

Making Non-Monogamy: A Design-Oriented Approach for Studying Digital Game Intimacies

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Within the lively sub-field of queer game studies, a pocket of research on non-monogamies has come to offer new vantage points for understanding games' potential to challenge normative logics of pleasure and success. So far, this research has largely focused on analyzing existing representations of non-monogamies (usually polyamory) in digital games, often critiquing how games have regularly reproduced hetero- and mono-normative assumptions about what kinds of intimacies are normal and desirable and which are transgressive or taboo (Adams & Rambukkana 2018; Dwyer 2021; Rambukkana & Adams 2025). Recently, non-monogamy has begun to flow from the fringes of games media and culture into the mainstream. For example, many players now have access to popular and commercially successful titles that intentionally include non-monogamous stories and characters, such as *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023), *Hades II* (Supergiant Games 2025), and *Date Everything* (SassyChap Games 2025). Evidently, some developers are recognizing that players want to experience a more diverse range of in-game intimacies and are making moves to meet that demand. In my own research, I respond to this shift by pivoting away from game analysis and toward questions of how actual players are thinking about and engaging with non-monogamies in games, as well as how creators might design these relationships to better resonate with queer desires, identities, and orientations.

My research-creation dissertation-in-progress engages these problematics using a player- and design-oriented approach, seeking to understand what alternatives players want and imagine for in-game relationships. What can we learn about designing for queer(er) play by realizing and documenting such alternatives, and by using prototyping to explore a variety of intimate progressions, pathways, rules, mechanics, affects, and interfaces?

To begin, I touch on the project's theoretical commitments, including queer phenomenology and queer use (Ahmed 2006, 2019; Youngblood 2015), queer

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mechanics and affect (Ruberg 2019, 2022), and anarchist sexuality (Portwood-Stacer 2010). I also use Alexis Shotwell's (2017) work on relational significant otherness. This concept, rather than approaching monogamy and non-monogamy as a binary based of one versus many relationships, instead advances an ethics and politics of co-constitution, valuing difference, and growing our capacity to be responsive in all our connections and partnerships (see Haraway 2003; Campbell 2014). This throughline helps me to ask questions about what it means to design for queer(er) play without presupposing that alternatives to monogamy would only be desirable or meaningful for non-monogamous players. Finally, I provide my rationale for grounding this work in a theory of "polydisciplinamory": a research-creation framework that adopts the affective dimensions of polyamory to help researchers navigate a variety of attachments to different disciplines, methods, sites, subjects, and creative outputs (Loveless 2019).

From there, I break down my methodology and explain my use of a feminist speculative creative practice (Auger 2013; Martins 2014). Drawing on aspects of design ethnography (Pink et al. 2022), this project aims to combine the informal design knowledge of players with the formal design knowledge of queer game developers. The first step is a multi-stage interviewing process that invites players to express their thoughts and feelings about non-monogamy (or its absence) in the games they play, what they would want to be different, and why. Players fill out an open-ended questionnaire about their gaming and relationship histories and preferences. To follow up, I then conduct a series of more conversational "gaming interviews" where I ask questions as participants play (Shaw 2014). This step provides opportunities for players to (re)contextualize or build on previous responses, as well as for me to observe and document their emergent thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

Once the interviewing stage is complete, the project becomes a multi-sited endeavour in speculative and critical design. Alternating between feedback from players and developers, I will iterate on game prototypes in a process that is flexible, shaped by different constraints than commercial game development, and that uses a participatory, "bottom-up" approach to account for players' context-specific wants, needs, and values (Pink et al. 2022). While collaboration with developers outside of Canada is an option, my outreach efforts are focused on small and independent queer game developers based in Montréal. Documenting this process to produce design knowledge is key, and so this paper has a strong focus on my use of the Method for Design Materialization (MDM): an approach intended to help researchers capture a game's design-in-process through software version control (Khaled et al. 2018; Khaled & Barr 2023). Using examples, I show how I am using GitHub to document the design trajectory of game prototypes by pairing time-slices of code and other materials with reflective journal entries that document the thinking behind each decision. This paper asks what it means to apply MDM in this specific research-creation context, highlighting the affordances and challenges of involving players at multiple points in the design process and offering insight for other researchers who are using participatory methods to make and study games.

As non-monogamies become more culturally legible and commonplace, including in the games we play, this project asks critical questions about how those representations may or may not resonate with actual players' desires and experiences, as well as how dating and relationships in digital games can be re-imagined through queer interventions.

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