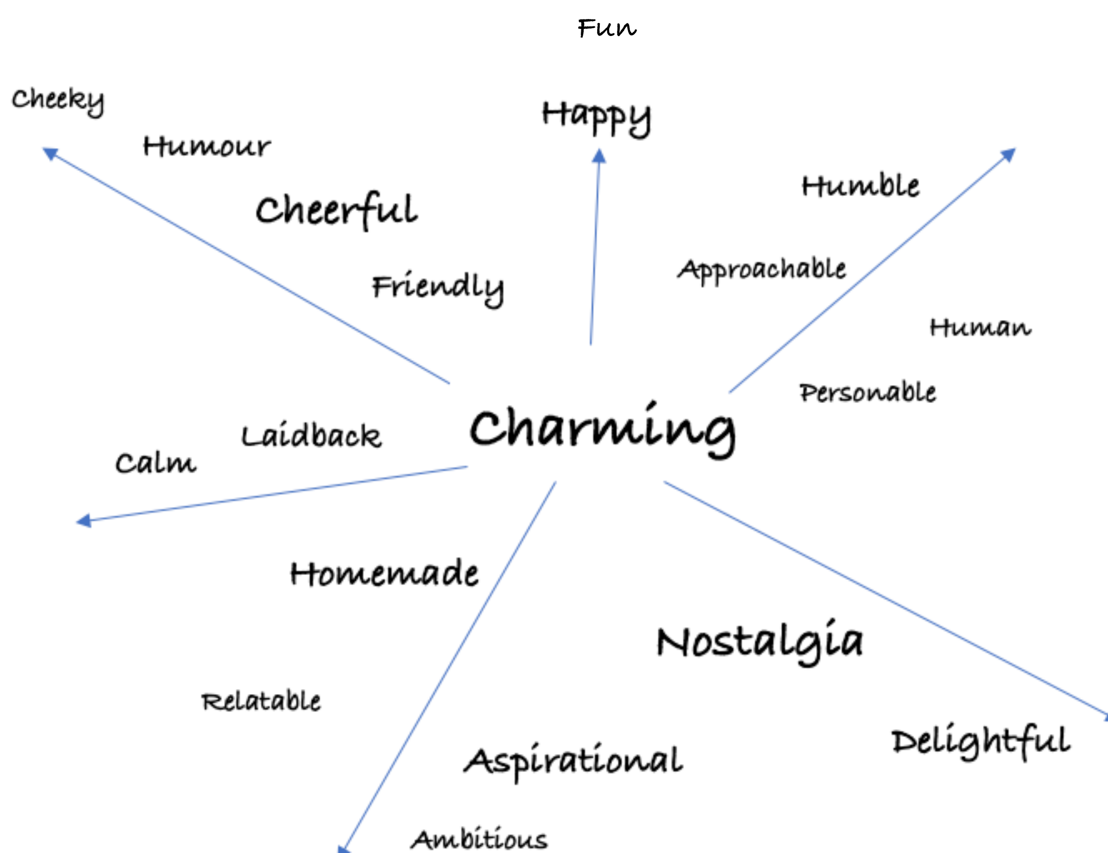
Charming work

How does a game charm? What is the work of making a game charming? And if we understand charm as seductive, how can the ethics and aesthetics of a charming game be understood as gendered?

These questions arose for me because the word 'charming' appeared regularly on my visits to KPER's London studio in 2018. After meeting one of its employees at a Women in Games event, I spent several weeks in its office, with a view to describing the culture of its workplace. Incorporated in 2014, KPER employed by 2018 about 20 people, approximately ten women and men (depending on when and who one counted as an employee), with a management team consisting of two women and two men. This made it an outlier in the games sector, whose workforce is predominantly male (Bulut 2020; Kerr, 2017). One of the questions I had in mind when visiting the studio was how this organisational profile was relevant to the kinds of games it made and how it made them. And the word charming was used by employees to describe both of these aspects.

For example, at a meeting convened to describe drafts of a new company logo, Daisy, the brand manager, showed the following slide to describe KPER's brand values:



The central word identifies a look and a way of being: an aesthetic and a subjectivity. It tethers a grammar. We might compare this to more common uses of the term such as, for instance, a charming man, a charming woman, or a charming scene, formulations which conjure up somewhat different qualities in respect of each of the nouns they circumscribe.

In the slide, the word charming qualifies KPER as a company, its employees, its games and their conditions of production.

In this regard, it operates in a way reminiscent to me of Susan Sontag's (1982) description of a 'sensibility'. In her 'Notes on Camp', Sontag evokes a sensibility as a taste and a badge of identity which is applied to a wide range of phenomena, from people to moods, scenes and things. A sensibility, she states, is a kind of private code, whose meaning is decipherable to those who use the term, and which expresses a kind of attraction to that which it qualifies. It is subjective, not so much an idea, a behaviour or more generally a set of objective attributes, so much as a kind of love which interthreads people and objects, sentiments and styles. It qualifies an attraction to a way of seeing and being.

Charming has very different associations, as a word, to camp. But it seems to work, in the slide, in some of the same ways as her evocation of a sensibility. It characterises people and things as well as a sensual response to them, through association rather than systematic definition. And like camp, its use as a term works as a gesture of self-legitimation by the group that promotes the sensibility's ethos. In Sontag's essay, this ethos is described as a minority's endeavour to dissolve a morality by which it is condemned, a move which establishes an association between camp and 'homosexuals'. In the slide, the move is oriented to assuming an identity within games culture and a games marketplace, on the basis of a specific kind of work, worker and working conditions.

Another, more contemporary writer who might help to consider how the word charming operates at KPER is Sianne Ngai (2010, 2012), who explores more contemporary sensibilities. These have emerged, she argues, in the wake of the huge growth in design and advertising, and the way these have made aesthetic experience an everyday occurrence – by contrast, for instance, to the more rarefied conditions underpinning camp's 'posh taste' (Sontag, 1982). Ngai explores three such sensibilities: cute, zany and interesting. In talking about the cute, for instance, she says that it appears as an aspect of mass culture and the consolidation of the middle class home as a female space dedicated to consumption, reflective of a "desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening, [and which evokes] tenderness for small things, but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle and diminish them further" (2012: 11). Like Sontag, Ngai attends to the gendered associations of sensibilities, and also like Sontag, figures aesthetic experiences as expressive of possibilities for social action (2012: 11): "the zany, the cute and the interesting thus call forth not only specific subjective capacities for feeling and acting but also specific ways of relating to other subjects and the larger social arrangements these ways of relating presuppose". Ngai's argument here is suggestive of how Daisy's word cloud might be interpreted: it provides a vocabulary to describe how customers (should) feel about KPER as a company and what capacities its games (should) sustain; how employees (should) feel and act towards each other, as well as their players. And whilst the sensibility Daisy articulates might be read to have gendered associations, these are not straightforward, and might be said to arise as a site of differentiation, between charming and its equivalents and unarticulated alternatives.

Taking Sontag and Ngai as inspiration, then, charming might be explored as a distinct sensibility associated with games. Whereas both of these authors talk about objects, my aim

in this paper is also to integrate ethnographic material. This endeavour takes its precedent from a third writer on aesthetics, Georgina Born (1995, 2004), who is interested in how phrases like 'the avant-garde' and 'public service broadcasting' are institutionalised (in IRCAM and the BBC respectively), how they manifest as subjectivities inhabiting those institutions and as products made within them. KPER can be interpreted as one institutionalisation of charming. Within its walls, objects and talk symbolise charming games, work and employees. And this symbolisation relies on the generation of a counterpart: that which is rejected with and through charm.

Whilst charm is central to KPER's corporate identity, the discourse of charming games is easy to find outside the studio. It appears, for instance, in headlines on game review websites, such as these examples, all from the *PC Gamer* online magazine: "the charm of point-and-click comedy" is described by one reviewer in reference to a 2D, hand-drawn animated game. Another is summarised as "a charming post-apocalyptic farming game". In reviews, charming and cute often appear side by side: "Ni no Kuni II is so cute and charming that it's easy to forget that one spends at least 70% of the game's duration killing cute and charming creatures". Pixel art games in particular are often described in terms of their charm. One game is called charming because it "nails the style and spirit of retro monster catchers": it "could easily pass for a GameBoy Color game" circa 1998. The reviewer goes on: "I get a quiet joy from booting up a lovingly made little PC game in 2019 and feeling like I've discovered a lost GameBoy game, devoted to a very particular look and type of design".

These reviews, as well as Daisy's slide, suggest that charming has affinities with two sensibilities which have already been written about extensively. First, cute – and Ngai's exploration of this sensibility echoes many of the traits in the slide. The emerging field of 'cute studies' (Dale, 2016; Dale et al., 2016) expands this to a wide range of phenomena, from Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dog* to Pikachu the Pokemon monster (May, 2019), evoking the different ways in which cute things express power dynamics through the arousal of protective feelings. Second, nostalgia, as named in the second largest font on the slide, and a term already used by several game scholars to describe the appeal of several titles (e.g. Ivanescu, 2019; Suominen, 2008; Suominen et al., 2015; Juul, 2014; van de Weyer, 2014). Beyond games, several writers have explored the 'retromania' of digital culture (e.g. Hogarty, 2016; Boym, 2011; Wilson, 2005). Reynolds (2011), for instance, uses the word 'hauntology' to evoke a power mobilised by digital goods constituted from sampling and remixing. This attention to nostalgia in popular culture might be traced back to Benjamin's 1935 essay *The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, marked by its "painful straining towards a wholeness or unity of experience" shattered by the mass production and distribution of art, a dynamic which might be understood as the basis of whatever might be termed 'popular culture' (Jameson, 1969: 53).

Before evoking the power of charm, a brief note on how and why I participated in life at KPER.

An ethnography of game work

In February 2018, KPER accepted my proposal to visit their studio on a regular basis for up to a year, as a case study of game work. My aim was to examine an instance of a media

‘work world’ (Caldwell, 2008; 2009), by looking at not only what happens on screen or behind it, but how the two relate to one another.

KPER offered an opportunity to experience daily life in an organisation which could not have existed a decade ago. As an ‘indie’ game studio, its existence is testament to the re-organisation of the game sector in the wake of the growth of online gaming, the proliferation of digital production and distribution platforms, and crowd-funding (Young, 2018; Tyni, 2017; Kerr, 2017). To date, the ‘indie’ scene has been described largely in terms of its discourses and ethics, including the rejection of growth as the primary corporate aim and the valorisation of craftmanship over high production values (Whitson et al., 2018; Gibson, 2018; Kerr, 2017; Juul, 2014; Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016); the espousal of more equitable, inclusive, do-it-yourself creative development practices, rather than professional specialisation (Westecott, 2013; Crogan, 2018); and the treatment of players as critical and co-creative collaborators (Pearce, 2006; Lipkin, 2013). While some accounts emphasise how this challenges dominant aesthetic and ethical values in the commercial game sector, others highlight that it can also perpetuate discourses of authenticity related to defining real games and real players (Fisher and Harvey, 2013; Harvey and Fisher, 2015), and also accentuate some of the worst aspects of game work, including long unpaid hours (Whitson et al., 2018). In either case, the survival of indie studios is seen to rely on the development of affect, including customer loyalty, by offering access to communities of taste which extend from game play mechanics to player forums and studio cultures (e.g. Cook, 2018).

KPER called itself indie. In 2018, it was also in a period of transition. Initially set up by a collective working via an IRC (internet relay chat) channel, its first title started out as a voluntary enterprise performed in spare time by enthusiasts working across time zones and continents. After several years of unpaid work, the company secured an income via a crowd-funding initiative, and spent two years in early access mode, publishing its main title on Steam every night. This generated substantial revenues. When I contacted them, the studio was finishing its second game, and planning its longer-term future in light of its history as an volunteer-led organisation with a flat structure and a commitment to pixel art, and its projected future as a financially sustainable business which now paid employees and had a management hierarchy. Nearly all employees had been there for several years and lived through this period of transition alongside one another. Most were in their late twenties or early thirties.

The case study’s design was informed by studio ethnographies (Whitson, 2018; O’Donnell, 2014; Ash, 2017; Jørgensen, 2017) and the literature on production cultures (Meyer et al., 2009). I spent approximately 40 days in the studio over 9 months, observing and sometimes participating in work activities, talking to employees, attending ‘socials’ in the office and the pub, going to events and shows, reading and commenting on texts such as design documents and draft scripts, and also playing games under development. Much of the studio’s work was coordinated and done online using the Telegram chat system, and I participated in various project channels over 11 months.

To explore how KPER charms, I have brought together data concerned with its discussion or manifestation, and organised this according to aspects of cute and nostalgia aesthetics. The analytic move is associative: from an idea in literature on cute and nostalgia, I describe

aspects of my life at KPER which relate to it. I draw on, and differentiate between, three types of data: field memos; conversations with employees; and a game diary I kept while playing KPER's second game, *Jingoes*. This last method is borrowed from the work of Diane Carr (2017; Carr and Cheesycat Puff, 2019), who analyzes transcripts of play sessions to explore the ways in which playable texts make meaning. In the conclusion, I return to the relationship between charm, gender and labour, to consider game aesthetics as gendering work.

The cult of the cute child
The cute is expressive of the cult of the child in contemporary culture (May, 2019). Biological studies of how cute things, including children, elicit care emphasise characteristics such as a "large head and round, soft body; short and thick extremities; big eyes and chubby cheeks; small nose and mouth, and a wobbly gait" (Lorenz, 1943 quoted in Dale, 2016). In objects, these attributes translate into qualities such as small, diminutive, pliable, vulnerable, without cutting edges. Addressing us as if it were a child in search of its mother, the cute commodity invokes the grafting of maternal love onto itself (Ngai, 2012). It seduces by offering value in the form of nurturing use rather than abstract exchange, inviting a form of consumerism based on loving identification rather than soulless self-gratification. By bringing commodities into the realm of human concern, the ethos of cute entails a disavowal of difference or otherness. But this ethos rests on an imbalance of power between subject and object: the cute flaunts their vulnerability, the perceiver their unthreatening orientation, opening up the possibility for innocence to be understood as cunning, and protection as the fetishization of helplessness (May, 2019).

Game diary
The first couple of levels set the story up: a father is killed, a mother is dead, and the hero is their young daughter, who inherits a kingdom under attack. A family saga of mythic proportions is put in place, and the player is taught battle controls by playing as the daughter, following the instructions of her elderly, benevolent tutor – the game's stand-in father figure.

My duty is to protect the daughter from slaughter. But this is war as playground squabble, with cheery exclamations aplenty (let's go!), childish phrases ('it's not fair!'), witty repartee, laughter and tantrums. The characters are colourful and dwarfish, with oversized heads and eyes, continuously animated (there is no standing still, the characters hop from leg to leg on the spot), who often start fights on the basis of misunderstood perceived slight. The player is a kind of Gulliver in the land of Lilliput, looking down on squabbling babes in woods. There are no dead or dying on the battlefield, with defeated units disappearing in a puff of smoke. When I win a battle, I get some gold stars and a grade from A to C, as with homework (and a C elicits the same response it did at school: disappointment and resentment for effort unrecognised).

And there are dogs. The hero has a pet, who attacks by howling and emitting pink hearts, and, like Lassie, helps humans in trouble. He wanders off, stumbles onto good causes, and is called back to his mistress at the end with a 'good boy!', a laugh and a pat.

Conversation with Dale, artist

I say that several people in the studio use the word 'charming' to describe KPER's games and to give feedback on ongoing work, especially art work and script-writing. What does 'charming' mean in this context? He says it's "an incredibly well executed marketing tactic"; the word is "pushed" in publicity "so that people associate that with our games…because we are telling them to essentially". Charming, in this initial response, names an effort at manipulation.

He then goes on to say that it means "kind of cute, appealing. We do a lot of the Nintendo-like small moments that make you remember the game. So in Mario [the Nintendo franchise], if you lie down, a bird will land on his nose. It's a cute minor detail that most people won't see, these are the ones people appreciate because it feels like they have fallen on something tiny and unique…so it's almost a deliberate attempt to target that". A game charms on the basis of detail. It targets and controls through powerlessness, appealing to be seen by appearing as overlooked.

Dale then says that "charming is about self-expression": "we have a lot of dogs in our games and we tweet about dogs a lot and it's charming because there is almost no reason to have this in except that it personally appeals to us, which humanises the company". In this third articulation, innocence and manipulation are made indistinguishable: KPER's marketing tactic appeals by assimilating the product with its producers, and producers with consumers. A game charms through a structure of identification by which its makers are charmed, offering the possibility for players of being like makers; being close to them, each helplessly responding to the anthropomorphised animal. The appeal revolves around the desire for sameness in affect, charming by being like the charmed, humanising the company by anthropomorphising its product.

In other conversations I've had, the phrase 'self-expression' was used to evoke difficulties in working relationships in the studio: for instance, when employees were distressed at being told to do what they loved with their art work but also make it different; or when work was judged to be driven by the desire for self-expression as opposed to the needs of the project. Such instances of self-expression were then experienced as threatening the quality or purpose of work. I interpreted them as instances of disenchantment, because they indexed differences in affect. In making charming synonymous with self-expression, in this conversation, Dale excludes difference in feelings, and treats self-expression as expressing like and with others.

Dale's final point evokes charming in opposition to abandonment and death: he "pushes the idea" that he is "personally invested in a product" by continuing to contribute to forums about it long after release. "It's keeping the community alive and the feeling that people care. There is a concept of games being abandoned, which is a very unusual concept. You don't see it with film or TV. You don't say a film has been abandoned after people stop making sequels. But games are evolving products, people expect more, they want to see life and enthusiasm in the project". A game's survival depends on continuous care, thereby eliciting the care of players: it's an ongoing, nurturing reciprocity, which staves off desertion by eliciting fear of it. A game charms by exhibiting its loving dependence on a social world which can kill it.

Field note memo
After I attend a meeting with an HR consultancy representative who is advising KPER, Hester, the COO, emails me the 2017 KPER Handbook, in the process of being updated. It starts by stating that the office is a "fun and relaxed space": "please treat it like your home". "No being naughty and calling people names". "Try not to think of the team in terms of managers and underlings". "Naughtiness, we're afraid, has consequences. If you have been slacking off a lot, or have been generally very, very bad, you will be told off". "In summary: be nice to everyone, or else!"

Hester says that the handbook is being updated because, historically, the company has treated staff as parents treat their children. The HR consultancy is helping to work out how to become employers, and think about staff as employees with rights and access to a legal framework to enforce them. The company is "growing up". The process of HR policy review is an extension of the institution of the new management structure in January 2018, which appointed a head of art and technical alongside the existing CEO and COO, and replaced a flat with a hierarchical pay structure.

Several employees said in conversation that the new structure made things better insofar as it de-personalised disagreements and professionalised communication, including, for instance, around annual reviews. Before, differences of opinion could lead to stalemates, or won by whoever held out the longest. The relief felt at a more managerial approach to the exercise of authority is suggestive of some difficulties which followed from having addressed the studio and its inhabitants – in KPER's first HR handbook - as charming. Authority was then 'disenchanted': a rationalised discourse of "management" and an (impersonal and thus justice-based) discourse of rights and duties was, when I start visiting the studio, supplementing that of familial bonds. Both languages of description existed side by side in daily life (see Bulut, 2020, for another example of this interplay in a games studio). And this is one way of making sense of the movement in Dale's answers about what 'charming' means at KPER: it is both an outward-facing "tactic" and, at the same time, inner "self-expression". Charm operates by undoing the distinction between these.

Making madeleines
Citation in retrogames assigns aura: it works like the Proustian madeleine (Garda, 2013), connecting back to a past and provoking through reverie the yearn to return to an earlier self. When contemporary designers use features from ancient gaming history, they symbolise play as participation in a heritage community bound by shared history and experience (Suominen, 2008; van de Weyer, 2014). Hence the prominence of retrogames, by contrast to other genres, in crowdfunding campaigns (Garda, 2013); they seduce and appeal by virtue of the sociality they sustain, which is based on longing rather than actual return. The effect is pedagogic, teaching players to love the genre's origins, and appreciate its pioneers and paragons, by performing a type of cultural archiving. Such love is often vicarious, arising not as a new version of something already lived, but rather as a way of experiencing the new as enduringly historical (Reynolds, 2011). Retrogames thereby leverage workers' pressured leisure time in hectic and fragmented knowledge economies by associating this with an imagined history and prefabricated sentimental ties to others (Wulf et al, 2018; Lowenthal, 1985). In militating against obsolescence, games which play on nostalgia express the anxiety of the disuniting passage of time.

Game diary
In a pique of frustration, I reduce the difficulty level right down to 'story mode', just to get through a level which has defeated me in only a few turns. The game transmogrifies. My units wipe out all opponents. I move them along the screen and squash obstructions flat. No more planning needed! I am reminded of the board games I used to play as a child, like Monopoly or Ludo, in which game play consists largely of moving pawns along and doing whatever the board dictates (buy, capture, collect money…). These were games played on collective occasions, a way for adults and children to pass time without getting bored of each other, because all that was required was following instructions, with the die deciding which ones to apply. I remember the hours playing Monopoly on the living room table, the elation of capital accumulation, and the rueful pleasure of knowing I was definitely going to win. The memory is a little marred by the subsequent realisation that this was the adults' strategy for avoiding upset.

Once the initial gloating passes, *Jingoes* appears bewilderingly pointless in story mode. There is no story – just a battlefield to traverse. This battlefield has a border, like a picture frame, and behind it a grid of squares. It looks, now that I have the attentiveness to notice, like a game board on a table. And I think that what story mode actually involves is a re-vivification of the sensations of family board game play, but without needing to gather together the necessary relatives.

Conversation with Cody, the CEO
Cody talks to me about the origins of KPER's large online following. He says that there is a common perception that if a game studio launches an idea for a project, and gets a lot of press coverage, an audience will just appear. But this is not how online communities work. They transfer from place to place. They are copied and pasted. The problem with trying to start an online community from scratch is that no one wants to join a forum that has no one else in it. So in the case of KPER, it started with a previous project he worked on, which had an online community associated with it – he can't remember where that came from. It wasn't large, but large enough to seed his next project. So this project was revealed, and it generated a lot of interest, because it involved a person associated with a project they were fans of already and it promised to develop a similar idea. And others who saw this interest realised there was something to join. And the community grew and became much larger than the original one, because there was something to participate in with a history.

Cody says he is not part of any online community: he rarely posts in forums, and he couldn't care less about what people say in them because opinion is usually so divided. It is a taboo to say that a game company does not listen to its customer feedback, but he's learned that he can't put much stock in what people say online. It is not what a community says which is important, but the fact that they want to join in something. So even if a game is 'bad', a studio releasing it can do well because it's something that the community will want to talk about. They will buy it so that they can talk about how bad it is.

Field note
Daisy talks to me about the pitch she had prepared for KPER's third game, *Hocus Hall*, to persuade others at KPER that this was the game they should make next. Her idea was to

create a place to inhabit, rather than only a game to play through. She saw designing the game as an extension of her love for creating imaginative spaces, like her own home, or dolls' houses. Her concept for *Hocus Hall* is expressed in combinatorial logic: it's young adult fiction meets farming sim. There is huge demand by fans of books like *Harry Potter* for a world that has a similar tone and mood but which allows them to find their place in it – like being first time readers again. And *Hocus Hall* would also have elements of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, Garth Nix's *Abhorsen* trilogy, and the *Gravity Falls* cartoon series. The pitch presentation has images from all of these source texts, placed in ghostly adjacency, a visual re-mixing plundered from digital archives. There are few words, and very little on game play mechanics, which, a year or so into development, remain unspecified. *Hocus Hall* already has a large following on Discord and Twitter. What seems to have persuaded Daisy's colleagues then, as well as the online community surrounding *Hocus Hall* now, is this display of genealogy.

Field note memo
The office has a 'social' channel on Telegram, for messages classed as 'not work'. It is one of the busiest channels, and employees – current and ex – post messages throughout the day. The topics vary: politics, pictures of pets, witty repartee, weekend plans…A frequent way of initiating a topic is to post details of a game's launch, often in the form of a forwarded tweet. This is then often followed by comments about the game's antecedents or the studio's other titles. When I search Telegram for instances of the word 'charming', about half appear in this channel. As examples:

- It's very cute and charming, 10/10 would live there
- Any Undertale fans in the office might be interested to hear about Deltarune, a new game that Toby Fox just released for free. I played it through, plenty of the same charming writing
- Recommending Wandersong to anyone who likes chill/pure/charming games
- I've watched some lets plays of this before, the magic system is interesting but the game overall lacks charm, all the characters are super mean

Although the channel is treated as 'not work', it plays a central role in office life, sustaining bonding through the expression of likes and dislikes, and the virtues and vices of a shared and evolving canon. Pragmatically, it's a way of keeping up with what is happening in the games sector. Poetically, it is a way of talking to each other as players again, maintaining the archive of common references, adding to a constantly developing language of evaluation, and playing vicariously through colleagues' accounts of play because everyone's play time is now so scarce.

Back to the future
Nostalgia in digital culture is not simply for a past as it was but as it could have been: it looks back to looking forward (Reynolds, 2011; Boym, 2011). Expressing a desire to return to a plenitude that once seemed possible, nostalgia repudiates the direction in which a world is heading, and remembers its incipient alternatives (Jameson, 1969). In exhibiting disillusionment with what has become popular, and dissensus with the values of a majority,

nostalgia is a form of amour-propre, a testimonial of minority interest. Its' taste claims nobility, by contrast to the vulgar enjoyments of the crowd, and prescience or heightened sensitivity to the deepest impulses of an age (Davies, 1979). In game culture, this rendition of nostalgia has been interpreted as an affirmation of the authenticity of 80s and 90s game design (Juul, 2014), valorised as a point of contrast to innovations in processing power associated with the later aggressive formalisation of the industry when it became commercial (Suominen, 2008; Keogh, 2019). The appeal of vintage game design is then understood to lie in its declamation of the industry's trajectory in the present as much as its re-appropriation of the past.

Field note memo – reflections on pixel art
On opening up *Jingoes*, I am reminded of all the other games made or published by KPER that I have played. Each time, I am initially startled by the quality of the art: they all look like games made a long time before I started playing them (and I'm much older than everyone at KPER). My initial thought, each time, is that these games are ugly. They have none of the painterly qualities of many contemporary games, no depth or perspective, no complex camera work….Why would anyone make a game that bears so overtly the stigma of software's temporal impoverishment? One way to think about this is in terms of the role of the ugly in art history (Adorno, 1970/2004): ugly art denounces or critiques a world that creates ugliness. I have in mind the appearance of 'common' people in the history of portraiture. Such interventions take up a cause through their aesthetics, the cause of the ugly. Applying this idea to pixel art, I might interpret it then as condemning the ideals of realism as beauty embodied in 3D graphics and engines. Whilst in its original form, pixel art reflected the functionality of early consoles and graphic cards, its revivication in the present points to its autonomy as artistic technique. So pixel art now transforms the functional into the aesthetic. Like a kind of arrière-garde (Reynolds, 2011) – denouncing the present by re-enchanting a disenchanted perspective on what games have become.

Conversation with Todd, level designer
"I think when people say charming in relation to pixel art, I really think they mean nostalgia. People say charming because it takes them back to their childhood. A lot of people who are in their 20s and 30s now grew up with those pixel art games, and I think it reminds them of those bygone times… There was this window of time around the early 2000s, around the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 era, when the Triple A industry was pushing this super realistic high detailed graphics, they were pushing the limits of the tech, and as a result a lot of the games ended up being very action orientated but they also ended up being very brown. We have tried to keep our games bright and colourful. You are seeing more people now realising that it's expensive to pursue photorealism and it doesn't necessarily make for the most memorable looking game. I think there are a lot of people who might not realise that they like games because they assume they are all action and violence but when you present someone with a charming world, a bright and colourful world, you are drawing in people who might otherwise have been turned off by those gritty and brown looking shooters."

Todd evokes a group of people longing to return to a past not so much lost as led astray through a window of time – an opening created by an industry heading into an expensive cutting-edge future, by contrast to creating and eliciting bright visual memories. The

distinction here is between a charming period of enchantment and a disenchanted world of technical rationality. It's also a distinction between a minority and a majority. The attachments of the minority to the medium's displaced past is, in the present, added to by people who are not gamers: people who do not realise they like games or have been dissuaded by their commercial grittiness. Charming involves surprising them with vicarious memories. The ghosts of this hauntological structure of feeling animate a world; a place to live, rather than act, in, with charm opposed to the barbarity of realism.

In other conversations, Todd talked about enjoying survival horror games, many of which exemplify gritty and brown aesthetics. His account is not, therefore, a simple representation of his own tastes or history, but rather emerges as he puts into words what he and others mean when they use the word 'charming' at work. It is suggestive of how the word brings about a certain orientation to the history and classification of games, which homogenises and renders 'other' the development of games as a commercial medium.

Conversation with Cody, Harriet and Daisy
Cody: There is a bit of magic to retrogames, they are very simple, they are alarmingly charming, they have something going on which elevates them above modern games. You just fall in love with them…Somewhere along the way, the idea of games as metaphor, games as a game, has been lost. You can look at our game and say, it's still a game. I'm not supposed to be immersed, I'm not supposed to believe I am in that experience or that the graphics are so realistic that I am actually there. You have a layer between you and the game, you can appreciate it as a game, you have a game. You can appreciate how charming a little thing that is. And somewhere along the way, that just dropped off, and now it's all about immersion and realism, and so on. I think there are a lot of people, like us, who miss playing a game.
Hester: Just having fun. Just playing a game.
Cody: So we can say, this is a game that you might have played ten years ago, but now it's got online multiplayer, and it has this and that, and it turns it into something new. And there is quite a niche for that. It's what we play and it's what we enjoy.
Hester: And it has a charming retro look. But it's far from being what games used to be like.

Field notes – a KPER social
KPER has organised a social to watch the Eurovision Song Contest on the studio's huge TV screen. There are about 40 people there, friends and acquaintances from other small studios, some with games to be published by KPER. I am sitting next to Cody on the sofa and he tells me a bit about his background: his parents were unemployed and poor, and never managed to change their circumstances. He uses the word 'stuck' a lot to describe them and their lives. I ask if he feels he has become unstuck from this past. He says yes, he likes that idea. He started something, set up a business. Only because he didn't want to work for someone else. And he's been successful. What he wants now is for everyone in the company to be OK – not to have to worry about money, and just enjoy making games together. I say that also sounds like a version of being stuck: everyone staying put, never moving on. Stuck in a positive sense, maybe. He thinks about it but doesn't say anything. This image of what Cody wants – people having enough money to be able to just focus on making games together – had come up in other conversations, so I hear it as an office trope, a vision of the company's desired future for some employees. It expresses nostalgia for an

imagined moment in the past, when some people at the social had worked together making games in their spare time, as leisure, with the prospect of getting paid and working as a game dev still on a hazy but sunny horizon. When a social was about sociability, rather than also networking to move on. In the wake of the company's financial success, the piety of making games without concern for money infuses office-based sociality with the aura of remembered plenty yet to come. (See Chia, 2021, for an exploration of games culture as an example of a possible post-work society, and also Bulut 2020 on some of the complex ethical challenges this can give rise to. To put this social in context, note that work in the games sector is secured largely through personal contacts – Ozimek, 2021).

Conversation with Gabriel, artist
I talk to Gabriel about what 'charming' means at KPER: "it's a certain aesthetic I guess. Almost like a throwback to older video games, when they were imperfect. And they kind of have a hand-made look to them. It's kind of crude in a way, but that is what makes them charming". A charming game is imperfect and crude. The terms evoke associations with roughly shaped matter, something to be polished. Gabriel's evocation reminds me of another conversation, with Dale, who said there was a reason why most new employees at KPER had little previous professional experience. The company sought out diamonds in the rough, in order to make games with the same attribute (games with lower than AAA production costs).

Gabriel goes on to talk about another studio he works for on a freelance basis, weekends and evenings. He says it gives him creative freedom – he goes away, draws stuff, and it goes into the game. He doesn't have that at KPER any more, as everything goes through a process. But the art style at the other studio is very different: "it is very sketchy, like someone made it who doesn't know how to make art. It has charm. It has a hand-crafted look to it. Actually, the hardest part of working on it is knowing when to pull back and not over-detail stuff". The account, contrasting KPER's 'process' and the other studio's sketchy approach, is suggestive of the difficulty of maintaining imperfect and crude aesthetics over time, as experience is gained, as the future actually unfolds. How does an employee or a studio keep looking back to looking forward as time passes? (At the time of writing, it is worth noting that the most recent hires at KPER have more extensive previous professional experience than the initial group of employees).

The consolation of enchantment
The cute is a contemporary version of the pastoral. The latter romanticised the natural world for the industrial revolution's urban populations. The cute romanticises the relation between products and customers as reciprocal and harmonious (Ngai, 2012). In both cases, productivity is enchanted (Adorno, 1970/2004). The enchantment of productivity is advocated in environmental literature which stresses the importance of imagining a 'charming Anthropocene', to move away from fatalistic extinction narratives and imagine conservation as re-wilding, and (product) development as an art and a craft rather than a service (Buck, 2015). This vision also manifests in studies of 'enchanting work' (Endrissat et al, 2015; Frenette and Ocejo, 2018) which attend to how service workers describe the appeal of their jobs in terms of self-expression and work to enchant colleagues and customers as co-participants. In these instances, enchantment, like cute, has ambivalent qualities: it can imbue exploitation with aura, but also maintain work's meaning. A network

of equivalences can be teased out from these explorations of enchanted productivity: the cute as pastoral; the pastoral as enchanting; the cute as re-enchanting productive work.

Game diary
I click on the 'codex' button on *Jingoes'* main menu. It's an encyclopaedia of the game's elements. The plains, mountains, rivers and forests are evoked in copious detail, like a travel book, linguistically rendered in far more abundant ornamentation than the pixel art animation makes visible. The adjectives proliferate as the writing sensually chronicles the myriad fauna and flora which the luxuriant terrain gives life to. Nature appears as a cornucopian horn of plenty, its lifeforms ecstatically celebrating a cozy pagan fertility (Cook, 2018). The writing seems deliberately over-written: although structured like an informational rule book, it reads like a mythology.

I consult the codex a couple of times only, as it doesn't come into play during battles. Which makes the effort of its writing all the more noticeable. It seems to point to its status as expressive embellishment. Maybe this is what makes the writing 'charming'.

Field note
Daisy talks to me about *Hocus Hall*'s origins. She had wanted to create a place for world-building. But when Annabelle (the head of art) took on the role of producer, she focused on what the game looked like, with Cody concerned primarily with game mechanics. And it felt to Daisy like there was no more room for her on the project: for designing a place as opposed to a look or a system. The tasks she wanted to work on were treated as frill. She had insisted a few times, but ended up feeling silly. When Hester asked her to take on more marketing tasks, saying Daisy was not needed as much on *Hocus Hall* anymore, Daisy was initially upset, but recognised it was true: there was art, programming, and a mechanic to be produced. But there was no longer a role for the kind of work she wanted to do: designing a world to live in.

A few months later, when we had lunch again, Daisy said she felt happy she had stopped working on *Hocus Hall* and did marketing. Designing screenshots and websites fitted in more closely with her idea of satisfying work: constructing a magical place, rather than doing art that fulfilled the functionalities of programming and game mechanics. (At the time of writing – i.e. after my period of field work – the emphasis returned to constructing a sense of place and Daisy took over the role of producer, which is suggestive of the different phases and re-directions a game can go through over its relatively lengthy period of development).

Field note
Before the marketing meeting, Daisy says to me that no thought has ever been given to branding, and she wants to re-think how the studio presents itself. After Hester, Cody, Rebecca (the marketing strategist), Annabelle and Esme (artist), enter the room, Daisy says she thinks the company needs to re-brand. She has looked at other studios' branding, and starts showing some slides of logos, saying what she likes and doesn't like about them. Cody asks whether she wants to present or have a conversation. Daisy says, hesitantly, have a conversation.

Hester and Cody then talk a lot about what they like and do not like about other studios' logos. Daisy's presentation is overpowered by the forceful expression of opinion. I'm struck by a certain contradiction: between the statement that no one at KPER has considered branding, and the display of certainty about why some logos are poorly designed as well as repeated statements that this task requires thought and time. Daisy says she aimed to find solutions which do not require a lot of work. Cody responds by saying that this is not a lot of work compared to game development, which sounds like a soft rebuke for not taking the task seriously enough.

Daisy then shows the slide mapping the company values[1]: nostalgia, laidback, anarchic, with charming in the largest font in the middle. Hester says this is very important work, it describes who KPER is as a company. Cody says he objects to one word: anarchic. It doesn't fit in with the kind of place KPER is. KPER is like a village, a small community, a picturesque scene, a relaxed place to live in. Daisy ought to focus more on what she loves. It'll avoid producing designs which are too zany.

I stay in the meeting room with Daisy afterwards, and say it sounds like a difficult job because she was told to do what she loves, but also listen to all this feedback. She jokes: 'yes, do what you love, just not this'. She shows me the websites of other companies she researched. On one, she says she met them at GDC and they said 'our studios are so alike', and she thought 'no we're not'. I ask why, she responds 'they are so corporate'. The last word implies a criticism. It throws light on why the meeting felt difficult. In a company that identifies as not-corporate, marketing has an ambivalent status. It aims at promoting sales, yet what it is selling is a form of unquantifiable non-alienation: charm as identity, rather than exchangeable commodity. Auteurship, not commerce. Daisy's rejection of the idea of being corporate after a meeting about branding seems an attempt at retaining a certain idea of the studio as a charming Anthropocene: a company which remains wildly productive rather than tethered by the imperative for sales and service delivery.

Closing note

In compiling these notes on charming, I have sought to trace the forms of love and seduction which the sensibility makes expressible. The note form is intended to enable continuities to be traced between games as objects, workplace culture, and employee subjectivity, whilst treating each as associated with, rather than determined by, the others. The form of writing is also intended to enable game work to be represented in a different way to how it often appears in academic accounts and also the games press, where there is, rightly, a heavy emphasis on the marginalisation of women and the exploitation of employees' passion for games (e.g. Bulut, 2020). This case study does not contradict such representations of the games sector. Rather, it aims to address the problem of how to represent game work and cultures when there are also further stories to tell, including of workplaces where women make up half the workforce and where aesthetics draw on conventions associated with the feminine (I use this term with circumspection and mean it as a hybrid cultural construction).

[1] This was an earlier draft of the slide discussed at the start of this paper.

The note form is also intended to illustrate that charming, like camp, is a motley sensibility. It arises from encounters between earlier aesthetic categories. One of these, nostalgia, expresses in some contexts a certain ageing, curmudgeonly attitude towards popular games culture and a longing to return to imagined pre-lapsarian days, when games sustained predominantly male bonding. Another category, cute, has contrasting associations, with the infantile, the domestic and the commercial. Charming as aesthetic, then, is suggestive of the extent to which games, game work, and also gender, have changed since the early days of feminist game scholarship and activism, when there were attempts to create distinctively girl-friendly aesthetics and mechanics by contrast to games for and by men (e.g Kafai, 1996; Denner and Campe, 2008); and when game culture could be described as dominated by 'hegemonic masculinity' defined in opposition to 'femininity' (e.g. Alloway and Gilbert, 1998, p95). The emergence of charming games, then, points to the break-up of straightforward gender binaries within game culture, including academic criticism.

This is not to suggest that charm is 'gender neutral', a concept which relies on its antecedent binary. Rather, it is more useful, I think, to return to Sontag's depiction of the revolt and rejection which a minority sensibility expresses. What charming 'others' is large, corporate, gritty and violent – or games as the unreconstructed, hyper-masculine medium and industry which have long been the object of feminist critique. This rejection is affective work, in two senses. First, it is a business strategy emerging under conditions which include the growth of a global 'indie' scene and the fracturing into niche markets of the games industry, the shift from games as commodities into platform-based services, and the espousal of digital content creation as a craft for self-presentation rather than the display of rarefied, professional expertise (Ozimek, 2021). These developments have altered the alliances and oppositions by which game, and digital culture more broadly, are constituted, with charming taking up the cause of a minority ethos. And whilst this ethos might be labelled feminine, including in its commodification and exploitation of vulnerability (Lukács, 2020), the case of KPER suggests that this affective labour is not done by or for women only, and is not necessarily expressive of financial vulnerability. Rather it is the strategy pursued to find space in a domain historically dominated by industry goliaths. Of course, most 'indie' studios are not financially viable (Whitson et al, 2018), and KPER is an outlier in this sense too. What its' case study suggests is how gender – understood as a matrix of attraction and rejection, seduction and repulsion – has been altered or re-signified in game culture with the rise of indie game work.

Charming is affective work in a second sense, at the level of subjectivity. Here, it is worth returning to Born's (1995, 2004) research on aesthetic discourses institutionalised in workplaces. She explores how aesthetic subjectification fragments the subject and produces incommensurable desires, for instance between public service broadcasting and competitively tendered operations, or the bureaucratic administration of the avant-garde. KPER's charming games and game work also generated competing desires: between game making as a hobby for self-expression and as a project requiring collaboration between complex specialisms; between creative autonomy and commercial imperatives, seen for instance in employees' appreciation but also apprehension of the studio's online following; between familial, parental forms of authority and those deriving from a corporate, legal and capitalist framework of rights, including property rights. The discourse of charming operated at KPER to negate the tensions between these alternatives and make them equivalent. This

was continuous labour, and I have described some occurrences when the sensibility and its associated affects did not hold discursively, when pain, frustration and disenchantment were experienced as a result of charming also producing its other. This wrestling over what charms points to the realms of experience the sensibility opens up for action and negotiation in a workplace operating as a global, commercial but also minoritarian community of taste.

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