RISE OF THE VIDEOGAME ZINESTERS

HOW FREAKS, NORMALS, AMATEURS, ARTISTS, DREAMERS, DROPOUTS, QUEERS, HOUSEWIVES, AND PEOPLE LIKE YOU ARE TAKING BACK AN ART FORM

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For the child I was,
the book no one could write for me.

Chapter One

THE PROBLEM WITH VIDEOGAMES

I have a problem with videogames.[1]

Plenty of people seem to have problems with videogames these days. Newscasters are fond of reporting that videogames are dangerous to children, either because they teach children how to steal cars and kill cops or because they actually connect children electronically to the game-playing predators who are waiting to snatch them away. Religious leaders have wasted no time condemning videogames as a trap for children's souls, and armchair psychologists accuse them of turning kids into antisocial hermits.

People condemn videogames because videogames are pervasive in popular culture. They're on our computers and our cell phones, in our homes and purses and pockets. Even if you yourself don't play games, you have a hard time escaping their marketing. When the television isn't telling you to be afraid of videogames, it's telling you to buy them, and to drink *World of Warcraft*–flavored Mountain Dew while you play.

These are some problems people have with videogames. What's *my* problem with videogames?

As a queer transgendered woman in 2012, in a culture pervaded by videogames—a culture in which, typing on my computer, I am seconds away from a digital game, even if I

have not taken the time to buy or install a single game on my computer—I have to strain to find any game that's about a queer woman, to find any game that resembles my own experience.

This is in spite of the fact that videogames in America and elsewhere are an industry and an institution. I've already brought up *World of Warcraft*, a game about performing repetitive tasks until numbers increase. So, now that we're in the land of numbers, here are some numbers. The ESA—that's the Entertainment Software Association, who spend half their time assuring the population that videogames aren't worth being mad at, and the other half pursuing litigation against anyone who distributes games that their shareholders have long since stopped distributing or profiting from—claims that, as of 2009, 68 percent of American households play digital games.[2] In 2008 alone, people bought 269,100,000 games (the ESA word is *units*.)[3]

So digital games, by the numbers, are here, and they take up a lot of space. And almost none of these games are about me, or anyone like me.

What are videogames about?

Mostly, videogames are about men shooting men in the face. Sometimes they are about women shooting men in the face. Sometimes the men who are shot in the face are orcs, zombies, or monsters. Most of the other games the ESA is talking about when it mentions "units" are abstract games: the story of a blue square who waits for a player to place him in a line with two other blue squares, so he can disappear forever. The few commercial games that involve a woman protagonist in a role other than slaughterer put her in a role of servitude: waiting tables at a diner (or a dress shop, a pet shop, a wedding party). This is not to say that games about head shots are without value, but if one looked solely at videogames, one would think the whole of human experience is shooting men and taking their dinner orders. Surely an artistic form that has as much weight in popular culture as the videogame does now has more to offer than such a narrow view of what it is to be human.

And yes, from here on out I'll be talking about videogames as an art form. What I mean by this is that games, digital and otherwise, transmit ideas and culture. This is something they share with poems, novels, music albums, films, sculptures, and paintings. A painting conveys what it's like to experience the subject as an image; a game conveys what it's like to experience the subject as a system of rules. If videogames are compared unfavorably to other art forms such as novels and songs and films—and they are compared unfavorably with these forms, or else this paragraph defending videogames as art wouldn't be necessary—it is likely a result of how limited a perspective videogames have offered up to this point. Imagine a world in which art forms are assigned value by the number of dykes that populate them. This is the world I inhabit; this is the value games have for me. And why not? The number

of stories from marginalized cultures—from people who are othered by the mainstream—that a form contains tells us something about that form's maturity. If a form has attracted so many authors, so many voices, that several of them come from experiences outside the social norm and bring those experiences and voices to bear when working in that form, can't that form be said to have reached cultural maturity?

It should go without saying that novels and films have plenty of dykes in them, as do the media of writing and filmmaking. American comics have been around since 1896—that's over one hundred years—yet comics are still involved in a debate, as videogames are, about their cultural and artistic value. But I can think of many comics about queer women. More important, I can think of plenty of queer women who make comics: to name a few, Diane DiMassa, Alison Bechdel, Jennifer Camper, Kris Dresen, and Colleen Coover, in order of how disappointed I was when they came out in defense of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.[4] And those are just print comics, in a world where the majority of comics are published on the Internet.

In Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For*, Mo (a dyke to watch out for) explains a metric she uses to decide whether she'll watch a movie. This criteria has become known as the Bechdel Test: the movie has to (1) contain at least two women who (2) talk to each other about (3) something other than a man. So why do videogames fail my variant of the Bechdel Test? Why are there no dykes in videogames?

I know at least one of you has been itching, for several pages, to point out games like *Fear Effect 2: Retro Helix* and *Mass Effect*, both of which include scenes in which women smooch women, both on and off camera. In *Fear Effect 2*, women make out for the benefit of the male audience the game's creators

expect to buy the game. (The first scene, in fact, is of the protagonist stripping as seen through a hidden camera, which tells us something about her relationship to the player.) And the lady-sex in *Mass Effect* is just one of many branches on a tree of awkward dialogue, offering nothing resembling the actual lust, desire, and flirtation that women feel for each other. But, aesthetic failures aside, the most important distinction here is that these are stories about queer women that are generally written by white, college-educated men. These are not cases of queer women presenting their own experiences.

Why are digital games so sparse in the dykes making art department? Why are the experiences that games present, the stories they tell, the voices in which they speak, so limited?

The limitations of games aren't just thematic. When I criticize games for being mostly about shooting people in the head, that's a design criticism as well. Most games are copies of existing successful games. They play like other games, resemble their contemporaries in shape and structure, have the same buttons that interact with the world in the same way (mouse to aim, left click to shoot), and have the same shortcomings. If there's a vast pool of experiences that contemporary videogames are failing to tap, then there's just as large a pool of aesthetic and design possibilities that are being ignored. I don't believe these are separate issues, either. To tell different stories, we need different ways of interacting with games. Why are games so similar in terms of both content and design?

The problem with videogames is that they're created by a small, insular group of people. Digital games largely come from within a single culture. When computers were first installed in college campuses and laboratories, only engineers had the access to the machines, the comparative leisure

time, and the technical knowledge to teach those computers to play games. It is not surprising that the games they made looked like their own experiences: physics simulations, space adventures drawn from the science fiction they enjoyed, the *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop role-playing games they played with their friends. As computers made their way out of labs and into homes, the games that programmers were hacking together became a salable product—and salespeople showed up to profit off of them. And so as businessmen and marketers guided videogames into becoming a billion-dollar industry, publishers installed themselves as the gatekeepers of game creation.

Commercial games have become expensive: according to a presentation at the High Performance Graphics 2009 conference, *Gears of War 2*—an industry leader in the "men shooting things" genre—had a "development budget" of 12 million dollars.[5] ("Development" refers just to the cost of creating the game—it doesn't include all the bucks that were spent marketing, manufacturing, and shipping the game.) If the game cost that much to produce, you can imagine what it would have to earn in sales in order to make any money. Hint: more than 12 million dollars. With that much money at stake, publishers and shareholders are not going to permit a game that is experimental either in terms of its content or in terms of its design. The publisher will do the minimum amount it can get away with in order to differentiate its game from all other games that follow its previously established model and that are being sold to its previously established audience.

Now we have a dangerous cycle: publishers permit only games that follow a previously established model to be marketed to previously established audiences, and only to those audiences. The audiences in question are mostly young adults,

and mostly male. And it's these dudes, already entrenched in the existing culture of games, who are eventually driven to enter the videogame industry and to take part in the creation of games. The population who creates games becomes more and more insular and homogeneous: it's the same small group of people who are creating the same games for themselves.

Videogames as they're commonly conceived today both come from and contain exactly one perspective. It should be terrifying that an entire art form can be dominated by a single perspective, that a small and privileged group has a monopoly on the creation of art. Before the adoption of the printing press, the church was responsible for the creation of books, and the books that monks hand-lettered in Latin in monasteries were largely the Bible or books that agreed with the Bible. Not to knock the Bible, but that a single institution can hold power over what works are allowed to exist within any art form should demonstrate the power that institution has over that art form, and therefore over that culture. And so the printing press, which allowed people to print their own versions of the Bible in their own languages—and eventually to print books that had nothing to do with the Bible—had a role to play in the decentralization of religious authority in Europe.

The printing press is a piece of technology. If digital games, a form that is often (and not entirely correctly) described as being "technology driven," can be compared to books, where then is the printing press for videogames?

What Videogames Need

There's a videogame about a dyke who convinces her girlfriend to stop drinking. Mainstream gamer culture by and large does not know about this game. I know about this game because I made it.

I created *Calamity Annie* in 2008. I made it by myself: I wrote the dialogue, composed the music, designed the rules, scripted the game, and drew all the characters. It was made in a couple of months. The development costs were the cost of the food that went into my belly. I made the game in a program called Game Maker, which, at the time, cost fifteen dollars.

I am nowhere close to the only person who has used Game Maker, nowhere close to the only person who makes digital games outside of the games industry's publisher model. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of such creators. A few of them have achieved some mainstream recognition, like Jonathan Blow and Jason Rohrer, who was profiled in *Esquire* magazine. But these rich white dudes were professional programmers before they came to videogames, and so they don't represent the new dynamic that I'm excited about: hobbyists and non-programmers making their first games. There are lots of tools that allow people to make and distribute games without ever having written a line of code and without having to pass through publishers' gates. In years to come, there will be a lot more tools. I hope that there will also be a lot more people.

I once heard the criticism that the phrase "what videogames need" can usually be more honestly rephrased as "what I want from videogames." In that case, what I want from videogames is a plurality of voices. I want games to come from a wider set of experiences and present a wider range of perspectives. I can imagine—you are invited to imagine with me—a world in which digital games are not manufactured by publishers for the same small audience, but one in which games are authored by you and me for the benefit of our peers.

This is something the videogame industry, by its nature, cannot give us. I like to think about zines—self-published, self-distributed magazines and books. Send me a dollar and a

self-addressed envelope; I'll send you a stapled book of some stories from my life, or some pictures I took of out-of-the-way nooks of my city, or researched accounts of historical murders, or some jokes about sea life. (What does the merman's waiter bring? He brings the MERMANATEE.[6]) I like the idea of games as zines: as transmissions of ideas and culture from person to person, as personal artifacts instead of impersonal creations by teams of forty-five artists and fifteen programmers, in the case of *Gears of War 2*.

The Internet in particular has made self-publishing and distributing games both possible and easy. Authors are able not only to put their works online, but to find audiences for them. Publishers want to be gatekeepers to the creation of videogames, but the Internet has opened those gates.

Currently, the only real barrier to game creation is the technical ability to design and create games—and that, too, is a problem that is in the process of being solved.

Digital game creation was once limited to those who knew how to speak with computers: engineers and programmers, people who could code. In the games industry of today, coders are an inescapable fixture of the hierarchy of production, since games that we play with machines need creators capable of negotiating with machines. Game creation is daunting for someone who doesn't code professionally. But more and more game-making tools are being designed with people who aren't professional coders in mind. (I describe several of these tools, and what each is good for, in the appendix.) It's now possible for people with no programming experience—hobbyists, independent game designers, zinesters—to make their own games and to distribute them online.

What I want from videogames is for creation to be open to everyone, not just to publishers and programmers. I want

games to be personal and meaningful, not just pulp for an established audience. I want game creation to be decentralized. I want open access to the creative act for everyone. I want games as zines.

It's a tall order, maybe, but the ladder's being built as you read these words.

Is What You Want Really What Games Need?

Why transform videogames, though? What do I get out of it? What, for that matter, do videogames get out of it?

In 2005, movie critic Roger Ebert infamously remarked that he does not think games can ever be considered as art. (By whom? By him, apparently.) He argues, mostly by assertion, that he doesn't feel game designers can exercise enough authorial control over the experience of a game. Ebert has gone on to make no attempt to justify or defend his remark or engage in any kind of debate, other than to allow, five years after the original remark, that he should have kept his opinion to himself.[7]

As I've made clear above, Ebert is wrong about videogames as a form. But frankly, I don't care whether Ebert is wrong or not. Achieving "artistic legitimacy" is not a good reason to transform videogames. Who legitimizes art? To cede the right to decide the value of games to an authority that has nothing to do with games—or to concede the right to decide what is and is not art to any authority outside of the artist—is a dangerous trap. Creation is art. It doesn't need validation beyond that.

What it needs is to be free. That an art form exists should be justification enough for people to be able to contribute to it, to work in it. We finally have the means to allow more than just programmers and big game publishers to create games—and the vast majority of people in the world aren't computer

engineers, or designers employed by Epic Games. What do we gain from giving so many people the means to create games? We gain a lot more games that explore much wider ground, in terms of both design and subject matter. Many of these games will be mediocre, of course; the majority of work in any form is mediocre. But we'll see many more interesting ideas just by the sheer mathematical virtue of so many people producing so many games without the commercial obligations industry games are beholden to. Remember, I'm talking about hobbyists, people who make games in their spare time with the tools they have on hand. And even if a game isn't original, it's personal, in the way a game designed to appeal to target demographics can't be. And that's a cultural artifact our world is a little bit richer for having.

To visualize this new world of games, think about network television versus YouTube. The former spends a lot of money and time creating content designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator. Because network shows need to justify themselves monetarily—they need to catch enough viewers to earn advertising dollars—they can rarely afford to be brilliant, daring, or bizarre. (Sometimes a director has enough force of will, and fights the network hard enough, to create a show that is all of these things. But it's certainly not the norm.)

YouTube: millions of videos from millions of authors. Most of them are mediocre: boring, familiar, or unwatchable. That's to be expected in an arena where everyone is allowed to contribute. But others are sublime, brilliant, valuable: Grishno's "Transgender in New York" videos,[8] wendyvainity's surreal computer animations and music,[9] or shaneduarte's *Simpsons* remixes.[10] As long as there's some sort of infrastructure, valuable works—those by both dabbling amateurs and dedicated