

# Design Bleed: A Standpoint Methodology for Game Design

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we develop the concept of design bleed, a standpoint approach to game design. We adopt the terminology of bleed from the Nordic community around live-action role-playing games and use it as a lens on game development. Based on our own experiences in developing two game jam games, *Lovebirds* and *Get Your Rocks On*, we identify four ‘ingredients’ for bleed-inspired game design. We develop design bleed as a community affirming design practice which can be used as a tool for carving out shared standpoints. We suggest that this is particularly productive for game designers at the margins, as it has potential to be creatively and emotionally healing but can also invite expressions for political resistance to normative game culture.

## Keywords

Game design, game jams, hegemony of play, design bleed, live-action role playing, standpoint feminism.

## INTRODUCTION

*It was during the winter of 2011 in Copenhagen when I, Ida Toft, participated in my first game jam, a large-scale game development event (Kultima 2015). Approximately four hundred participants had joined the site with the intention to jam together. I was there with my friend and colleague, Amani Naseem. At the time, none of us had a formal education in game design, but we had been around the scene for some years. Senior game designers had encouraged us to join the jam, supposedly because we might make an interesting contribution. When arriving at the jam, we were instructed to form groups each including four types of skills; programming, game design, visual art, and sound design. We were asked to label ourselves with one of these possible roles, defining our abilities up front. A team formation ‘speed dating’ exercise ensued through which all labelled game jammers were meant to arrive at a well-balanced table of skill sets. I found myself surprised about the assumption that those four skills were considered essential for completing a game. When we were encouraged to join the jam, I had assumed that it would be a space appreciative of our ideas and ways of making as digital creators. Now I wondered how I could most smoothly fit into one of the four predefined roles without attracting too much attention. I decided to take up a label at random and role-played my way through my first hour of my first game jam experience.*

Game development spaces, just like games, are complex multi-faceted phenomena, imbued with social expectations and values. This is why game jam scenarios like the one above are often structured according to “key rules” (Musil 2010) which formalise

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the conditions under which such a “compressed development process” (Zook and Riedl 2013) is supposed to take place. Ida’s experience at Nordic Game Jam 2011 illustrates a moment where a key rule, dividing game development into four skill types, clashes with the person behind the skill, causing friction. In this moment, the creative priorities of a young game developer were erased and moulded into a set of established ideas about the game development process. The expectation to fit all game jammers into a predefined set of roles asked of them to dismiss their own practice, knowledge and skills, and, at least temporarily, play along and pretend<sup>1</sup>. This raises the question how game development can happen beyond the confines of externally imposed norms, and how we can think of such alternatives in methodological terms.

In this article, we respond to this question by developing the concept of *design bleed*, which supplies us with an evocative way of making sense of the need for community affirming design practice. With the concept, we appropriate the live action role-playing community term “bleed” (Montola 2010; Bowman 2015, 2013) from a standpoint feminist perspective (Collins 2002; Haraway 1988; Harding 1986), thus putting it to use to acknowledge the situated needs and knowledges of marginalised creators in the games field.

Within feminist discourse, Standpoint Theory has been developed as a way of challenging universal epistemological truth claims, contending that “knowledge is situated and perspectival, and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced” (Hekman 1997). By invoking Standpoint Theory in our discussion, we acknowledge the groundbreaking work of standpoint feminists like Patricia Hill Collins (2002), Sandra Harding (1986), and Donna Haraway (1988) who have argued that everyday knowledges at the basis of our social location importantly impact our intellectual and creative work. According to Patricia Hill Collins, standpoints are shared among groups, because “shared experiences can foster similar angles of vision leading to group knowledge or standpoint deemed essential for informed political action” (Collins 2002). We take this as a call to reflect on how our situated skills, emotions and life experiences as creators bleed into the way we make games. Moreover, we explore how an attention to standpoints can become a resource to question universalist notions of ‘best practice’ in game design. In contrast to formalised game jamming rules, a standpoint methodology of design bleed affirms all members of the developing team as agents with valid and relevant expressions, including social, affective, aesthetic, and technical skills and tastes.

This paper has two ambitions. We first conceptualise design bleed as a standpoint approach to game design, an analytical term documenting often ostracized contributions to collective game jamming situations. Secondly, we identify conditions under which we have witnessed bleed happen in the development of two of our games, *Lovebirds* and *Get Your Rocks On*. We worked on these two games as game jam collaborators, although in both cases the design teams included other team members whose perspectives we cannot speak for in the scope of this paper. We therefore emphasise that the ‘similar angles of vision’ discussed here are limited to what we can identify as our shared social location: We are white, queer, able-bodied European scholars and game developers with higher education degrees and a stable financial and social support system. This means we are entering the conversation from an incredibly privileged place while still considered on the margins of a greatly imbalance, cis-male dominated games scene (c.f. Vossen 2018; Passmore et al. 2018). Without trying to diminish or erase those dimensions of our identity which grant us privileges in these spaces, this paper focuses on degrees of marginalisation and alienation. We do so strategically, in order to learn how “self-defined standpoints can stimulate resistance”, as Patricia Hill Collins reminds us (2002, 29).

We approach these goals in four sections, the first one locating the need for design bleed vis a vis the “hegemony of play” (Fron et al. 2007), which invests in a particular notion of games and play to the detriment of others. As the opening vignette shows, the hegemony of play structures expectations about game creation according to normative roles in the ‘games industry’. This happens regardless of whether an individual game developer considers their practice as part of that industry. As a result, assumptions about relevant skill sets exclude those makers whose skills do not align with the given norm. However, since its documentation in 2007, game creators have found ways to resist the hegemonic standardisation of game development through projects and tools affirming creators’ lived experience.

Secondly, we review literature from feminist Standpoint Theory and draw lessons about how embracing and articulating standpoints can be productive as healing and as resistance to dominant trends in game development culture. We further address thoughts on relevance in the case when creative contributions come from game developers at the margins. To do this, we bring Harding’s concept of *strong objectivity* (1986) in conversation with design theory to develop a concept of *strong relevance*. By this, we mean the prioritisation of creators’ holistic interests during the design process.

Thirdly, we discuss roots and routes of bleed as an evocative term from live-action role-playing (larp), which emphasises personal affect as part of game culture. In larp culture, bleed has predominantly been used to look at player experiences, and the way game experiences ‘bleed over’ to life contexts or vice versa (Montola 2010; Bowman 2013, 2015; Brown 2014). We appropriate this term as a lens on game development, arguing that design bleed is useful when observing how experiences, affects, aesthetics and knowledge which are traditionally suppressed in normative game development culture can bleed into games, thereby affirming collective standpoints of game designers.

Finally, we demonstrate design bleed at work in *Lovebirds*, a game developed during Nordic Game Jam 2014, and *Get Your Rocks On*, which we made as participants of the Lyst Game Jam 2017. We wrap up by drawing on the making of these design projects to identify four elements which we consider necessary for design bleed to occur.

## **THE HEGEMONY OF GAME DEVELOPMENT**

Much of game development culture is confined by spoken and unspoken conventions around games and play. In 2007, Janine Fron and colleagues have unpacked this tendency as “a hegemony of play”, a cluster of “values and norms that reinforce the industry’s technological, commercial and cultural investments in a particular definition of games and play” (Fron et al. 2007, 1). Back in 2007, the authors suggested that the hegemony of play can be likened to an “elephant in the living room, of which everyone is aware, but which no one calls by name” (ibid).

More recent developments in game culture have changed the discourse around this elephant, with a body of work making its contours and aggressive features more discernible (Evans et al. 2015; Tod 2015; Vossen 2018). Overall, however, little has changed about the authors’ main points of concern. The hegemony of play still summarises a range of playful expressions and interactions which follow a dominant pattern of games “ignoring the needs and desires of ‘minority’ players who are in fact the majority of the population” (Fron et al. 2007). Hegemonic principles of game culture still reinforce an imbalance between those tastes, preferences, and talents which are considered valuable by the games industry and those which are not.

The hegemony of play affects at least three levels of games culture. On an ontological level, it promotes what can be defined as ‘legitimate’ forms of play and games in the first place. This level is regulated both through dominant expectations about fun (e.g. Koster 2004), and attempts at canonising game definitions, including the investment in ‘real’ and the marginalisation of ‘fake’ games (Consalvo and Paul 2019). Secondly, the hegemony of play defines what can count as “proper” game creation, in that it reinforces particular technological, commercial and cultural investments in particular types of hardware and software. As Fron et al. (2007) point out, it is a small elite of stakeholders who determine “which technologies will be deployed, and which will not; which games will be made, and by which designers; which players are important to design for, and which play styles will be supported” (Fron et al. 2007, 1). Thirdly, on a socio-cultural level of representation, games hegemony encourages a selective visibility of bodies and identities to be catered to through play. This includes the prioritisation of the typical white male experiences and presences (Dietrich 2013; Passmore et al. 2018), and more or less subtle forms of exclusions of gamers deviating from the norm (Gray 2014; Shaw 2014; Vossen 2018). For this paper, we focus our attention to the second cluster; game creation.

Critical game design requires an active attention to the values and ideologies that inevitably manifest in any game expression (cf. Flanagan 2009, Murray 2018). There have been various efforts to resist dominant ideas about game creation, especially through works made in artistic and activist game design contexts (Brice 2017; Tremblay 2018; Jenson and deCastell 2009; Westecott et al. 2013; Westecott 2013). Notably, marginalised makers often incorporate more vulnerable day-to-day life experiences and relationships seemingly unrelated to game development into their work.

One example is Kara Stone’s work *Ritual of the Moon* (2019), a queer futurist science fiction game played for five minutes per day over a period of 28 days. *Ritual of the Moon* was developed over several years by a design team of eight makers through an elaborate design process which incorporated mental health management, crafting, and the translation of personal themes into design. Stone traces these priorities back to the initial moment in which the game idea was born; a series of painful reflections on a significant friendship and its potential ending (Stone 2018). According to her, the design process and its layers of material labor stayed responsive to the fluctuation levels of the team members’ mental and emotional wellbeing. This affected the time spent with and away from the project as well as the team members’ relationships and production capacities.

A second example is Allison Kyran Cole’s *Anthology of Intimacy* (2019), a series of seven small role playing games modelled around different expressions of intimacy in varying forms and levels. Each of the seven games were created during a one-month long collaboration between Cole and a significant person in her life, inspired by Cole’s wish to connect with others during her studies abroad. Cole specifically chose people who represented relationships in her life with different levels of intimacy, hoping to explore “untouched parts of my relationships with them” (Cole 2019). Each game explores facets of intimacy created during these projects, characterising specifics about each relationship. They equally document moments of vulnerability and fear, as well as the stability found in longer-term friendships rooting Cole in her everyday life.

We argue that these projects challenge hegemonic assumptions about game creation in two ways. First, instead of rooting collaborations in a priori roles and expectations, these projects acknowledge the fluidity of developers’ experience unfolding during design. Secondly, they treat team members’ mental states, desires, and mutual relationships as resources instead of obstacles in the way of clear-cut development goals. This is done by prioritising curiosity in difficult and vulnerable dynamics and deploying design tools to allow these dynamics to bleed into game production. In

both projects, personal themes and relationships affect the material process of game development, be it through development time (Stone 2019), or the choice of genres (Cole 2019).

Another way of resisting the hegemony of play has been the use of accessible technologies and methods, including tools like Twine, Stencyl, GamerMaker (Quinn 2013) and Bitsy (Harrer 2019). Among these tools, Twine was originally developed for creating branching narratives, not explicitly for game development. This is important because it indicates the blending of different skill and maker communities traditionally not affiliated with games. Communications scholar Alison Harvey (2014) observes how Twine as a platform helped previously silenced narratives, especially around marginalised experiences, gain visibility in games culture. According to Kaitlin Tremblay, creator of the Twine games *Stop Me If You've Heard This One Before*, and *Lights Out*, the space and community around Twine “are inherently political in a way that feels feminist because, at its core, Twine is about accessibility and inclusivity through that accessibility” (Tremblay 2018). At the same time, Tremblay asserts that Twine games are frequently dismissed by mainstream game culture for failing to be ‘real’ games. Appropriately, while tending to cater to a queer and other marginalised creators, Twine follows the trajectory of “queer failure” (Halberstam 2011) in that it fails to produce what the hegemony of play defines as ‘real’ games.

Creating games beyond the norm comes at two risks, however. First, as discussed by Harvey (2014), the liminal status of Twine games as games ‘failing’ to serve industry expectations imposes precarious labour conditions on already vulnerable creators. Games like *Lights Out*, *Ritual of the Moon* and *Anthologies* have been created in games contexts beyond the industry, through personal resources, as well as arts and academic scholarships. Secondly, there is the risk that within the feminist Twine community, certain standards come to be expected in order for a game to be acknowledged as feminist. In this case, the expectation to use Twine might come to be the new elephant in the living room (perhaps, this time a unicorn).

If hegemonic forces affect all kinds of spaces, irrespective of their intended industry affiliation, our work is no exception. While Nordic Game Jam has been promoting itself as creative, open and supportive event space where everything is possible, it has also celebrated occasions where jam games have been incorporated into normative game culture by becoming commercial products (e.g. Joust 2014<sup>2</sup>; Stikbold 2016<sup>3</sup>). In their manifesto, the Lyst Game Jam organisers emphasise the creative freedom of exploring concepts around sex, love, and romance, while also expecting the event to “broaden gender diversity in *the industry*” (Lyst Manifesto 2014-17, our Italics). This means that game jams are run partly with the intention to generate successful products and fresh ‘talent’ able to cater to an existing market.

These dynamics suggest that hegemonic forces are not static but consistently work towards incorporating, assimilating, or stigmatising ‘innovative’ design practices. This moderates our expectations when presenting design bleed as a standpoint practice. While we do believe it can work as a tool for resistance, we do not expect it to undo hegemonic forces, or do any good in the wrong hands. In fact, since bleed emphasises personal takes, humour, aesthetics and affective qualities, any counter-hegemonic use of it must happen from the bottom up. As a methodology, design bleed therefore belongs to marginalised game creators and their allies.

## **A DESIGNERLY APPROACH TO STANDPOINT THEORY**

Standpoint Theory emerged in the early 1980's as a move away from a ‘reactive’ stance of feminist critique towards a more active position of creation<sup>4</sup> (Stanley and Wise 1990, 37; Hughes 2002, 153). In particular, standpoint theorists were asking the question of how a science “apparently so deeply involved in distinctively masculine projects [could] be used for emancipatory ends” (Harding 1986, 29). Such questions

are not without resonance to our experiences of making games in heavily masculinized spaces, spaces often subservient to the heavily masculinized game industry. Thus, we take Standpoint Theory as our starting point for thinking through creative game development from the margins<sup>5</sup>.

The central idea of Standpoint Theory is that social locations and their experiences matter. Because certain kinds of knowledge is only available at certain positions in society, some positions are better suited than others for particular kinds of knowledge production (Harding 1992). While the mainstream knowledge represents the knowledge of the elite, the peripheral positions have a ‘double vision’ (Haraway 1988) that is the knowledge and belief systems available to the mainstream entangled with the practical everyday skills of navigating the consequences of these norms from an oppressed position. This is the basis for what Harding has called “strong objectivity” (Harding 1992). In design practice, it has been suggested that the validity of a design intervention should be evaluated in terms of relevance rather than ‘objective’ truth (Zimmerman et al. 2007).

Making Standpoint Theory pertinent for game designers means shifting our conversations from questions around universal ‘truth’ (e.g. ‘best practice’) to questions around relevance. Strong designerly relevance requires detailed knowledge about the current situation, a strong preference for an alternative reality, and reflections on the possibility that a game might bring about that preferred reality. Hence, we propose the term *strong relevance* to think about games developed at the periphery. Strong objectivity, however, needs strongly articulated standpoints, and these do not come effortlessly. Standpoints are developed through meticulous reflection (Harding 1986), investigation (Haraway 1988) and articulation (Collins 2002), and strong objectivity is forged by grounding knowledge claims in their lived situations. Similarly, strong design relevance is built when creative expressions are firmly grounded in individuals’ particular situations, preferences and visions of alternative realities.

In *Black Feminist Thought* (2002) Patricia Hill Collins discusses how self-defined standpoints have inspired resistance from within Black female communities surviving normative white patriarchy in the US. Collins writes about the need to resist and rewrite the objectifying and controlling images developed by and for the elite to keep Black women in perpetual positions of ‘Other’. Thus, hegemonic stories and knowledge provided by white supremacist society are insufficient and inadequate for survival. Instead, Black feminist thought contains a multitude of sophisticated practical and intellectual knowledges offering modes of survival and resistance. While we appreciate that Collins’s study centres on Black women’s experience in the US, we believe that her discussion of shared standpoints holds strong relevance for affirmative game design practice. For instance, Collins points to a dialectic relationship between reflection and action in which reflection can bring about changed actions and changed action can bring about new experiences and new awareness. In design theory, we can relate this to the activity of framing and reframing (Shön 1983). Designerly practice is effective as an investigatory technique (Naseem and Toft 2011) because the efforts to materially articulate preferred realities not only bring about refined ideas of what is possible, but each new design iteration also brings out new insights of the existing situation. This suggests that design practice is particularly suitable for expressing and refining standpoints.

Well-articulated standpoints are not only essential to prepare the ground for acts of resistance and for rewriting controlling images, they are also necessary for coalition and solidarity (Collins 2002, 37). This is especially the case for collaborations across different axes of power and privilege, and between group members who experience different or intersecting kinds of oppression. Collins shows us that coalition is both possible and critical in order to avoid separatism and exclusionism (ibid.). The articulation of standpoints can help identify points of connection, while staying aware

of differences. In design collaborations, we understand this as the delicate search for a common expression, e.g. a game, which is ideally representative of the shared priorities within a collaboration. Thus, there is a dual work going on in standpoint design collaborations. First, there is the work of an individual designer within the group who needs to articulate their *strongly relevant* expressive needs. Secondly, there is the work of a collective to find overlaps and points of connection among these relevant needs while staying aware of intersectional power dimensions. We believe the work of expressing ideas, voicing disagreements, and listening to each other helps to refine an understanding of similarities, differences, contrasts, and common themes. Importantly, there are limits. As Collins points out, in some constellations, power differences make it hard, and in some cases impossible to sustain coalitions (ibid, 39). This is a point which will reemerge in the discussion.

## DESIGN BLEED

We adopt the term *bleed* from the live-action role-playing (larp) community, where it refers to a blurring of boundaries between players and characters, such that aspects of the game world spill over into the out-of-game reality or vice versa (Montola 2010; Brown 2014; Bowman 2015). Originally used among Nordic larp designers, *bleed* was later discussed in an academic context (e.g. Montola 2010), referring primarily to emotional spillover in role playing experiences. As the term gained popularity, it started to be used more broadly to include spillover of thoughts, physical states and relationship dynamics (Bowman 2015).

While certain conditions can make bleed more or less likely to appear, it has been described as delicate to manage (Brown 2014). Players and designers interested in bleed pay attention to the quality of relationships between players, levels of trust, personal risks, and room for experimentation<sup>6</sup>. However, as much as players and designers aim to regulate the emergence or elimination of bleed, it ultimately remains unpredictable and elusive. Brown explains: “Even if one is making conscious decisions to seek bleed-in through character choices and player allowances, it is not always achieved“ (2014).

Nevertheless, among Nordic larping communities, *playing for bleed* has emerged as a common practice of actively seeking emotional spillover during game play (We Åker Jeep<sup>7</sup> 2005-2007). Larp scholar and player Sarah Lynne Bowman suggests honoring the delicate moments of bleed as “golden moments” (2015) of (un)comfortable play, a player motif which Johanna Koljonen (Koljonen, 2004) has traced back to the early 90’s. Heidi Hopeametsä (2004) similarly uses the term “positive negative experiences” to describe pleasurable gameplay experiences commonly framed as undesirable (e.g. tragedy, horror, and powerlessness). Through *bleed*, distress becomes a source for joyful exploration, providing a “meaningful sense of discomfort” (Jørgensen 2016). US larp designer, artist and activist Jonaya Kemper (2017) has been most explicit in referring to the potential of embracing oppressive roles in larp as “emancipatory bleed”. Overall, players’ and designers’ attraction to bleed includes assumptions about its political and societal potential, the capacity for political liberation (Kemper 2017), self-exploration (Brown 2014), growth (Beltrán 2013) and self-improvement (Montola 2010): “Playing for bleed can lead to insights about oneself and the world, and it creates intense emotions that some players crave” (Brown 2014).

Outside experimental play communities, less celebratory attitudes towards bleed are more common. US-based author and game designer Lizzie Stark points out that “in the US, we often think of bleed as something to be avoided” (2012). Bowman (2015) makes a similar observation in regards to the perception of bleed among players in North America and Europe, where the boundary between game world and reality is imagined as clear and solid. Many players of Bowman’s research express discomfort in admitting that bleed might even exist. Further, issues related to negative emotional carry-over were often brushed aside or treated as something the players ought to deal

with themselves by ‘walking it off’ or learning to take the game less seriously. From an embodied cognition perspective, this avoidance approach to bleed is viewed with suspicion. Leonard and Thurman (2018) observe that keeping the boundaries between the fictional world and everything else requires forceful compartmentalization of in-character experiences, a kind of self-censorship which is depleting players’ emotional resources.

We see the dismissal of bleed, e.g. through the insistence on ‘solid’ boundaries, as an expression of hegemonic games culture, since it prioritises compartmentalization over real experience. As the opening vignette illustrates, such compartmentalization exists in game jam settings through the imposition of hegemonic roles; design, programming, audio, graphics. Game jammers’ insistence on expressing themselves exclusively through these ‘roles’, reinforces the dynamics of policed marginalised knowledge and visions. It erases the situated skills, priorities, interests, and previous life experiences of jammers, especially those jammers whose life experiences and expertise deviate from the given industry script.

With the term *design bleed*, we conceive of bleeding-in as a resource for articulating standpoints, and intentional bleed-out as healing and empowering. Design bleed encourages jammers to resist the confines and hegemonic norms of ‘real games’ by embracing situated priorities as “golden moments” (Bowman, 2015). Design bleed insists on the legitimacy of difficult, non-conventional aesthetic preferences and skills simply by right of them being strongly relevant by virtue of existing.

## **BLEEDING STANDPOINTS: TWO CASES**

In what follows, we discuss two design projects, *Lovebirds* (Nordic Game Jam 2014), and *Get Your Rocks On* (Lyst Jam 2017), in which design bleed was at work in expressing individual and collective standpoints. When developing these games, neither bleed nor standpoints were on our minds. Using these concepts here is an attempt of retroactive sense-making; grasping what was going on in our aggregate of intentions, attention, and the radical pursuit of group affirmation. By shedding light on the differences and commonalities in designing these games, we hope to demonstrate ways of provoking bleed as a design resource in a way that can be of use to others. Our intention is to provide inspiration rather than a comprehensive model, allowing design bleed to flow to and take a helpful new shape in different design contexts.

### **Lovebirds**

It was a grey cold winter day when we were strolling around the giant assembly hall of Aalborg University, Copenhagen. We were among hundreds of other prospective game jammers eager to move around and pitch ideas to friends and strangers. We had just been invited by the organisers to do this by stepping on one of the many wooden crates scattered on the ground. One person standing on a crate while holding up an empty cardboard piece caught our attention. Their pitch was as simple as it was engaging: Let’s make something out of cardboard; anything, as long as it was not a board game. We joined the first brainstorming round. Initially, conversations were confusing, ideas and opinions were untamed but as both team and themes settled, the conversation took a more structured direction. Seated around a table, everyone shared two things, an idea and a skill they would like to bring to the jam. In this process, everything was noted down. We did not pay particular attention to building on one another’s ideas, neither did we try to match each other’s interests. The process was about sharing our individual preferences and understanding where each of us came from. The notes contained a long list of skills and materials, many of them merely tangentially linked to game development: Working with conductive paint, designing masks, playing the violin, working with paper cuts. Rather than dismissing these interests as irrelevant, they were treated as a significant starting point from which to make sense of the official theme; privacy.





Image 1: *Lovebirds* played at the Lyst 2014

Our first prototype consisted of two cardboard masks covering players' entire faces, complete with small eyeholes, and long, pointy noses. We were not sure how to interact with those masks yet, so we tried them on to see what would happen. A nose fencing match ensued. I, Sabine Harrer, picked up the violin and tried to jam along, turning the game into a strange dance. Where was this going? We noticed that the players seemed to enjoy their fight, indicating a possible mechanic. However, this mechanic did not convince all of us, so we decided to continue the quest for interesting interactions. From a design bleed perspective, this was an important risk worth taking. We could have stopped at the fencing interaction, declaring it a 'natural' affordance of the pointy masks. But we were not feeling it. Moving on to explore different interactions which would please all was preferred to stopping at a compromise.

The next steps included making physical modifications to the masks and experimenting with various interactions. During one of such experiments, a target was drawn on one of the masks and a pen attached to the other one. Would the 'pen-player' be able to move their head in a fashion that hit the target, leaving a mark at the right spot? When testing this interaction, we noticed that the masks' small eye holes restricted the players' vision. Rather than removing this challenge (e.g. by widening the eye holes), we equipped each player with a digital tablet (Nexus 7) whose selfie function was used as a 'mirror' to guide the players. Thus impeded and equipped at the same time, the players started a peculiar dance, slowly shoving their heads towards each other, looking out for the 'right spot' in their mirrors while the group around them started giving instructions and encouraging what had now become two lovebirds trying to *beak*: *You're almost there, just a bit closer, oh, you're so close!*

This was our 'golden moment', a moment which ran through the team as an organic, shared sense of excitement and arrival, sealed by collective laughter. The *lovebird* spectacle and its suggestive connotations affected us on a physical, affective level. Through a combination of gestures, words, and materials, the players had surreptitiously slipped into a symbolic mating ritual whose implications resonated on a level of lived experience with everyone on the team. The spectacle conjured up shared insecurities around physical intimacy, sexual exploration, failure, arousal and consent. Instead of moving away from the apparent awkwardness of these associations, we decided to stay with them and ponder ways to recreate a similar

moment for players with whom this situation would equally resonate. In other words, we used what intensely pleased us about the playtesting situation as a core reference for the desired gameplay experience. By working with what had pleased and excited us as a collective, we attempted to create something which would be capable of pleasing and exciting others as well.

Through the rest of the process, we used two related strategies to remember and affirm the golden moment; storytelling and materialising. Considering storytelling, the name *Lovebirds* sprung out of an attempt at circumscribing the playtesters' awkward interactions, as well as our own associations with it, through a silly, evocative backstory: The two players are two lovebirds enjoying a beautiful sunset on a secluded forest branch, when they are overcome with the urge to *beak*. None of them has ever *beaked* before but they have a rough idea of how it works. This is where the game starts and the players are thrown into the challenge to overcome their insecurity as first-time beakers, potentially under the respectful watch of 'pornithological' onlookers and live musicians who improvise a tasteful soundtrack based on the *Lovebirds* base melody.

When it comes to designing the materials, the challenge was to facilitate a 'beaking' experience which came close to our golden moment. Here, optimising the response to touch, and encouraging the players to softly rub their beaks against each other was prioritised. We did this by mounting an electric circuit in the insides of the beaks and connected it to an LED headlamp which would turn on whenever two beaks touched each other on their conductive spots. The beaks' ability to be literally 'turned on' was exploited as an appropriate storytelling device: Making each other's beaks 'turn on' became a collectively desired moment in each of the four or five *Lovebirds* sessions we ended up running across different European games festivals, following the jam.

Intertwining narrative and material strategies helped us continue game development in a way which sustained loyalty to the initial bleed moment. This included the level of linguistic choices. *Beaking* became a central concept which not only effectively anchored mechanics and narrative in the spirit of the golden moment, but gained a special meaning for the team way after development and showcasing had ended. In all its silliness, it created a shared experiential reference, a safe experiential horizon affirming our joyful belonging in the game jamming space.

Needless to say, there is some risk in this kind of process. Rather than a planned process moving from A to B, comprising Z stages, working with design bleed is hard to formalise. What the development of *Lovebirds* highlights is that bleed can occur and be sustained through a radical trust in the skills of the group to identify 'golden moments'. In each step of *Lovebirds*, the prime focus was not on making a 'good' game, or making a game at all (it was on making something out of cardboard that wasn't a board game!). Neither was it about making an explicitly political or autobiographical game. As a standpoint game, *Lovebirds* is an expression of celebrating existant skills, knowledges and aesthetics, as well as shared designerly arousal. It was about our shared sense of strong relevance.

## **Get Your Rocks On**

*Get Your Rocks On* was developed on a sunny day in June 2017 at Lyst Game Jam, a game jam which was more explicitly dedicated to the theme of sexual intimacy and romance. We had found an outdoors spot on the jamming site; a wooden picnic table close to the picturesque pebble beach. Unlike Nordic Game Jam, Lyst Game Jam used a pre-curated group formation process. While in theory, this would have allowed us to get straight to the phase of idea creation, we dedicated the first hours to an intense conversation about our surroundings and how we connected to them. How did we perceive the landscape and its features in relation to us? What moved us? Giving room to this first conversation was not easy. It required us to de-prioritise feelings of guilt related to the imperative of creative productivity, the reason we were invited

here in the first place. How could we justify our existence in this privileged space if it wasn't for efficiently producing playful output? And what was a conversation worth if it didn't directly feed into this ultimate goal of creative productivity? Such feelings caused impatience and the impulse to impose structure, an impulse we collectively resisted during these first hours. Instead, as the bright Norwegian summer night transformed our surroundings, we started talking about rocks and time. How long did it take for a rock to form? How long would the rocks around us still be there after we were gone? Did we have individual rock preferences? What made people become attached to rocks in general? Was it possible to talk about love relationships, or even jealousy<sup>8</sup>, between humans and rocks?

In hindsight, allowing space and time for these questions in spite of the 'compressed' development environment of a game jam was essential, as it laid a solid foundation to create an intimate game like *Get Your Rocks On*. Needless to say, from a hegemonic perspective interested in potentially commercial output, the extended unstructured phase of attention to our environment and each other could be classified as 'waste of time'. From a perspective of strong relevance, however, it was most effective in creating affective bonds, trust, and safety essential for design bleed to occur. In addition, the initial conversation sharpened our perception of our surroundings. Following our initial exchange, we went for a stroll on the beach, collecting rocks we found attractive, developing a language to describe our individual tastes and experiences. Showing interesting rocks to each other and admiring each others' rocks created a trajectory for how we approached romance and flirtation through game mechanics later on.

Like with *Lovebirds*, working out a unique language was helpful in clarifying and materialising our design vision. We started by designing a simple game board and let our favourite rocks enter the game. In this first iteration we played around with associations around dating. Each player owned a 'place' and some rocks and would meet other rocks on the board, 'pick them up' and invite them to 'their place'. We designed rules for movement across the game board which would allow players to strategize and negotiate how and when to pick up each other's rock. However, analogous to the first fencing mechanic in *Lovebirds*, something was missing. This ruleset was too cumbersome and did not fully resonate with us.

We decided to leave the table and go for a swim in the chilly Norwegian lake. Dealing with the experience of acclimating to the cold water took all of our attention. The further we walked and eventually swam away from the shore, the more the design table disappeared from our view. Instead of pushing ideas, concepts, rules, we dealt with the more urgent need of pushing our bodies through the waves, eventually reemerging to lie down and dry on the pebble beach. We leisurely picked up pebbles and started thoughtlessly playing with them. Design thoughts immediately returned, but now they took a different turn. Was it possible to communicate softness through a rock? What if two people touched a rock simultaneously? We experimented by touching a pebble from different angles, using a finger each, keeping eye contact. To our surprise, the sensation of feeling each others' presence via the medium of a rock was magical. We had found our golden moment.

Not only did our golden moment on the beach introduce strong relevance to our rock-based interactions, it also made the formal game board less relevant. Our renewed attention turned from an interest in abstract 'pick up' rules towards rules facilitating concrete touch. The golden moment had introduced a prioritisation of feeling each other; now we were searching for ways to articulate this experience to players, combining mechanics and flirtatious language. Led by this intention, we consulted online flirtation guides and dirty talking tutorials which consistently yielded two recommendations for erotic interactions: Describe actions and materials as detailed as possible and state desires and wishes clearly. This inspired us to develop a rock-specific flirtation style naming and acknowledging 'erotic' game elements.

Idiosyncratic phrases, especially puns were chosen to ‘facillytate’ play in a direction which would relax players and reduce the risk of serious play.



Image 2: *Get Your Rocks On* at Lyst closing party

Our evocative ‘rockabulary’ included verbs designed to charge all player interactions and game elements with excessive erotic meaning, turning the rocks into a flirtatious medium. A new game starts by a player putting a finger on the same rock and inviting other players to join. According to the game, this is a ‘turn on’. The rules say that rocks must roll, not slide or be lifted up. Losing touch with a rock ends a turn, and is therefore a ‘turn off’. The crevices of many rocks can be grasped using fingernails. The game defines this as ‘nailing’. A finger can softly move across the rim of a rock, thereby ‘rimming’ it. As a special move, it is possible to cross another player’s finger by moving over it. This move requires consent in the form of a polite question: *Can I come over you?* Like in the ‘beaking’ example, this ‘rockabulary’ of *Get Your Rocks On* affirmed our shared preference for escalating smutty puns.

Overall, rather than approaching Lyst’s theme of love, sex and romance from a content angle, we turned our attention to our surroundings and to one another. Moving between formalized and trust-based exploration in formal and informal settings allowed bleed to occur in this process. Over a weekend, *Get Your Rocks On* became a manifestation of three people’s steamy conversation with their environment and each other in a way which prioritised playful attachment and silly group affirmation over market-ready results.

## DISCUSSION

The case studies above report on our own experiences of developing games in the context of particular time-compressed events and should therefore not be taken to reflect what design bleed should look like in other settings. However, we suggest that our processes spur inspiration as well as indicate patterns at work in standpoint-aware creation following the principle of strong relevance. Design bleed is most of all a commitment to stay with the situation, and prioritise creators over conventions and external rules. In what follows, we discuss this commitment in terms of four priorities we consider necessary for design bleed to occur in ways which affirm marginalised creators. These four priorities are *needs before roles*, *patience before outcome*, *skills before tools*, and *acknowledgment of power before comfort*.

### **Needs before roles**

Making bleed occur requires an active commitment to extant situational needs for creative expression. This means staying respectfully connected to one's own preferences, discomforts and sense of meaning, and taking responsibility to bring these to the attention of the team. Second, it requires being equally respectful to and curious about team members' expressive needs. Finding shared standpoints through shared needs can require hard work depending on the constellation of the group. Affirming needs before roles is thus related to affective labour, a kind of labour that has a tendency to go unnoticed (Kennedy 2018; Harvey and Shepherd 2016). We believe it is important that all team members are equally invested, partly for reasons related to power and privilege, but also because using bleed to develop shared standpoints requires the contribution from everyone. When developing *Lovebirds*, some members on the team enjoyed fighting with the beaks while others were less engaged. We only settled when we had found a mechanic which resonated with everyone. In both processes, we circled around the theme, both seriously and playfully, for a considerable amount of time before bleed happened as a shared experience.

While our case studies present situations where bleed manifested as joyful moments, we do not believe that bleed is necessarily equivalent to comfort. Just as marginalised larpers might take emancipatory pleasure in exploring oppression through play (Kemper 2017, np) occurrences of design bleed can challenge teams to face vulnerable, awkward moments. In the development of our two games, these moments were relatively brief due to the compressed sense of time. However, deciding to bring discomforts or disagreements to the attention of the team can be jarring, especially if uttered from a place of marginalisation *within* the team. The prioritisation of needs through strong relevance can be useful in giving space to, naming, and confronting discomfort, which is required for bleed to come about.

### **Patience before outcome**

Bleed-focused game design can take time and happen in unpredictable ways, at unpredictable moments in time. In fact, as the literature on bleed in larp points out, bleed is delicate to manage and cannot be fully controlled. This means that the moment of bleed might never happen or, in the context of a game jam format, it might happen so late that there will not be enough time for the team to adequately transfer it into a game format. This aspect of bleed interferes with a central hegemonic principle of game jams; productivity. Both of our case studies show processes in which bleed *did* happen, but in other constellations this is far from guaranteed.

In *Get Your Rocks On*, our initial investment in unstructured conversation was an enormous risk which weighed on us in the form of 'procrastination' guilt. Taking the amount of time we took to connect to each other and our environment felt like a luxury we did not have in the context of a compressed creative event. Given what we knew and already understood about normative game jamming, and game production culture more generally, patience was a resource we had to guard with confidence and trust our creative priorities. The search for golden moments of bleed requires *collective* investment in patience, trust, the ability to take risks, and the acknowledgement that even then, bleed might still not happen.

### **Skills before tools**

There is a common theme in the examples we draw on; the centrality of materials not commonly used in game development. This is not a requisite but it does bring attention to a choice of skills and materials. As the Marxist roots of Standpoint Theory teach us, what we produce and how we produce it are significant components of who we are. In a game design process, this relates to how we approach materials, what we make of them and which tools and skills we choose to draw on. For this

reason, we understand choice of platform and development environment as included in the conversation on choice of materials.

Thus, the third priority in bleed-based game creation is to be reflective and intentional about the choice of materials and skills. We encourage an approach to game design in which games are not medium-specific. Games do not have to be digital to be games, neither do they have to conform to ‘best practice’ standards, tools, or formats. Instead of deciding on the standard game engine or tool that is most popular in a given context, choice of platform might include reflecting on how it will support the confidence and sense of expertise for different team members. That means examining who becomes experts and who becomes observers, learners or helpers, and to what extent these are roles that support a bleeding of skills and exploration and articulation of standpoints for the individual.

The list of skills and desires we made early on in the development of *Lovebirds* helped us to be reflective and flexible about these choices. With this list at hand, we turned attention to each other as already experts of play and game-like pleasures. In this way we welcomed each other as people with a wide range of skills, connecting our game development capacities to our capacities outside of games circles. This allowed team members’ previous creative expressions and practical life experiences, such as playing the violin, or repairing electricity at home, to bleed through.

Furthermore, it can be useful to include a variety of materials in the process, as switching between material contexts can encourage different ways of thinking. In the making of *Get Your Rocks On*, for instance, we switched our attention between abstract rule design, swimming, physical play, and online tutorials. Similarly, one of the main bleed moments happened right after a quick swim in the cold water. These shifts of attention introduced a new angle, a minimally adjusted position to design from, to explore individual and shared moments of bleed. For an online collaboration, it might be useful to make arrangements for similar shifts of attention to make sure the team stays dynamic in meaningful ways.

### **Acknowledgment of power before comfort**

As mentioned before, articulation of differences in power and privilege is a prerequisite to negotiate trust and safety within a team. As Collins (2002) reminds us, this is not always successful, since privilege tends to make socially advantaged individuals blind to power and therefore unsafe for minority group members. In groups where power differences *can* be negotiated, doing so seems essential to facilitate bleed. Although we were not explicitly aware of this ‘bleed ingredient’ during design, we now see awareness of social power as an important aspect in cultivating shared standpoints and balancing diverse needs for expression. To increase bleed safety, we can learn from practices developed in the larp community to deal with risks and possibilities of bleed in a responsible manner (Kemper 2017; Bowman 2015). This might include making an effort for transparency by having conversations about priorities, expectations and emotional capacities as well as agreeing in advance on how to handle or embrace different levels of discomfort during play, how to step out, take breaks or check in with others. Conversations around bleed safety are not limited to the initial collaboration stages but should be practiced throughout the entire game development process. Continuous assessment of safety is a core ingredient in bleed-based game design.

It begs repeating that even if they have ‘optimised’ strong relevance along these four lines, game developers cannot expect the magical moment of bleed to occur (see point two, patience). This is because design bleed requires access to emotional resources, such as the ability to trust, which are not a given in many design spaces or team constellations. Any perceived lack of safety can quickly seal the crack from which bleed would otherwise emerge. This might be related to a team member’s fear of

making oneself too vulnerable in a social setting, the fear of being unheard, rejected or not taken seriously, or the feeling of being an ‘impostor’, or a burden to the group, or required to speak on behalf of an entire community. Such fears are as legitimate as they are effective in reducing the chance for a ‘golden moment’.

That said, if design bleed is possible, we believe it can serve as a survival tool for marginalised creators working in hegemonic spaces. The radical prioritisation of strong relevance via needs, desires and extant knowledge in the face of the norm can be both healing and politically potent. We suggest that exploring shared standpoints through game design bleed can spark protocols for creative survival that reach far beyond the relatively short weekend of a game jam.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The role playing did not last beyond this opening exercise. Making use of support network and pre-established safety strategies helped us find ways to work around the rules.

<sup>2</sup> Initially developed at Nordic Game Jam, 2011. Released by Die Gute Fabrik 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Initially developed at Nordic Game Jam, 2013, released 2016.

<sup>4</sup> There is a need to point out that Standpoint Theory itself is situated in European Marxist and Hegelian traditions (See Smith 1979, Hartsock 1983, Harding 1986, 1992). These are not unproblematic roots. For instance, we take issue with Nancy Hartsock’s (1983) insistence that crafting a ‘female’ standpoint requires the provisional dismissal of ‘divisive’ factors like race or class. Instead of liberating ‘all women’, his erases cumulative forms of oppression affecting BIPOC, transgender, and disabled women and nonbinary people. It furthermore positions white, cisgender womanhood as a default feminist standpoint, thus amplifying oppression for those most disadvantaged by white, heteronormative, ableist patriarchal society.

<sup>5</sup> Bear in mind that these positions are always relative depending on the social composition of any given gathering or conversation. The same individual might take a more privileged or oppressed role depending on the game jam context. Taking the metaphor of centre and periphery seriously, to what extent one finds oneself at the margins has everything to do with who is included in the first place. This also means that, rhetorically placing oneself at ‘the margins’ is a political gesture that draws attention to power hierarchies while also contributing to redrawing these boundaries of who is included and who is not.

<sup>6</sup> To create transparency, larp games often come with a rating of bleed levels along with details about duration, number of players and materials necessary (see e.g. Webb 2016). This gives the players a chance to assess the intensity of bleed they may expect, allowing them to optimise bleed (cf. Kemper 2017), if desired. Bowman (2015) also mentions that the community has developed gestures for emotional signalling during the game, organizers hosts pre-game workshops or post-game debriefing for sharing of lingering tensions and resolving disputes. Even when debriefing is not formally organized, players often initiate this informally if they sense there is a need for it.

<sup>7</sup> The Scandinavian design collective *We Åker Jeep* deliberately seeks to provoke intense emotional play by for instance asking players to bring out-of-game situations or out-of-game-relationships into the game world. *We Åker Jeep* states on their website that many of the games from the collective rely on bleed and that “[s]ometimes the entire purpose of a game is to create bleed” (We Åker Jeep, 2005-2007).

<sup>8</sup> We found out that, yes, this was possible.

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