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KOREAN SOAP OPERAS, TELENOVELAS AND SCI-FI CONSPIRACIES: A GAME-MAKING EXPERIENCE WITH LATIN AMERICAN YOUTH IN LONDON

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Abstract: *This paper explores a game-making programme for 14 Latin American migrants aged 13-18 in London/UK, carried out between October/2017-January/2018, where I investigated the relationships between game conventions, platforms and personal preferences in the curation of fluid identities through game production. Participants presented varying levels of affinity with games linked both to access issues and to other specific elements (e.g. perception of games in contemporary culture, gender). Questionnaires, observations, unstructured/semi-structured interviews and gaming archives were employed to explore this participatory initiative and data was analysed through Multimodal Sociosemiotics. Findings remarked how shared understandings about digital games can find their way into platforms and act as “cultural-technical gatekeepers”, supporting or hindering the engagement with game-making of those often perceived as outsiders to gaming culture. This gatekeeping happens when there are “creative dissonances” between, for example, personal preferences and platforms aligned to normative/mainstream genres. These dissonances, however, can end up fostering subversive designs, contravening gaming conventions and potentially challenging traditional gaming boundaries. This insight is relevant for understanding “cultural-technical constraints” and subversive/non-mainstream game-making, especially in relation to innovation and appropriation of game-making resources/strategies by non-mainstream groups.*

Keywords: *game-making; Latin America; inclusivity; conventions; identities*

Introduction

In recent years, different authors identified how digital games are often spaces for exclusion (Consalvo, 2012; Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Differences in engagement with games, such as how often or the kind of games that one plays, should not be seen as solely the result of personal preferences, but also related to a much more complex scenario that involves privilege and politics in the development, commercialisation and consumption of digital games (Jenson & de Castell, 2018). Fron, Fullerton, Morie, and Pearce (2007), for instance, coined the term Hegemony of Play to highlight how practices within the game industry – e.g. workforce profiles (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Harvey, 2019) and values favoured in game engines (Grimes & Feenberg, 2013; Nicoll & Keogh, 2019; Freedman, 2020) – and within consuming circuits – e.g. *eSports* (Jenson & de Castell, 2018) – work towards reifying certain

naturalisations within gaming and gatekeeping who can take part in gaming and under which conditions.

This does not mean, however, that we are necessarily fated to reify these hegemonic values and practices when engaging with digital games. Game-making in non-mainstream contexts, for example, has been one of the initiatives aligned to counterhegemonical work. Different authors (Anthropy, 2012; Harvey, 2014) argue that the democratisation of the means for game production can lead to a scenario where, for instance, more diverse values are promoted through videogames. And different initiatives have been developed with the aim of fostering spaces where people seen as marginalised in gaming can develop their own games (Harvey, 2014; Dahya, Jenson, & Fong, 2017), also exploring these participants' realities and relationships with culture through expressive game production.

But while inclusive game-making has the potential to foster the establishment of broader and more diverse circuits for game production and consumption, we need to reflect about the challenges implicated in the development of such initiatives. I argue throughout this article that if one of the key objectives of inclusive game-making is to promote gaming not as a monolithic practice but as a multifaceted phenomenon (where different affections, allegiances and identities play significant part), we then must also avoid homogenising narratives towards “digital game minorities” within these initiatives. Through the presentation of three *MissionMaker* games produced by young Latin American migrants at a game-making club in London/UK, this paper provides insights into the divergent creative processes adopted by participants who are often labelled under a single limiting category (“Latin American”), and into how recognising and supporting this multiplicity is crucial for a real (and not cosmetic) inclusivity, allowing participants to curate their own identities (Potter & McDougall, 2017) in that process. Based on findings from this experience, I argue that failing to recognise and accommodate these multiple ways of engaging in game-making initiatives can reify the same gate-keeping structures that inclusive game-making aims at disrupting: the systematic exclusion of those who do not conform to certain “model” of engagement with digital games.

Game-Making as Transformative Practice: Culture, Technologies and Identities

Different research has explored the transformative potential that game-making beyond mainstream/professional contexts can have (Harvey, 2014; Dahya et al., 2017). Dahya et al. (2017), for instance, remark how this kind of interventionist work, sensitive to intersectional questions of gender, class, race and power in digital games, can provide young people from different backgrounds the opportunity to consider pursuing a (lucrative) career in game development professionally while at the same time constructing a more diverse and critical body of participants in gaming.

One important ideal that connect these different game-making initiatives is the idea of experimentation with digital games and participants' autonomy, rejecting a reproductive approach to game-making. In this sense, they share a similar ideal with different Media Literacy (Potter & McDougall, 2017) initiatives, fostering a more autonomous and critical stance towards the field which participants are engaging with. This more autonomous approach to game-making can be opposed to a more prescriptive and acritical use of game development.

A prescriptive approach to game development, where game-makers simply follow pre-determined steps can work against the ideal of inclusion in digital games, “teaching” game-makers the “correct” ways of engaging with videogames. This approach can, ultimately, consolidate formative game development steps established within and by the status quo, promoting a limited inclusivity, with participants being able to “functionally operate” in the field while at the same time “learning” that they should abide to certain unspoken rules and norms – often relying on problematic coping mechanisms (Cote, 2017; Harvey, 2021) – if they want to be recognised as participants in that field, reifying processes of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2014). This “reproductive” approach to digital games can be, voluntarily or not, grounded on the way activities are framed. From the way we talk about games – e.g. the examples we bring for discussion into these spaces – to the way activities are pedagogically organised – e.g. giving specific guidelines for game development (de Paula, 2021) – we might end up shaping participants’ understanding towards the field, reifying discourses on how one should engage with videogames or which kinds of games are the more “authentic” ones (Consalvo & Paul, 2019).

This symbolically violent process of shaping participants’ understandings of games is not only related to cultural and/or pedagogical elements, but also linked to apparently more neutral elements such as the material conditions – e.g. game engines (Bogost, 2006; Nicoll & Keogh, 2019; Freedman, 2020) – found by participants to produce their games. Specific values – e.g. the priority given to visual and physical dimensions over emotional or interpersonal ones within game engines (Bogost, 2006) – can become ingrained in technologies, giving rise to technical codes¹ (Grimes & Feenberg, 2013) that can perpetuate these values.

Rather than reinforcing these “presumptions” (Harvey, 2014) – generated through public discourses, technical codes or both – inclusive game-making initiatives should become “points of disruption” towards exclusionary gaming practices (Harvey, 2019, p. 220), as it is only by “dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others” (Fraser, 2009, p. 16) that we can achieve more socially just inclusivity. Instead of demarcating “dos” and “do nots” in game production, experimental game-making activities can help to demystify game production, as without this alternative, disruptive ethos, these formative game-making spaces can become subservient to the hegemonic neoliberal agenda of gaming, merely producing new labour force aligned to current hegemonic practices within digital games (Harvey, 2019). Non-mainstream game-making initiatives, on the other hand, can help us “[...] address what constitutes our dominant construction of game designer and challenge those rubrics in order to understand the subversive and radical contributions of those who do not align with the normative constitution of the producer” (Harvey, 2014, p. 104).

The question that rises here, though, is: how to create and maintain these more experimental, formative spaces? And what challenges are implicated in this important endeavour? This paper,

¹ *Unity3D*'s ready-made (*prefab*) first-person character asset, which implements a first-person view perspective almost instantly can be seen as an example of technical code, illustrating *Unity3D* alignment to *First-Person Shooters* (FPS), for example (Nicoll & Keogh, 2019).

therefore, focuses on the complexities implicated in the constitution of these inclusive game-making spaces. Using cases from a game-making club with young Latin American migrants in London/UK, I discuss the importance of acknowledging the different affections, interests and intentions that might be at play within an apparently homogeneous group taking part in expressive activities such as game development. These particularities, which might be erased or downplayed due to a narrower focus on “inclusivity”, can provide us important insights into creative processes during expressive practices, becoming therefore crucial to understand the complexities involved in inclusive game-making, rejecting simplified narratives that comprehend inclusivity as a synonym to “access”.

To explore and foreground these different affiliations and their respective creative trajectories, I employed “identities” as a central concept: identities, in this project, were understood as fluid and malleable social constructs which can be temporarily assembled and disassembled according to the context where a communicational act is happening (Shaw, 2014). These social constructs are not solely articulated through “traditional” communicational acts, such as speech, but also through more subtle processes of participation: consumption, for example is highlighted by different authors (Canclini, 2001; Carr, 2005) as a way of articulate specific identities, since “our preferences reflect what we know, who we know, what we have tried, or tired of, and what we will admit to” (Carr, 2005, p. 478). In this sense, identities can be understood as a process of “curatorship” (Potter & McDougall, 2017), in which we carefully select and appropriate texts and construct temporary cultural ensembles that situate ourselves in different contexts, stating our affiliations and positionings. This process of curatorship is heavily dependent on our experiences and to the context where these experiences emerged from, and these sets of contextual experiences can be understood, following Canclini (2001), as repertoires. These repertoires mediate the expressive possibilities foreseen by participants, including whether and how certain elements can be invoked to articulate specific positions within a set context.

The notion of identity as curatorship works, therefore, as a shorthand for understanding the appropriation processes of game production by these participants. By exploring the games developed throughout this project, it is possible to have insights on the experiences and cultural positionings adopted by these participants in this context, understanding how the possible encounters of different systems of values, representation and knowledge – e.g. cultural preferences, gaming conventions, technical affordances – are employed in the construction of a personal cultural artefact. These insights can help us understand the potentials and limits of game-making interventions with participants not identified with mainstream gaming contexts to challenge normalised, hegemonic assumptions about videogames and about these participants.

Context & Methods

To discuss the potentials and limits of game-making interventions, this paper relies on data from a game-making club organized in a community-led centre for Latin American migrants in London/UK. Fourteen young people (ages 13-18, 8 female, 6 male) took part in a programme

comprising a total of 12 hours of activities spread across 8 weeks between October/2017 and January/2018, in which participants produced a full game – from ideation to playable version – using *MissionMaker*².

Institutionally, the activities were framed as a space for helping young migrants to settle in their new life: none of the participants were born in the UK, and half of them were already in their second or third new country, with several following the migration flows from Latin America to Spain between late 1980s and early 2000s, and later moves from Spain to Northern Europe after the 2008 Economic Crisis (Lafleur & Stanek, 2017). Making games, from an institutional point of view, was seen as a way to offer these participants the chance to develop diverse skills such as writing, game design or programming, and to provide a socialization space, where game-makers could forge new relationships. Another institutional objective was to provide more opportunities for participants to practice their English: therefore, as convener of the club, I was asked to favour instructions in English and to limit the usage of participants' native Spanish language³.

Among these institutional positions, the sole use of English was the most challenging element since participants presented variable levels of proficiency in that language. During the first sessions, the solution adopted was to assign “interpreters” among those who had a better command of English to support their colleagues in understanding conversations and instructions⁴. After a few weeks, it was noticeable that this approach was very stressful to “interpreters”, who had to manage multiple fronts (planning and developing their game, understanding how *MissionMaker* works and clarifying language questions to their peers). Moreover, considering that one of my objectives was to explore these participants' identities through their game-making practices, forbidding them to use their strongest language seemed counterproductive, especially for participants who had very limited command of English. In this sense, after week 3, we – as a group, including the institution's youth programme director – reviewed this limitation and decided to favour a bilingual approach: I would offer instructions both in English and Spanish, and participants would be encouraged to use English, but would not be forbidden to rely on Spanish if necessary.

Programme Structure, Data Generation and Analysis

All sessions happened at the institution's computer lab and were organised in two main parts. Sessions started with a shorter section (around 30% of the available time) where I introduced a specific topic to be explored, such as character design or more specific *MissionMaker* techniques (e.g. environment construction, how to record and insert external media files or how to program

² Software that supports the production of 3D first/third person games without previous knowledge in programming or 3D modelling, produced through *Unity3D* and with a considerable influence of Medieval RPGs. For more details on *MissionMaker*, see de Paula (in press).

³ Although fluent in both, neither of those are my first language – which is Portuguese.

⁴ While the allocation of “interpreters” was seen as a “pragmatic” solution to a “practical” issue (e.g. as a way to keep English as the main language of the activities), it is important to recognise how that decision had impact in group dynamics, for example, by creating clear hierarchical relationships across participants (“interpreters” and the “interpreted”), even if discussing those implications go beyond the scope of this paper.

a NPC behaviour). This smaller section was followed by game development time (70% of the session), where participants worked on their own ideas with my support. Game-makers worked mostly in pairs or groups of three but were free to share ideas and seek help from their peers. I was the sole session leader⁵ throughout most of the project; during the first and the last session, I was joined by one of the institution's youth programme director.

To produce a more holistic view of game-making in this context, I followed participants' design processes throughout the whole experience. I was not only interested in the final product but also in the process, including the design – here understood as in the Sociosemiotic sense, the decisions involved in the process of communicating meaning (Kress, 2010). I employed different methods to map the different trajectories and processes followed by participants in their game-making experiences: questionnaires, observations, interviews and game analysis.

Questionnaires were used to gather basic information about participants, including their age, brief life trajectories (e.g. where they were born/how long they were living in the UK), and their gaming experience (e.g. favourite games, how often they played and with whom). Besides this initial information, I used my position as session leader to carry out observations and (unstructured) interviews, informal conversations with participants, prompted by technical questions asked by game-makers, or by noticeable design decisions that I believed could yield interesting discussions in relation to the main aspects investigated by this project (e.g. identities, personal preferences, gaming conventions).

Due to the nature of the sessions – where I played both the role of session convener **and** researcher – I often had to cut short unstructured interviews due to other issues, such as supporting participants that encountered technical obstacles. To avoid this “data loss”, I employed semi-structured interviews with participants either before or after the main activities. These semi-structured interviews were informed by existing data (e.g. questionnaires, their games), allowing me to elaborate on the links between these subjective elements and whether and how they were “translated into” participants' games. Participants were always interviewed as groups according to the games being produced (e.g. a pair that was working in the same game was always interviewed together), with all being interviewed at least twice; once throughout the programme and once in the final session. Besides questionnaires, observations and interviews, I also carried out game analysis. Rather than solely analysing the final product, I saved a copy of each game at the end of each session, building then a progressive game archive which lent to the evolution of their design.

To analyse the different types of data generated throughout the project, I employed a framework based on Multimodal Sociosemiotics (Kress, 2010; de Paula, in press). In a project such as this, which involves different participants working within a specific context limited to the available semiotic resources (making a game through *MissionMaker*), to discuss identities it is important not

⁵ I have written about my dual role as researcher and instructor and its implications regarding methods and results elsewhere (de Paula, 2021).

only to acknowledge the “actual” (“realised”) signs, but also explore why that specific way of realising meaning was employed. Multimodal Sociosemiotics, therefore, offers a path to investigate motivation (“intention”) in meaning-making without ignoring the role of social context in shaping the available resources for meaning-making (Kress, 2010). In this way, it is possible to understand not only how elements such as (gaming) conventions are influential in design decisions, but also providing a more nuanced approach to these sign-making processes, understanding their uses not necessarily as a corroboration, but potentially as a subversive exploration of these culturally-shaped resources, something only identifiable when analysing its motivation (de Paula, in press).

In the following sections, I present a more detailed account of the game-making practices carried out during this programme, exploring how participants’ previous experiences and knowledges mediated their game-making processes. By focusing on three different cases, I expound on the limitations related to the use of specific labels (such as “Latin Americans”) as a shorthand for participants’ diverse experiences, interests, and expectations. How to recognise and accommodate (potentially ignored) differences in such spaces? The 3 cases selected here are employed to demonstrate the different experiences, approaches and creative strategies adopted by participants, indicating here the complexity implicated in the construction of inclusive game-making initiatives and the multiplicity of identities that can be assembled within the same context.

Know Your Audience: Repertoires, Practices and Expression in Game-Making

One of the objectives of this project was to explore the different ways in which participants that are not part of what is assumed as the “core audience” of digital games would appropriate game-making. Most of the games produced in this initiative navigated across different influences, often articulating diverse (and sometimes, contradictory) values and knowledges. Although it is possible to label participants as Latin American migrants in London – as indicated in the questionnaire, all but one participant identified themselves as Latino/Latina – this labelling can “flatten” the complex cultural positionings occupied by these participants. As it would become clear throughout the programme, as important as their preference to speak in Spanish and their shared taste for *reggaeton* were their allegiances to *anime*, football clubs or horror movies. Rather than necessarily articulating a stereotypical view about what it would mean to be a Latino/Latina – the footballer, the druglord, the chicano, the good lover (Penix-Tadsen, 2016) – what we have is a much more complex patchwork of intertextual relationships exemplified by the process of curatorship of the self (Potter & McDougall, 2017).

Throughout the programme, it became clear how participants navigate different circuits of media, indicating how dichotomic divisions such as global and local or mainstream and peripheric can be complex and counterproductive (Apperley, 2010). The three games analysed here can be seen as an example of this variation, with participants articulating intertextual relationships with stereotypically “local” products (e.g. *The New Boss* and the Colombian telenovela *La Reina del Sur*), “foreign” niche texts (e.g. *Extrovertido* and the Korean soap-opera *Orange Marmalade*) or mainstream global products (e.g. *Experiment Z* and *Stranger Things*). This engagement with texts from different media circuits help us to better understand the cultural

positions sought by these participants: on the same way as their experiences as “migrants” or “Latin Americans” are part of their repertoires, so are their experiences in other parts of their lives. Their cultural repertoires, therefore, become detached from region-bound, specific local identities (Canclini, 2001), opening different expressive possibilities beyond stereotyped understandings towards these participants.

This does not mean, however, that all identities are easily accessible to anyone and everyone, as their repertoires, even if detached from local identities, are still bound to their different experiences, and still mediate their expressive responses. In this research, for example, it is possible to argue that at least as important as their position as Latin Americans was their different levels of engagement with digital games. As it was possible to notice through different research instruments (e.g. questionnaires, unstructured interviews), there was a broad range of uses and affective bonds to videogames among this group, with some participants being knowledgeable, prolific players, and others who considered themselves alien to videogames, with most of their experiences being limited as an activity that was part of their past, or to small casual games played on mobile phones, at most.

Through the initial questionnaire and follow-up interviews, it was possible to notice that female participants reported a much more limited gaming experience than male participants: of the 14 participants, 3 reported not to play games, all of them female. Moreover, female participants reported to play less often and none of them claimed to play in dedicated consoles, listing solely mobile casual games (e.g. *Candy Crush Saga*) or online Flash games (e.g. *Fireboy and Watergirl*) as their favourites. Male participants, on the other hand, reported easy access to consoles and usually identified mainstream games (e.g. *GTA*, *Fortnite*, *Just Cause 3*) as their favourites.

This brief review of participants repertoires does not aim to box participants into specific categories (e.g. male or female, experienced or novice players) or to reinforce outdated stereotypical divides in relation to gaming preferences, as already criticised elsewhere (Carr, 2005) but to highlight the challenges implicated in this project. As discussed here, despite coming from similar backgrounds, there are noticeable overlaps and discrepancies in participants’ repertoires, which culminated in different horizons of expressive possibilities for these participants. This understanding also remarks the complexity of this kind of inclusive initiative through digital games: the “Latin American” identifier here could easily become misleading as, in a naïve reading of the situation – especially considering the different ways gaming is culturally explored and exploited in diverse media circuits – all these participants could be considered as alien to mainstream gaming circuits (Penix-Tadsen, 2016). Nevertheless, what this initial reflection and the longer engagement with participants show is that these participants’ situations are considerably different, as were their allegiances, interests and their creative responses to the activities proposed.

In the following section, I will focus on the different creative responses produced by three pairs of game-makers: *Experiment Z*, produced by Yerry (13) and Juan (17); *Extrovertido*, by Marta (14) and Carla (14); and *The New Boss*, by Elena (15) and Daniela (17). By exploring their initial positions in relation to games, their creative choices and uses of *MissionMaker*, I intend to clarify

how the complex relationships between repertoires, interests, material conditions and the reproduction/appropriation of resources for game-making can be.

Dissonances, Consonances and the Creative Dimensions of Expressive Game-Making

As discussed earlier, while the six participants whose games are analysed in this project self-identified as “Latin Americans”, this label is not enough to account for their different interests and experiences, let alone to be employed as a single “reading key” to analyse their productions. Even though there is a perceived homogeneity across game-makers (e.g. their aforementioned “Latinicity”, their experiences as migrants living in the UK, their young age), their games, following Anthropy (2012), tell different stories. These differences, as it might become clear in the following sections, are the result of participants’ engagement with the complex amalgam of semiotic resources and practices – from material resources such as *MissionMaker* to their previous experiences with videogames; from pedagogies and interest in proposed activities to cultural affiliations and personal aspirations – that constructed the space from where these games were produced. Understanding these differences, including the diverse ways participants designed multiple creative responses to the prompts they were presented to, is of utmost importance for those interested in the establishment of inclusive game-making spaces, leading towards a more nuanced understanding of the (social and pedagogical) possibilities and limitations of such spaces.

Experiment Z

Among the three games analysed here, *Experiment Z* is, arguably, the one that pushes *MissionMaker* to its technical limits, making use of different techniques to give the player an experience akin to that of mainstream Adventure games, with secret items, traps and a final boss battle. Juan and Yerry were players experienced in gaming genres invoked by *MissionMaker* (e.g. RPGs, Action-Adventure), and they continuously relied on their gaming experiences throughout the programme, often discovering conventional functionalities that were not explicitly taught in the sessions (e.g. that holding down the “Shift” key while moving would make the character sprint).

To produce their game, Juan and Yerry relied on several Science Fiction tropes (Erickson, 2016): a conspiracy to dominate the world, a big conglomerate doing unethical experiments, clones, mutants, and a virus that could wipe out humanity from Earth. In this sense, *Experiment Z* is, to some extent, detached from any local context, as there are no elements – besides the use of spoken Spanish in some voice overs – that localise it globally. Rather than constructing situated identities in relation to specific spaces or texts, Juan and Yerry’s cultural allegiance was more linked to the genre(s) (Arsenault, 2009) they were engaging with, making use of the sense of familiarity and, ultimately, advantage in this activity (Perron, 2014) afforded by their repertoire.

This consonance between their interests, repertoires, and material conditions for game production culminated in a recursive cycle of progressive design. Throughout the project, they were able to find ways of implementing most of their design ideas, often through techniques that are somewhat evident in *MissionMaker*. Using Trigger Volumes, Timers and two rules, they made a temporary invisible barrier, important to a specific sequence where Sherlock (protagonist)

confronts Elsare (villain) before the final battle (de Paula, in press), for example. Their ability to design and implement such game structure in *Experiment Z* works, to some extent, as a shorthand to illustrate how Juan and Yerry's design and development process was, most of the times, less "frictional" than that of their colleagues: Juan and Yerry were, at some degree, already "insiders" in gaming, and made use of this cultural position when constructing their artefact.

This does not mean, however, that Juan and Yerry did not encounter challenges during this creative endeavour: while they were already familiar with (mainstream) gaming, this was their first game-making experience. An analysis of *Experiment Z* helps us understand how "transferring" their knowledge about mainstream gaming to game production is not a seamless endeavour as it might seem. In other words, not all of Juan and Yerry's design choices were easily implemented in *Experiment Z*. Their game ending for example, illustrates one of the rare occasions where there is a noticeable dissonance between their original idea and what was implemented. The ending of Juan and Yerry's game, based on a dramatic cutscene⁶, works as an interesting example of their use of identity expression and of the dissonance between design (plan) and realisation (final product):

Excerpt 1

Juan: When the clone attacks Elsare, Sherlock takes the antidote and releases it: the camera opens, and it is possible to see mutants falling in a wave effect, all of them.

Juan's description of the final scene hints at camera movements and a wave effect killing several enemies at once. The description of camera movements resembling a cutscene can also be interpreted as an expression of their identities as knowledgeable players: by describing camera angles, they were not only exposing their knowledge about common narrative devices in videogames, but also establishing links between theirs (*Experiment Z*) and other games they considered "good" games⁷.

Nevertheless, *MissionMaker* only affords the use of player-centred cameras – they are always focusing on the playable character in a third-person perspective – and there is no way of stopping player input (e.g. stop a player from moving her avatar using the keys), meaning that cutscenes like the ones described in Excerpt 1 are impossible of being produced in this software.

⁶ Filmic, non-interactive portion that might be part of a game (Shaw, 2014, p. 37).

⁷ During interviews, Juan singled out games produced by *Rockstar* – such as *GTA* or *Red Dead Redemption* – as examples of "good" games, for example. On the same way as *Rockstar* uses cinematography to reach a certain level of aesthetic legitimacy in broader culture (Wright, 2017), it could be claimed here that Juan and Yerry are using cutscenes (a conventional gaming structure) to achieve a certain level of legitimacy to *Experiment Z as a game*.

Figure 1: *Experiment Z* Final Sequence in Play Mode



While Juan and Yerry were able to readapt their game to the available resources – rather than a cutscene with a multitude of enemies, a live sequence with 6 enemies (Figure 1) falling simultaneously when the antidote vial was released – it became clear their frustration in not being able to accomplish their initial, epic plan. Even if the ending was underwhelming by Juan and Yerry’s standards, *Experiment Z* was well-received by their peers.

Experiment Z evidences how Juan and Yerry were knowledgeable about (mainstream) gaming, and how the identities worked in their text are not easily linked to limiting local-bound identities (e.g. Latin American). Their design work helps us understand the potentialities and limits of game-making, with their repertoire being useful, but not completely transferrable into game-making, as the cutscene ending exemplifies. Even if challenged at some stages, their work was mostly stable, since their familiarity gave them certain advantages in how to plan and devise their product, as well as clarifying the role played by conventions in creative processes.

Extrovertido

Extrovertido, game produced by Marta and Carla, is a contrasting example to *Experiment Z*. Rather than relying on more general gaming conventions, Marta and Carla’s game engage with Korean soap-operas, female roles and representations of love, aspects that are considerably overlooked when we think about the traditional power fantasy, frequently explored within the heavily masculine realm of mainstream gaming (Jenson & de Castell, 2018). To understand the differences between *Extrovertido* and *Experiment Z*, we must firstly reflect about the different positions from where these two games were produced. Differently to Juan and Yerry, who were knowledgeable game players, Marta and Carla reported limited engagement with videogames, due to a scenario where issues around access – e.g. lack of opportunities for playing games beyond their mobile phones – played a central role.

This lack of familiarity with the kind of games invoked by *MissionMaker* (single-player adventure ones played on computers) had noticeable repercussions in Marta and Carla's work. In comparison to *Experiment Z*⁸, the narrative elements played a much more central role in *Extrovertido*. Throughout the programme, it became clear that, for Marta and Carla, "telling the story" of Baek Ma Ri (the playable character) and Jung Jae Min (your prospective boyfriend) was more important than other elements that are often acknowledged as "good gaming standards", such as difficult challenges for players (Consalvo & Paul, 2019).

These differences in their interests and experiences, while useful to remark the diverse approaches adopted by participants throughout this initiative, are by no means enough to summarise the significance of *Extrovertido* for highlighting the potential for creative expressions through inclusive game-making initiatives. *Extrovertido* can be described as a role-reversal "damsel-in-distress" based on the Korean soap-opera *Orange Marmalade*. In *Extrovertido*, the player, as Baek-Ma Ri, watches her prospective boyfriend Jung-Jae Min being kidnapped (Figure 2) and fights to rescue him from Ah Ra, their jealous rival. Marta and Carla's proposed ending sequence was the most distinctive element in their game. Instead of concluding *Extrovertido* in an "and they lived happily ever after" fashion, right after Baek-Ma Ri (the playable character) rescues her prospective boyfriend Jung-Jae Min, Marta and Carla planned a sequence where Jae Min was found in a catatonic state and the player would then assume the role of his carer until he regained his mental faculties (de Paula, in press).

Marta and Carla's proposal articulates a deeply complex view on gendered roles: Ma Ri is, at the same time, the main character of their game, who goes through different challenges to "do whatever she wants" (in the words of Carla); on the other hand, she ends up adopting a more subservient role to Jung-Jae Min in the end, catering to his needs. This subservience is highlighted, for example, by the choice of their game's title:

Excerpt 2 – Discussing the game title with Marta and Carla

Researcher: Why *Extrovertido*?

Marta: Because he was a friendly, outgoing guy...

Researcher: Jae Min?

Marta: Yes

Researcher: But why give the name of your game based on him?

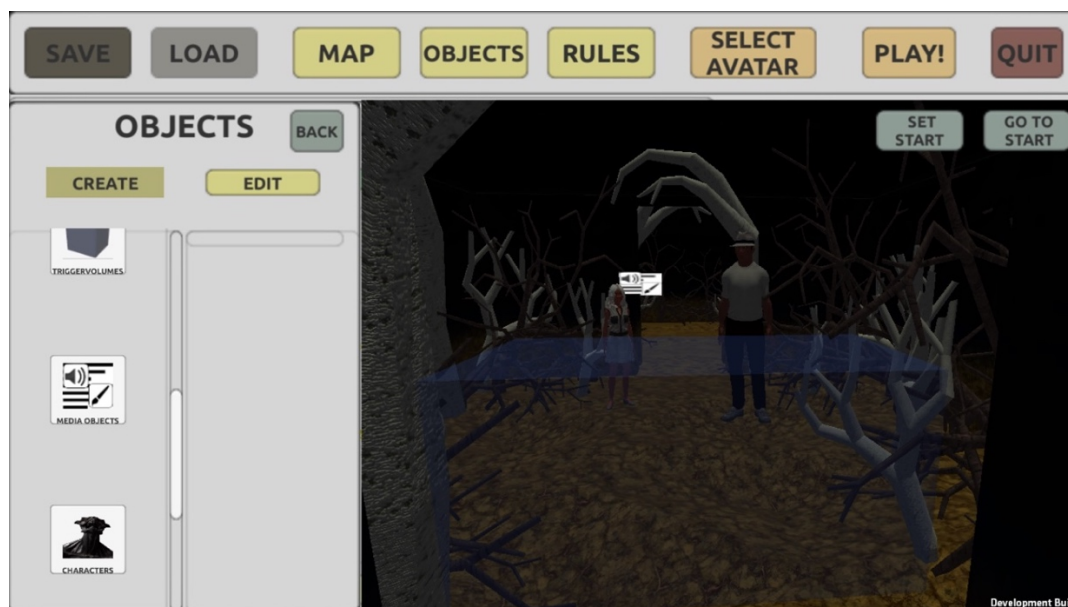
Marta: Because he is the centre of the game!

Marta and Carla's game illustrates how complex personal game-making activities can be, remarking the high level of ownership presented by them in relation to their repertoires, using a Korean canonical text to articulate a dual-gendered role – strong and caring, decisive and nurturing – often explored in Latin American imaginaries (Chaney, 2014). This process also highlights how comfortable they were in curating different dimensions of their identities (Potter

⁸ That is not to say narrative elements were not important in *Experiment Z*, as the final planned sequence described in the previous section remarks.

& McDougall, 2017) – as young women, as Latinas, as fans of obscure Korean soap operas – at this particular design moment.

Figure 2: The opening scene of *Extrovertido*, where Jae Min is kidnapped by Ab Ra, as designed by Marta and Carla in *MissionMaker*'s Edit Mode (screenshot by the author)



MissionMaker, however, is aligned to a specific type of gaming tradition, one that relies more on physicality than on interpersonal experiences (Bogost, 2006). Marta and Carla progressed on the development of their game, implementing “more physical” aspects of their game, such as a sequence where the player (Ma Ri) traces Jae Min steps, or where she fights Jae Min’s captor to free him. “Tracking, [...], acquiring, navigating, striking” are, after all, conventional, pervasive game mechanics (Hayse, 2014, p. 445), fitting into *MissionMaker*'s mainstream-aligned nature, therefore, being easier to be implemented; taking care, as they wanted to represent in the final sequence, is not.

After reflecting and testing out some ideas, Marta and Carla opted for a different ending, deciding to reveal that Jae Min was all the time an alien in disguise and, needing to return to its planet after being saved by Ma Ri (de Paula, in press). Marta and Carla’s new ending is, to some extent, a result of a dissonance between their original ideas and the affordances presented by *MissionMaker*, but it also stems from their interests and aspirations. Even if throughout the whole game-making club, Marta and Carla experienced dissonances (e.g. between the stories they wanted to tell and the discourses about gaming they were used to), they were always committed to the proposed activities, working hard to tell the story they had planned. Their creative process, therefore, was much more centred around their story rather than around conventional game structures, as it was the case with *Experiment Z*. While it was possible, Marta and Carla accommodated both approaches, until an irreconcilable moment – the caring sequence – emerged. Interestingly, Marta and Carla opt for a third way: while their main solution comes from a narrative device, they eschew simultaneously a merely ludic-oriented solution and one that simply recontextualises *Orange Marmalade*, bringing an ending by transforming an ambiguous love story into that of an impossible love.

Extrovertido provides us an important example about how repertoires are significant elements in creative processes, but not necessarily determinative: in this case they help us to identify some of the identities curated by game designers (e.g. fans of niche Korean soap operas), but alone, they do not account for the whole creative process. *Extrovertido*'s final sequence gives a glimpse of Marta and Carla's capability of appropriating different elements to produce a creative endeavour that not only indicates their cultural affiliations and positionings, but one that also indicates the potential such initiatives can have, by demonstrating that participants can use these spaces to produce artefacts that challenge mainstream public discourses about games.

The New Boss

Among the three cases analysed here, *The New Boss* is the only one unfinished. Elena and Daniela, the designers of this game, had a relationship to games akin to Marta and Carla's, with access being a central hindrance to their engagement with these cultural products. Like Marta and Carla, Elena and Daniela's game also has noticeable intertextual ties with an existing media product – in this case, *La Reina del Sur*. Nevertheless, the similarities between these two pairs of designers (Elena and Daniela, and Marta and Carla) cease there.

Narratively, *The New Boss* has a clearly identifiable narrative thread, presenting a gender-reversed version of the original plot, with Zakarias Malika assuming the role of the protagonist; in their game, he (Zakarias/the player) discovers by accident his late partners' secret life as a drug queen, and the whole story unfolds around Zakarias' saga to retake control of his partner's gang. But even if there is an identifiable narrative, their game was never developed in the same way as Marta and Carla's was. To explore possible reasons for this underdevelopment, we must take into account some of the design decisions taken by Elena and Daniela. Excerpt 3 below details some of their rationale for coming up with *The New Boss*:

Excerpt 3

Researcher: So, *The New Boss*... what inspired you to come up with this story?

Elena: Ah, the characters and the camera looked like that game... [E looks at her colleague David] GTA?! [researcher nods positively]. So, you know, drug dealers, shootings... these things.

Researcher: Hmn, nice, great idea! Have you played GTA before?

Elena: No, but my brother plays it a lot. I always see him driving like crazy [laughs].

Researcher: Haha. Also, the story reminds me of a telenovela which is now a TV show in the US: *La Reina del Sur*... do you know it?

Elena: Ah, yeah... I know, but I do not watch it. My mom likes it though.

As hinted by Elena in the dialogue above, their game proposal was constructed not through elements that are part of their repertoire, or that are part of their affective dimensions, but through a combination between the imagery invoked by the tool and Elena's (second-hand) experience with games. In that sense, differently to what happens with Marta and Carla – who were invested in the story they were telling – in Elena and Daniela's case the same interest seems not to exist, as indicated by the last phrase (where she downplays her knowledge about *La Reina del Sur*).

Elena's experience here, to some extent, illustrates one of the biggest challenges in this kind of activity aiming at inclusivity, especially in relation to gatekeeping. Some exclusionary discourses (e.g. the idea that a game should look like *GTA*) were articulated in Elena's speech⁹, and differently to what happened to Marta and Carla, Elena and Daniela did not work around/through these gatekeeping elements. My intention here is not to stigmatise or categorise Elena and Daniela as "failures", but to acknowledge how complex these activities can be, and how easy it can be to overestimate the goals of such work. Here, it is only possible to speculate whether another approach – one that employed a different tool or pedagogical approach – would help Elena and Daniela to develop *The New Boss* beyond the starting sequence. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Elena and Daniela's experiences with *The New Boss* are not significant for understanding inclusive game-making initiatives.

Firstly, even if *The New Boss* was not finished, the discussion on their design process give us interesting insights into the process of identity through curatorship. Differently to what happens in *Experiment Z* and *Extrovertido*, in Elena's speech we notice a "negative" curatorship approach, with a double-move (recognition and rejection) of a media text. This approach indicates how identities can also be constructed through rejection, and in this particular case – since the text in question is a telenovela, a stereotypically Latin American genre – it works as a small token on the limitations of stereotypical views towards specific locally-bound identities.

Secondly, it is possible to consider whether they *really* were interested in making games, especially considering how this project was institutionally framed to them. This was indeed a space to produce games, but – naming two other institutional objectives already mentioned – also a space to practice English *and* to hang-out with their friends. In that sense, Elena and Daniela's resistance to game-making might be better understood in relation to the broader context, considering (all) their interests in place, which in this case can go beyond games. This consideration should not be used as a license to downplay the role that gatekeeping elements (such as discourses or material conditions) have in perpetuating the same exclusionary aspects we aim at disrupting, but to recognise that several different interest can be at play in these complex initiatives.

Final Thoughts

Through this paper, it is possible to understand the complex dimensions involved in the development of activities that aim at inclusivity in digital games. Among these challenges, at least two elements must be remarked when reflecting about the potentialities and pitfalls found in inclusive game-making.

As it became clear throughout the experience reported here, understanding who these participants are is essential. This understanding should not be sought through limited categories that can "flatten" our perceptions towards the lived experiences and knowledges of participants,

⁹ Prompted by *MissionMaker's* aesthetics, it must be said.

but through a more holistic approach. Borrowing the notion of repertoires (Canclini, 2001) as a set of different lived experiences that mediate our “universe of expressive possibilities”, it is possible to approach game production through a broader perspective, one that recognises the different dimensions, interests and intentions involved in this process. As discussed throughout this paper, as important as acknowledging participants’ Latino/Latina identity was to recognise how influential other elements detached from that specific local identity also were.

If repertoires mediate our “universe of expressive possibilities”, as it became clear in the cases explored here, we must also understand how these repertoires might be used, and how they might interact with other influential elements – e.g. the platform chosen to produce a game – in this context. Besides reiterating the challenges and potentialities of inclusive game-making and the limiting narratives that might be constructed through using single identifiers as a shorthand to recognise participants’ subjectivities, the experience detailed here also sheds some light into the importance of better understanding different creative processes, and how different creators face work with/around gatekeeping elements such as conventions, archetypes and ideas of genre (Arsenault, 2009).

Examining the (different) way these three pairs of designers engaged with the amalgam of semiotic resources available – from discourses to technical codes to intertextual relationships with other media texts – it is possible to recognise how elements were considered more or less central to their creative process in different situations, and how these elements can gatekeep participants from being included in some cases. *Experiment Z*, as an Adventure game, works more with aspects that can be easily recognisable as “game-like” than *Extrovertido*, for example. Even in *The New Boss*, an unfinished game, we have clear insights into how Elena was able to recognise some gatekeeping elements (e.g. the conventional looks of *MissionMaker*), which might have played a role in their rejection of the activity.

By singling-out these gate-keeping elements for participation in a specific field and indicating some ways to circumvent these structures – as Marta and Carla have done – initiatives such as the one described here are important not only to widen participation in the field through specific strategies, but also to clarify our own– sometimes limited – understandings about what the field in question is or can be. These insights into the boundaries between creativity, innovation and conventions (Arsenault, 2009) can be relevant not only to digital games, but to different creative domains where specific forms and formats are constantly being invoked to gatekeep participation, and further research in that direction might clarify not only these gatekeeping mechanisms, but also how to disrupt them.

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