

Is gameplay fun after all? Queer Indigenous resistances through gameplay

Leandro A. Wallace

Centre for Critical Indigenous Studies
Macquarie University
Sydney, Australia

Leandro.wallace@hdr.mq.edu.au Wallace.leandro13@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The thesis to which this paper is a part of is focused centrally on queer Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander experiences and resistances within and around the playing of videogames. It further engages sites of queer Indigenous public representation and builds on the emerging literature of Indigenous gameplay to understand what that representation may mean for queer Indigenous players and what may form resistance to existing practices. Central to the paper is a set of discussions with queer Indigenous people who game, as they disclose their hopes and aspirations and their practices of engagement and resistance regardless of whether games are providing an inclusive or 'safe' space. Through a stand-alone survey, they have disclosed their own thoughts on what it means to be a queer Indigenous person engaged in gameplay. This project is located within the Australian Research Council *Saving Lives: mapping the impact of LGBTIQA+ Indigenous Artists* program (O'Sullivan, 2021), that demonstrate what queer, and queer Indigenous representation – or a lack of it – can mean for joyful and fulfilling leisure.

Respondents' experiences and reflections are valuable insights into practices that take form when putting what Maria Lugones idea of 'world-travelling' into action (2003). Lugones' uses the idea of world-travelling to describe a person's capacity to navigate places that are not fit for purpose and create their own pathway through colonially-loaded spaces. World-travelling can take place in any area that is dominated by colonialities and colonial forces, videogames included. These navigation capacities are developed by dealing with colonial stories and heteronormative impositions as queer Indigenous players find themselves as 'unexpected readers' (Castillo, 2022, n.p.). Across the aforementioned thesis the idea of the 'unexpected reader' is transformed into the unexpected player. Elaine Castillo frames the unexpected reader as one who is unable to directly relate to the stories and characters represented. The unexpected reader is required to build connections across stories and characters that are not familiar or are not created with their existence in mind. Similar experiences were raised by Gaining Lives survey respondents when dealing with videogames characters and stories. For this reason, across the thesis, and in this presentation, I have adapted Castillo's concept of the unexpected reader to a gaming context in what I refer to as the unexpected player. Unexpected players, in this rendering, are required to navigate both colonial reiterations and impositions in videogames through world-travelling, and in order to locate their own pathways in a manner that they deem fit for purpose.

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This paper focuses on what play means and does for the queer Indigenous players that responded to the survey, through being placed as unexpected players. While the social activity of play alludes to numerous activities and affects (see Ruberg, 2015; 2019; Trammel, 2023), in the context of this study play is understood as engagement with a leisure activity, in this instance, videogames. This presentation will address the meanings that respondents have given to play and considered through their practices. Play, in respondents' arguments, has a close connection to the characters discussed in the thesis, which will be reviewed in this presentation, and to being able to shift representational power relationships. Furthermore, gameplay is how respondents engage with videogames and what meaning they give to their practices. It also highlights that being an unexpected player does not deter queer Indigenous players responding to the survey from engaging in play. These interconnections give play a different sense that is not separated from practices as well as showing how respondents' world-travelling and unexpected player situation influences approaches to play. I will develop how their reasons to play are closely related to their world-travelling as respondents provide diverse reasons to why they play.

Keywords

queer, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander players, unexpected player, world-travelling, gameplay, resistances

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