

A House Is Not a Home: Queergaming and Recuperative History in *Molly House*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

At PAX Unplugged 2024, players donned wigs and masks at the Wehrlegig Games booth, throwing mock christenings and unsanctioned weddings while demoing *Molly House* with designer Jo Kelly. Promotional playthroughs, including Becca Scott's costumed tutorial for the game's release, emphasize embodied play and improvised performance — invitations to inhabit Georgian queer community through gesture and costume. *Molly House* (Wehrlegig Games, 2025) is a board game whose formal procedures, as analog play often does, invite theatrical extension — the costumed demos at PAX being one such elaboration.

The game emerged from the Zenobia Award, which recognizes games addressing historically marginalized subjects. The community its players reconvene left behind little beyond the archives of its own persecution. Designed by Jo Kelly with Cole Wehrle, *Molly House* draws on court transcripts, trial records, and Old Bailey proceedings to reconstruct early eighteenth-century London's underground queer community. Players accumulate Joy while managing Gossip and Evidence; they navigate molly houses and cruising grounds, host collaborative Festivities, and contend with an Informer mechanic modeling the coerced betrayals that historically dismantled these communities. Three possible endings structure play: Community Survival (highest Joy wins), Community Infiltration (informers succeed), and Community Atrophy (if collective Joy thresholds go unmet, all players lose).

Edmond Chang's foundational work on "queergaming" distinguishes games *about* queer identity from games *for* queer play where queerness is "procedurally relevant," embedded in mechanics rather than what Chang critiques as "menu-driven identities" that treat queerness as representational window dressing (Chang 19; 17). *Molly House* occupies a somewhat ambiguous, yet generative, position in this distinction. The game's sources are what James C. Scott calls the "official transcript" the archives of power that record dominated communities only through the violence of their suppression. Through play, however, the game enacts what Scott terms the "hidden transcript": the counter-narrative of the dominated, the joy and resistance the archive erased (Scott ix; qtd in Flanagan 260). This selective reassembly of the archive is itself a historiographical operation. As scholars such as Elliott and Kapell have argued, historical games can function not merely as representations of the past but as arguments about it, turning on the selection of available facts and their assembly into

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narrative (Elliott and Kapell 5–6, 14). *Molly House* makes that operation playable, staging the move from official to hidden transcript as the work of play itself.

This recuperative work operates through what Mary Flanagan, drawing on Edward Soja and Homi Bhabha, calls "thirdspace." *Molly House* layers three spatialities: the firstspace of London's geography rendered as board locations—lanes, parks, molly houses—alongside the physical space of players gathered around a table; the secondspace of ideological structures, where the Society for the Reformation of Manners operates through currencies of persecution—Vice, Evidence, Gossip—and the thirdspace of play itself, where a struggle for joy, protection, and community contests ideological repression. For Flanagan, thirdspace is "the site for play and struggle," the only space containing "the possibility for social and political transformation" (Flanagan 253). The table becomes a site where players can inhabit, contest, and remake the space the archive foreclosed.

This spatial layering manifests in the game's formal design features. Joy functions as collective resource: the community must reach a threshold or *all* lose, refusing heroic individual victory. Vulnerability mechanics require players to build Reputation to score Joy, but doing so exposes them to indictment—moving through firstspace generates secondspace consequences. Festivities operate as collaborative card play, transforming potential threat into celebration through cooperation. The Informer mechanic embeds historical trauma, as players may be coerced into betraying the community, modeling the sting operations that brought down the actual molly houses. Most historical games offer what designer Amabel Holland describes as the fantasy of command, modeling the past as something players master rather than undergo. By contrast, *Molly House's* mechanical architecture works to preserve forms of historical subjection — its collective losses, exposures, and coerced betrayals holding players within the conditions of "people trying to survive and thrive in an environment where their control over their circumstances is often limited" (Holland 53).

The title *Molly House* invokes a productive disjuncture. The historical molly houses were spaces of belonging always already under threat of raid and destruction. Recent queer Georgian historiography emphasizes the labor of homemaking under persecution; Anthony Delaney's *Queer Georgians* describes Mother Clap's, one of the molly house locations in the game, as a place of companionship and community, "a place of rest, a place to eat, warmth and an opportunity to learn and share news and gossip," until a tip-off leads to a violent raid (Delaney 18). The game makes this precarity playable. The thirdspace of the table produces the potential for a recuperation of queer homemaking precisely because the historical spaces refused to hold — a recuperation that "uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform" its encounter with the past, in the mode Elizabeth Freeman calls *erotohistoriography* (Freeman 95). A house, the game suggests, is not yet a home. Home must be made, collectively, under conditions that threaten its dissolution. This insight gestures toward Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology and its attention to "feeling at home," or not at home, as questions of orientation and belonging (Ahmed 9) — a theoretical direction I hope to pursue in future research towards a full article.

Through close reading of *Molly House's* mechanics, paratexts, and source materials, this analysis offers a case study for thinking about the potential, and the limitations, of games as sites of recuperative historiography. By making queer joy procedurally necessary rather than merely representational, the game makes recuperation a

condition of play rather than a theme of it. The hidden transcript, enacted at the table, contests the archive's silence. But how does *Molly House's* queergaming potential translate into practice? Designer Jo Kelly emphasizes the game's interpretive openness: "the history is so spotty... the information we have is almost all from the position of the oppressor... so I feel like that openness is really important... people should be able to bring their own interpretations" (Kelly, Subject Matter Tabletop interview). Costumed booth demos, promotional playthroughs emphasizing embodied play, and online community discussions also suggest that the game has been received as an invitation to queer enactment. Yet questions remain: How do queer versus non-queer players experience the game's demands for vulnerability? Does its largely techno normative "euro-game" mechanical structure domesticate its otherwise radical content?

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