

What is a Game Autrice? The Auteur Theory and Female Game Developers (Muriel Tramis's Example)

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Despite the post-structural literary criticism directed against interpreting cultural texts as works of one person (Barthes 1977; Foucault 1979), the auteur category—applied even to individual creators of collective works (Bordwell 1979)—is also present in digital gaming discourse. For example, Aarseth (2004) notes that a game auteur should create more than one work, be recognized among players, and have a distinctive design style. However, game auteur theory has made only male game developers the subjects (Aarseth 2004; Demirbas 2008; Staszenko 2015); rare exceptions include the studies of established academic auteurs like Anna Anthropy (Strużyna 2014). This paper aims to develop the auteur theory by including female commercial game designers, usually omitted from the authorial discourse until the #GamerGate controversy (Wood 2017).

As a starting point, we chose games by Muriel Tramis, a person fitting the intersectional discourse: black female African-Caribbean from outside the Western circle. As a long-working designer at Coktel Vision, Tramis probably made the first digital games touching upon the themes of slavery (Sepinwall 2021): *Méwilo* (Coktel Vision 1987), *Freedom* (Coktel Vision 1988), and *Lost in Time* (Coktel Vision 1993); she was also the first woman to introduce feminist porn to mainstream digital games, as the examples of *Emmanuelle* (Coktel Vision 1989), *Geisha* (Coktel Vision 1990), and *Fascination* (Coktel Vision 1991) demonstrate. Still, after the commercial failure of a costly project *Urban Runner* (Coktel Vision 1996), she ceased designing commercially distributed games. In 2018, when Tramis received the Order of the Legion of Honour, she briefly attracted the attention of the mainstream media (Bidaux 2018).

The research was carried out based on Astrid Ensslin's functional ludostylistics (2014) and included seven games mentioned above in which Muriel Tramis participated. Although Tramis co-designed many more titles, these games demonstrate five characteristic features of her oeuvre. The first one is critical of racism and colonialism (*Méwilo*, *Freedom*, *Lost in Time*), much influenced by Patrick Chamoiseau's early works; Chamoiseau himself wrote dialogues for *Méwilo* and *Freedom* (Donovan 2010, 129). The second feature is the subversion of pornography (*Emmanuelle*, *Geisha*, *Fascination*); inspired by feminist psychoanalysis, Tramis ridiculed the male gaze and culture of rape, traditionally prevalent in male-directed gaming pornography (Tramis 1993, 68). The third feature would be sophisticated puzzles; Tramis constructed

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elaborate and culturally embedded logical challenges in her contributions. Examples that we can find in *Méwilo* (puzzles that require non-diegetic knowledge of Tramis's homeland, Martinique) or *Lost in Time* (the final puzzle that involves the use of an orchid against the male opponent). Although such puzzles prevented Tramis's games from reaching large audiences, mastering them helps to understand their game world and the cultural anchorage of Tramis's contributions. Finally, Tramis's works are distinct with authorial signatures. *Méwilo* introduces the digitized face of Tramis as a shopper (Zimmermann and Suck 1988, 57); moreover, *Fascination* and *Lost in Time* feature black female characters resembling Tramis. One may also note that *Fascination* and *Lost in Time* put black women as protagonists for the first time in gaming history. Also, Tramis briefly makes her cameo appearance in *Urban Runner*, a French-American coproduction that takes place in Paris.

To conclude, Tramis's selected output helps consider her a game auteur—or, to use a more appropriate word—an autrice. Tramis was sure of her position in the digital game field; for example, she signed her name as “authoress” in *Geisha*'s credits. However, we need to underline that this research unavoidably excludes Tramis's collaboration with Pierre Gilhodes or entirely educational *Adibou* series. Despite the increasing difficulties in applying auteur theory to the digital game industry, we hope that the study will strengthen the position of female developers in the game field.

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