

Lyric Games: Genealogy of an Online “Physical Games” Scene

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Lyric games are highly personal, independently published role-playing games — tabletop (TRPGs), live-action role-play (larp), or somewhere in-between (“freeform”) — published under the “physical games” category on the itch.io platform, a site for independent games creators to sell their work and find that of others. These games are often created by queer and/or otherwise marginalized designers, conceived of during online game jams, compiled at short notice using one’s own or publicly available artwork, and then sold on itch for \$5-20 USD, often amidst a constellation of other games from that particular jam or creator. The term “lyric games” was coined by designer John K. Harness (2019), who describe them as “[teetering] on the edge of playability and sometimes even [acknowledging] that their primary mode is to be read as literature--that the reading is the playing, is the engagement, next to or even more than table play--again, *lyric*” Examples include Takuma Okada’s *Alone Among The Stars* (2019), Jay Dragon’s *Esoteric* (2019) collection, and Ben Chong’s *Tara Tubats* (2019). It is a truly global scene, with many of the creators hailing from southeast Asia, the West Coast of the United States, and Australia. Designers in the movement embraced the idea of “lyric games” when they came to the public realization that having a normative, polished, play-tested, realistically *playable* game product in PDF form was *not* their ultimate design intention. Rather, lyric games are created neither as products nor ideas, but rather as “incitements” (Czege 2019), expressions of raw creative energy that then may “incite” a player to experience something strange or powerful, or another creator to create something comparable. The vagueness of the games is considered a feature (udernation 2019), and the games prioritize reading *as* play, explore difficult themes, eschew worldbuilding and lore, openly embrace ritual and games-as-religion, observe few distinctions between player and character, and insist on non-traditional narrative forms. Rather than seeing this movement as singular and unique, this paper connects the lyric games movement with its predecessors and present cultural moment, as well as describes its emergent game aesthetics through my own schema as well as those schemas of the creators themselves. I argue that these games are participating in a long tradition of artistic and literary modernism (Gay 2007) as well as more recent traditions of “serious” TRPGs (Wrigstad 2008, Leaman 2016), cultures of production (Dovey and Kennedy 2006), the game jam (Kultima 2018, Kennedy 2018), and the platformization of contingent media (Nieborg and Poell 2018). Modern financial pressures and platforms have produced an evolved social object (Harman 2016) in the form of a game scene that simultaneously embraces and rejects its elders.

Literary modernists, as Peter Gay (2007) claims, were preoccupied with formal aesthetic experimentation as well as rejection of their *bourgeois* inheritance. Despite differing mediums, they shared “the lure of heresy that impelled their actions as they confronted conventional sensibilities, and ... a commitment to a principled self-scrutiny” (3-4). Such language encapsulates the lyric games’ creators’ impulse to integrate technical writing with poetry. One example is Maria Mison’s (2019)

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Forgetting Your Touch, in which choosing to create a character is optional, has “the player [remember] they occupy a body,” and has procedures such as: “Have Person C ask how the other people are feeling / C doesn’t need to have answers.” Intended play is embodied, queer, and ambiguous on every level. There is no evidence of this game having been actually played to date, and yet the procedures for play are there for any to try. Mison’s lyric game participates in a broader tradition of game poetry, as created by artist Yoko Ono nearly six decades ago. The “game poem,” or a short game made for a small audience that has no obvious interpretation or message, has quietly persisted as a format over decades (Flanagan 2009, Bogost 2010). Its roots can be found in the Fluxus movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, led by artists such as Ono, George Brecht, and Allan Kaprow. Indeed, Ono’s instructional poetry or “event scores” in her 1964 anthology *Grapefruit* read now like rules to play inscrutable, avant-garde games (one example: “*PAINTING TO BE STEPPED ON / Leave a piece of canvas or finished / painting on the floor or in the street.*”) Fellow modernist traveler William S. Burroughs’ wildly controversial book *The Naked Lunch* (1959) would then prompt TRPG designer Robin D. Laws to write up “William S. Burroughs: The Role-Playing Game” (1988), a whimsical set of instructions to produce “rivetingly surreal, blackly satiric and disconnected sequences” which later “incited” Jonathan Tweet to create *Over The Edge* (1992), the first openly postmodern, surrealist commercial TRPG. Lyric games, in other words, participate in a broader tradition of modernist experimentation with form, also in the sphere of TRPGs.

Genealogies and chains of inspiration for queer lyric games such as *Sleepaway* (Dragon 2019) are best situated in the work of Ono and Tweet than, say, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), although TRPGs have always maintained a stake in queerness (Stenros and Sihvonen 2015). *Sleepaway* has players take on the roles of camp counselors who are telling tales of the Lindworm, a shapeshifting creature that once haunted the camp. The horror game takes on game-poem-level dimensions when certain Rituals (Dragon 2019, 115) require players to soak paper, burn paper symbols, and/or physically go outside. Ambiguous instructions that blur player and character are considered “immersive.” The TRPG itself has a very specific heritage: It is a Belonging Outside Belonging game, which means it is based on the diceless TRPG system *Dream Askew // Dream Apart (DA//DA)* (2019) by Avery Alder and Benjamin Rosenbaum, a game that explicitly explores community, trauma, and queerness. *DA//DA* is in turn a Powered by the Apocalypse game in the vein of Meguey and Vincent Baker’s *Apocalypse World* (2010) TRPG, modeled on practices of consent from sex education (Living Games Conference 2018). *Apocalypse World* itself has a range of influences from the indie TRPG scene catalyzed by The Forge (White 2015), most notably *InSpectres* (Sorensen 2005), with its partial success mechanics. But platform has an impact, too: since Harness and Okada received 177 entries for the 2019 “Emotional Mecha Jam” on itch.io, lyric games remain in constant dialogue with each other on that platform. In an era of itch and Patreon micro-transactions, smaller games released every month gives this openly queer, modernist-seeming RPG movement long-term means to fund itself beyond the mainstream. Both Alder as well as the Bakers were early adopters of the Patreon funding service for TRPG creators specifically. itch.io is now the chosen platform that streamlines audience and distribution, and through microtransactions, PDFs circulate and influence the new generation of designers.

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