co-created by the players. These games point to

directions worth exploring in digital work.

Another model of play emphasizes choice and openness instead of railroading and time-intensive grinding. Minecraft has become almost synonymous with this mode, but it would be irresponsible of us to pretend that it has exhausted the full range of possibilities of this style of play simply because of its massive popularity.

Finally, there's a model of play that hews closer to toys than games. Of course, toys represent a gigantic corporate industry in the same way as videogames. However, I still see the potential in digital toys as a model of play that stands apart from the videogame as product. I'm thinking here especially of work by designers like Andi McClure, who work in and around digital games and create interactive landscapes and audiovisual experiences that are extremely playful regardless of their classification.

7. against consumable/ing experiences

While these models of play are often set in opposition to one another, I see useful points of convergence insofar as they each, in different ways, perform resistance to a product model of videogames. Those of us interested in personal games, street games, open and construction-focused play, and playful toys all stand slightly apart from the industry's focus on games as consuming, consumable experiences.

And we have a lot to learn from each other's work. What would an open-world game that attempted to examine the logic of colonialism rather than uncritically replicate it look like? How could we design a game like *J.S. Joust* that doesn't replicate social structures external to the magic circle like sexism and ableism? What might personal, poetic games look like if designed to be shared by multiple players in the same space?

If we recognize that we are already working outside of, and in some cases explicitly against the dictates of games as products, our play will be richer for it.

Here I anticipate some objections: do I believe that we need to abandon longer-form, more technically complex, perhaps more traditional videogames wholesale? No. But we should examine our attachments to them carefully and think about our motivations for creating in a form that happens to fit so well with the needs of capital.

At the same time, this is not about shaming artists and game makers for participating in the totalizing system of capital. It's about recognizing the extent to which a model of play as product has informed our work and thinking carefully about whether that model is serving us or whether we have come to serve it in ways we would rather not.

I know that play can be so much more if we are willing to examine and resist the ways in which capital infiltrates and warps it. Digital play is already happening outside and against the industry – it's up to us to search out these manifestations and to create new ones of our own, together. As Robert Yang concludes in the same piece mentioned earlier:

“we don't need anyone's permission to imagine new frames for games. We just have to go and do it! Let's make couture, let's tailor games, let's make murals, let's make crafts and gifts. If we start performing these new frames and ways of understanding games, then we will make these things real”

So, lest there be any confusion:

This is not a request for permission.

This is an invitation.