Make Tents, Not War: Queer Play as Play-That-Critiques

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INTRODUCTION

This paper asks whether players can engage critically with a game regardless of designer intent. While much literature (Flanagan 2013, Ibster 2016) has been devoted to how to design games that deploy critical arguments or encourage player reflection, not nearly as much work has been done to suggest that players are capable of critiquing games through the act of play itself. Critique here is meant both in the standard sense as an expression of one's dissatisfaction with things as they are, but is also aligned with Dunne and Raby's alternative definition, "a gentle refusal, a turning away from what exists, a longing, wishful thinking, a desire, and even a dream" (Dunne and Raby 34-5). Put differently, in this paper, critique can be in response to what a work *did* or what it *did not do* and is not necessarily negative in tone.

To begin answering the question of whether players can critique through play, the paper employs a queer lens. In the same way that what might be called critical play represents an articulation of player dissatisfaction, queer theory has branched outward from concerns of heteronormativity towards giving a critical voice to the collective dissatisfactions of those marginalized by architectures of power and privilege. What it means to play 'queerly' is therefore framed through extant queer theory and queer game studies works. Queer play is shown to reject the assumptions laid out by a game and to find one's own mode of interaction that may not necessarily be tuned to the key of 'fun'.

With queer play defined, it is then tied explicitly to play as critique. This is done through a discussion of specific queer play practices which are illustrated through a mixed methods approach. First, through an appropriation of design fiction, this paper uses Nintendo's *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* as the setting for a 'play fiction' – not an extant queer play practice, but one that might exist and might reflect the utopic desires endemic to queer futures work. In particular, this play fiction imagines what would happen if the player never participates in the game's capitalist logics by never paying off their first housing loan, opting instead to live in a tent. Next, the case of a pacifist *World of Warcraft* player is presented as a complimentary example of a queer play practice that has actually occurred 'in the wild'. It is argued that both practices render the player invisible to the operational logics of their respective games in a way that reveals the underlying political assumptions that went into the games' design.

The queer play practices discussed in this paper demonstrate that even in games that are designed to evoke particular experiences, players are capable of finding ways of resisting embedded normative assumptions through a variety of what we may call queer play practices and, through describing exactly what goes into two such instances of queer play, it is shown that both the effort required of the player and the sanctions placed against them by the game's coded desire for normativity are non-trivial and potentially even no-fun – there may be more than curiosity at work here.

Indeed, with these observations in mind, the case is made that players are capable of critiquing games through the act of play itself and particularly through queer play practices.

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