

Pleasure and Intersectionality in Queer Dating-Sims: An Autoethnographic Research- Creation Perspective

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As women who play, study and create video games, we find games exceptionally gratifying when they are able to authentically represent our genders, sexualities and romantic fantasies –alongside, but more rarely combined with our ethnic, cultural and religious identities. In such instances, we derive pleasure not only from playing with our sexual and romantic desires (Poza 2015; McDonald 2017) but also from recognizing ourselves in what we play. In other words, pleasure derived from the representation of the complex intersections of (our) marginal identities (Malkowski and Russworm 2017; Stotler and Dill-Shackleford 2017) is a central issue in our autoethnographic approach to research-creation, which will be the subject of our presentation. More specifically, we will focus on the making of our game, *Dispirited*. Conceived as a space of visibility, it has, at its very core, an intersectional perspective on pleasure.

For context, the creation of our game is part of an ongoing larger research project, whose title translates to “Un-anchoring-Un-inking: From Screen to Map, Queering Space through the Margins”¹. It focuses on gender, sexuality, and identity in audiovisual media from an intersectional, intermedial, decolonial, queer and (counter-)mapping perspective. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada, this project is carried out by our team of researchers at the Queer Sensibilities lab. As its name implies, our lab’s research philosophy is rooted in the queerness of feelings, among which we can count pleasure in its romantic and erotic forms. By “queer sensibilities” (Browne and Nash 2010), we refer to queer affective and relational ways of inhabiting and imagining the world. Game creation allows us to test the limits of theoretical hypotheses raised in the fields of critical, queer, and decolonial studies.

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As part of this endeavor, our game explores the pleasure of “representing oneself” and “feeling represented” as gender, sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities in the literary space of fantasy and the ludic space of free independent video games. Offering characters, cultures, and relationships in which it becomes possible to recognize oneself constitutes, for us, a “politics of pleasure”² born of the feeling that something is missing in fantasy (Young 2015; Roberts and MacCallum-Stewart 2016) and video games (Fron et al. 2007; Shaw 2009; Latorre 2016), in which our identities are rarely, poorly or marginally represented. Consequently, representation itself becomes an act of resistance (Salter et al. 2018; Cantrell and Zhu 2022). This is why we have chosen a form of “queer utopia” (Muñoz 2009) where gender and sexual identities are not grounds for discrimination, allowing players to experience the joy of freely living out their attractions (Ross Dionne et al. 2023). *Dispirited* is a text-based dating-sim, more specifically an interactive fiction, i.e. a primarily narrative game whose objective is to develop a romantic relationship with one or more desired characters. The game takes the form of a branching adventure in three acts, where the player’s relational choices (romantic, friendly, or conflictual) shape the story. Four “romanceable” characters structure the plot, each with their own path leading to three distinct endings, for a total of twelve main endings.

Dispirited is primarily shaped by our experiences, identities, and queer/decolonial perspectives. As French ciswomen, respectively of Chilean and Turkish heritage, atheist and Muslim, middle and working class, asexual and allosexual, pansexual and heterosexual, our diverse identities inform the fictional universe, the narrative writing, and the choices made regarding representation.

On the one hand, our decolonial perspective leads us to adopt a counter-mapping approach (Harley 1992; Harris and Hazen 2015) to worldbuilding. Our game is set in a culturally-situated self-contained space —two floating islands called Alta and Ada, inspired respectively by Chile and Turkey, as well as Islamic mythology. Players and creators will later be invited to expand this universe by adding their own culturally situated places. Several maps will be provided to highlight the limitative nature of (our) cartography, questioning what is placed at the center or on the periphery, the size assigned to territories, and even name choices. We acknowledge by the same means the limitative nature of narrative creation, including the design of game mechanics (Ruberg 2022, Chess 2018), which posits the issue of a nuanced representation. Indeed, any representation remains permeated by stereotypes (Naji and Iwar 2013; Kong 2024), conscious or unconscious, that must be continually questioned and challenged (Babar and Ahmad 2021). Re-Orientalism (Lau and Mendes 2011) is chief among these issues, as a form of Orientalism (Said 2003) diasporic people can sometimes perpetuate and of which we must be particularly watchful. The research we conducted along with our creative process serves precisely in fostering this critical vigilance.

On the other hand, our queer perspective takes form in the freedom to customize the player character (gender, sexuality, name, personality, ideals, political views...), the gender-neutral writing, and the variety of romantic paths available, which will all be detailed in our presentation. This relates to our desire to have our players take part in the co-creation of our game by adding their own places and identities within the albeit limited frame of our creation. To achieve that goal, we reconfigure our players’ narrative agency into the mapping of their sentimental path following a queer reimagining of the Map of Tendre³. Therefore, whether geographical or emotional,

we conceive cartography as a situated, plural and co-creative tool to find other ways of inhabiting the world and relationships.

Our presentation will be divided into three parts, each revolving around the notion of pleasure. First, we will talk about the pleasure of theory and the theory of pleasure. Second, we will tackle the way pleasure takes shape in our game and through/for our players. Lastly, we will explain how we derive pleasure from creating, through a methodology rooted in mutual trust, active listening, and navigating our differences. This last part will include a meta-creative and meta-academic perspective. All of those expressions and interpretations of pleasure, collective and intimate, ludic and creative, are essential in our process of co-creating a pleasurable game.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Translated from the original French, “Des·ancrage - Des·encrage : De l’écran à la carte, queeriser l’espace par les marges”.

² The expression “politics of pleasure”, while our own, echoes Sara Ahmed’s work on the “politics of emotion” (2004), and Oscar Wilde’s reflections on pleasure as an aesthetic and political force (1891). It is intended here as a tribute to their intellectual and affective legacy.

³ Imagined in 1654 by Madeleine de Scudéry, the Map of Tendre is an allegory of romantic relationships. Conceived within the Précieuses movement, it reflects an entire sentimental philosophy: measured progression, pitfalls to avoid, and the quest for a gallant ideal. However, the Map of Tendre can today be seen as outdated as it advocates a chrononormative ideal that imposes mandatory stages in romantic relationships.