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Westecott, Emma and Epstein, Hannah and Leitch, Alexandra

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Feminist Art Game Praxis

Emma Westecott
OCAD University
100 McCaul Street, Toronto, Canada M5T 1W1
416.977.6000 x4656
ewestecott@faculty.ocadu.ca

Hannah Epstein, Alexandra Leitch
OCAD University
100 McCaul Street, Toronto, Canada M5T 1W1
416.977.6000 x4656
hanskigold@gmail.com, alex.leitch@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores multiple approaches to building an art game project created from a feminist perspective. Funded by a research grant, this can be seen as an experimental praxis that plays with connecting metaphors invoked in feminist theory to playable media. This connection is figurative not literal and manifests throughout the development process: in conception (artistic intent), production (technical approach) and engagement with existent and emergent theory.

Intentionally playing in the space between art games and game art and inspired by Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto, PsXXYborg[1] is an art game in development that presents a rich cyber-feminist mythos across multiple screens as an allegorical play with the eternal fascination of 'becoming-machine'. PsXXYborg blends feminist art practice, makerism and academic research in order to birth itself as a glitch for the hermetically sealed structures of game culture. When politically motivated the game glitch aims at disturbing the hegemonic structures of normative game culture questioning the evident exclusions growing over time. Questions include: How can digital play represent and reflect the human condition? What is a feminist game? Why does society position play as inconsequential? How might we play our way to an equitable future?

Keywords
feminist game studies, art game, praxis, cyber-feminism, arts-led research

INTRODUCTION

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics (Haraway 1991, 150).

Feminists have long been concerned with technological change, both to understand and to unsettle the ways that dominant ideologies are reinscribed into emerging power structures and to engage opportunities offered by technological evolution. The first signs of feminist interest in digital games can be traced back to the eighties (Skirrow 1986) long pre-dating

any formalization of the field of game studies. Beyond addressing the lack of women evident in game development more broadly the themes of feminist game studies to date can be summarized as "…gendered activity in digital games both in game playing and in game content; feminine preference in play style; feminine game-making and access to gaming…" (Westecott 2009). As a cyclical endeavor in which each generation necessarily claims their own multiple feminisms one challenge for feminist game studies has been the broader 'post-feminist' backlash. Given the ongoing lack of diversity in the game development community and the rise of "toxic game culture" (Consalvo 2012) more generally there is evident, and growing, need for explicitly feminist activity that intervenes in game culture norms to play towards a more equitable future. This context provided the motivation for the Feminists in Games network[2]. An important aspect of any feminist project lies in its fundamentally activist perspective. A feminist is actively interested in challenging the status quo and building an open, inclusive and sustainable space that can support and nourish all women and girls as well as other traditionally excluded individuals. Amongst other activities this research has seed funded a number of feminist projects[3] including PsXXYborg, the art game discussed in more depth in this paper.

Figure 1: A still of PsXXYborg's cyborg character, a gatekeeper calling you to 'upload'.

Art games have been broadly defined as games that "…challenge[s] cultural stereotypes, offers meaningful social or historical critique, or tells a story in a novel manner" (Holmes 2003, 46). Whilst a detailed discussion on the different debates around art games is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that the discussion of games as an art form remains provisional and under development in the community at large. In fact, it is the very fluidity of our understanding of what an art game is that creates an experimental space open to new games and new voices. This is a generative site for feminist intervention.

Figure 2: PsXXYborg titular still.

PsXXYborg was conceived by game artist Hannah Epstein in response to a call for projects issued by FiG (Feminists in Games). The project was further supported by OCAD University's game:play lab[4] as a collaborative arts-led research project. Arts-led research is a specific approach to new knowledge generation that prioritizes the critical vision, reflexive action and technological agency of art practitioners (Sullivan 2005, 3) as a way to generate new approaches to form and content.

As an art game PsXXYborg is inspired by Donna Haraway's cyborg metaphor. By engaging Haraway's work to act as thematic inspiration, PsXXYborg playfully presents itself as the ultimate engine of salvation for those who seek immortality through technological ascension. Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto (1991) is a core text for feminists engaging with technological evolution and as the digital grows ever more pervasive the figure of the cyborg stands as descriptor for the extensions of self generated by engagement with technology. The technological encounter creates a new experiential norm where one is expected to exist both physically and digitally simultaneously. The deeply rooted sci-fi vision of the cyborg is often portrayed either as a combative force in a post-apocalyptic landscape of man vs. machine, or, as the questionable science experiment to preserve or reanimate life. Haraway's cyborg offers a seductive, and fictional, alternative - achieving such measures by ironically proposing that the path to salvation can be cut with the tools of oppression. It is in this spirit that PsXXYborg adopts the cyborg metaphor to its own end.

Figure 3: PsXXYborg still of a representational player standing at the edge of something new.

Both Braidotti (1996) and Wilding (1998) have identified and acknowledged the importance of what, in the nineties, was termed "cybergrrl-ism" as the "…manifestation of new subjective and cultural feminine representations in cyberspace." (Wilding 1998) and it is possible to see the use of irony, parody, humor, anger and aggression as early strategies for online representational practices. Braidotti (1996) pointed out that "…nowhere is the feminist challenge more evident than in the field of artistic practice", in her discussion of the potential to be found in the use of parody. PsXXYborg's uptake of cyber-feminism is pragmatic to a digital art practice interested in debasing power structures through the uptake of broadly available technologies. Through the playful dropping of cues and intentional misinterpretation, PsXXYborg is clear that traditional game structures will not be adhered to. A playful 'oops' accompanies the parody as it critiques the tools it engages. This act of play is present in every aspect of PsXXYborg's development, as method even. By being led by the expressive capacity and interests of an artist (in this case a film maker) at every level of development it is possible to question existent approaches to both the act of game making and playing. As more different types of game makers engage, and, importantly, gain visibility for their game making practices, it is not radical to suggest the adoption of diverse techniques to give voice to an increasingly politicized generation of game makers.

Figure 4: A PsXXYborg still appearing briefly at the start of game, signaling the end of "games" in their industry standard incarnations.

As an arts-led research project PsXXYborg adopted the lens of cyberfeminism as a tradition that has long acknowledged the potential of engaging feminist theory with art making as one means to articulate intervention in cultural norms. The reinvigoration of cyberfeminism as one tool for feminist game studies connects future work to a genealogy of past activism. Beyond showing the connection between historical and emergent feminist praxis, the direct engagement of cyberfeminist theory to inform game design and development offers distinctive approaches to game making practices more generally. By taking seriously Haraway's playful "…argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction." (Haraway 1991, 150) PsXXYborg aims to articulate some ways in which applying feminist thinking to the process of game making can offer novel approaches. As such, this paper does not engage in feminist theorizing but opens a feminist praxis to schemas by those theorists referred to

throughout this paper in order to critique technologically augmented play and to inspire a new generation of artists.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FEMINIST GAME ART

There are scant examples of feminist art games. The following examples present a necessarily brief look at some key artists. Perhaps one of the first feminist art games, entitled "All New Gen" (1993/4) was made by VNS Matrix. VNS Matrix[5] were an Australian cyberfeminist collective who generated digital media interventions and installations, including authoring the famous Cyberfeminist Manifesto[6], that appropriated the language and narratives of cyberpunk to feminist ends. Twenty years later PsXXYborg charts a similar terrain in its invocation of the cultural anxiety around 'becoming machine' whilst referencing the probability that it is already too late.

The next significant feminist activity in game making can be traced in the artistic, theoretical and activist work of Anne-Marie Schleiner. Her ongoing work engages politically motivated interventions in game culture, including game art mods, that: "…can be seen as critical frameworks, and when used in the context of artistic practice, become environments in which player-participants can make meaning." (Flanagan 2005). Flanagan's thesis work connects her exploration of critical play practices[7] to digital game design approaches via "…turn-of-the-millennium 'cyberfeminist' practices…" (Flanagan 2005, 120) and whilst pointing to problems inherent in the original utopian cyberfeminist project as "…unrealistic in the face of real discrimination and social imbalances." (Wilding 1997, quoted in Flanagan 2005, 122) nevertheless moves forward to propose a design framework based on her research into critical play practices. The process of game making described in Flanagan's thesis moves through refined iterative cycles that re-work the iconography of existing game genres (arcade and first-person shooters) to refine and balance game mechanics towards more inclusive play experience.[8] Flanagan engages feminist art and play practices in her development of a framework for socially activist game design. Yet whilst Flanagan's schema of re-skinning, unplaying and re-writing can be applied to feminist art - a review of feminist approaches more generally yields signs of a wider expressive toolkit. The use of parody, irony and other forms of humor pervade feminist activity whilst techniques such as distanciation, embodied role-play and personal storytelling can be traced across feminist expression.

Holmes (2003) moves forward from her definition of art games to discuss feminist art games tracking a tradition of work from the nineties onwards that includes Laurel, Flanagan, Bookchin and more. Holmes states:

> Art game play sometimes requires a tolerance for critical theory mixed with intelligent humor-it is the combination of heavy content with clever punning that makes the game format an excellent structure to critique power relationships… (Holmes, 51)

Like many art games, Flanagan's work, and indeed that of other feminist artists, challenges the formal qualities of games and uses the material of digital games to other ends. PsXXYborg is a game that intentionally restricts agency and fragments the player gaze across multiple screens. The logic of an overt restriction of agency is meant to reflect the structural limitations that co-exist with a wider rhetoric of choice both in games and culture more generally.

Although there are future plans to extend and release development tools built to deliver the project, PsXXYborg is conceived as a game art installation. As part of Queer Arcade[9], PsXXYborg is experienced on site in a custom-decorated van creating an intimate gameplay experience that connects modes of real world transportation to a virtual journey. Future installations will explore possible site-specific options to experiment with multi-screen control and display.

Figure 5: PsXXYborg at Queer Arcade.

Art game as glitch
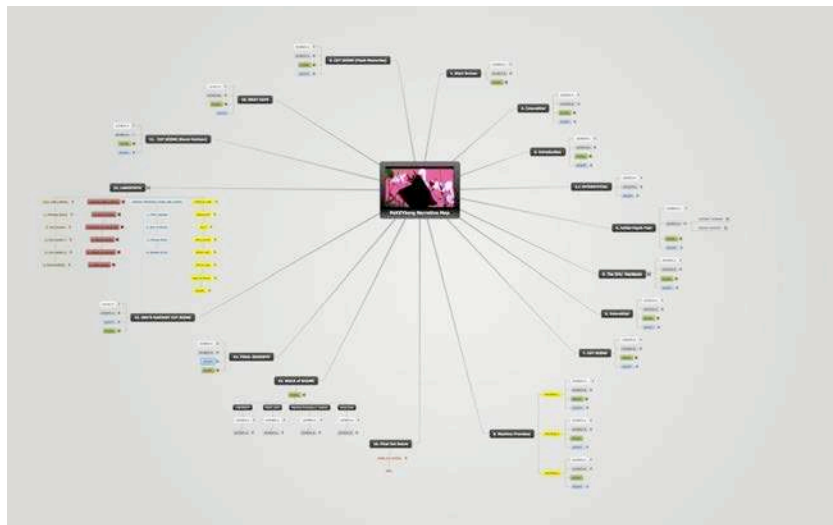
Figure 6: The tightly ordered structure of PsXXYborg is revealed in this game map. A stark contrast to the visual disorder it uses as aesthetic.

The glitch is identifiable as a systematic moment of seizure, pause or miscommunication in what might otherwise be a smooth and uninterrupted experience of an authored program. Increasingly recognized as an art form, glitches can be seen as the unintended reveal of the imperfection of our digital systems. Contextualized as an error, glitches often also happen to be beautiful. Despite this accidental quality, in most game encounters a player is expected to continue and ignore the momentary glitch. The concept of glitch can be seen as a useful tool to describe the critically playful intentions of feminist art game praxis. More than a nuisance or something that can be cleaned up later, the glitch is an unpredictable presence in an otherwise ordered system. Glitches freeze-frames and distort the promise of perfection and control, highlighting every crack, which,

as Leonard Cohen (1968) reminds us, "is how the light gets in." PsXXYborg engages the glitch, in theoretical and visual development. By refusing the comfortable landmarks of what is easily perceivable as a game, PsXXYborg is the game that cannot be identified as a game.

Figure 7: A compilation of PsXXYborg's glitch imagery.

FEMINIST THEORIES

Braidotti's ongoing work defining feminist nomadic thought makes "…an explicit case for affirmative politics." (2011, 13) and her reading of Haraway suggests "…Haraway's figuration of the cyborg is a sort of feminist becoming-woman that bypasses the feminine only in order to open up toward broader and considerably less anthropocentric horizons." (2011, 66). Braidotti points to the differentiated and complex subject named cyborg and states that "… the cyborg can act as an empowering political myth of resistance to contemporary power formations." (2011, 67). Braidotti's theoretical continuation of Haraway's prescient, yet pre-internet, writing allows for ongoing engagement with the cyborg post the utopic visions of the nineties.

One definitional challenge for feminism lies in how the creative output of women are included in feminist discourse, what is it about a particular piece that lets it be described as feminist or feminine? How is feminist work identified as such without reiterating the multiple judgments and exclusions evident in culture more broadly? This is a question central to the feminist project, without celebrating and making visible both feminine and feminist creative practice (distinguishable by the political intent of the creator), it is not possible to work against the erasure of women from history. Yet the process of categorization implicit to this process in and of itself risks reproducing exclusionary practices. Elizabeth Grosz's essay Feminism after the Death of the Author (1995) sustains a response to this challenge with the intent of allowing an approach that moves beyond self-limiting frameworks.

> What, then, enables us to describe a text as feminist or feminine? In the feminist literature surrounding this question, there seem to be four broad types of answers to this question: 1) the sex of the author; 2) the content of the text; 3) the sex of the reader; and 4) the style of the text. (Grosz, 11)

By text Grosz is referring to "…the products of any kind of discursive practice, whether poetic, literary, philosophical, scientific, visual, tactile or performative-that is, any

tangible network of signs that exhibits a "grammar" and "syntax,"…" (Grosz, 11). In this sense of text, art games can be approached using Grosz's framework. She then moves on to argue against each of these ways of categorizing feminist texts, only allowing some agency in the style of the text itself as carrying traces of feminine and feminist origins. More specifically in the contemporary context of post-structuralism and it's emphasis on the act of writing as separable from an authorial voice it becomes problematic to tightly bind the sex of the author with the automatic generation of a particular gendered identity. It is not that the identity of the author and the product of her writing are easily distinguishable, more that this theory points to an overlap rather than a direct one-to-one relation. The content of a text is similarly difficult to ascribe to any essential feminine voice, it is important to remember that women do not only create from personal experience and, even if they do so, women's experiences are as varied as men's and "…to claim that these experiences are only the result of women's patriarchal subordination (no others count), is to impose a present limit on women's writing: it must always remain reactive, a writing tied to oppression, based on ressentiment." (Grosz, 15).

Grosz suggests an alternate approach to feminist texts as taking place in consideration of:

> The relations between a text and prevailing norms must be explored, to be feminist "…it must render the patriarchal or phallocentric presumptions governing its contexts and commitments visible." (Grosz, 23)

PsXXYborg's explicit refusal to reproduce comfortable game tropes, in a game culture that openly lampoons anything perceived as invasive, positions it as an offensive presence. It's makers remain fully aware of the predictable oncoming criticism yet are interested in speaking to game makers and players willing to expand notions of game form.

> Texts retain a trace of their production, so a feminist text must problematize the standard masculinist ways in which the author occupies the position of enunciation. (Grosz, 23)

PsXXYborg makes no effort to welcome the FPS player or retro-nostalgic platformer. The highly personalized and yet openly psychedelic landscape is used to convey the world the player inhabits as they explore techno-evolutionary promises, and provides game engagement completely foreign to any commercial product. PsXXYborg is so radically different from contemporary games that it may well fall too far outside what a game can be. This is by no means a failure of the project; it is in fact the very type of transgressive play called for when critiquing a commercially driven industry. Free from direct commercial need this project is liberated from the normal constraints of game production.

The creation of PsXXYborg has followed a highly collaborative process that has generated tools for game making for release more generally. It is these tools, and their potential for future use, that allow for new types of games to be made.

> A feminist text must help facilitate the production of new…discursive spaces, new styles, modes of analysis and argument, new genres and forms - that contest the limits and constraints currently at work in the regulation of textual production and reception. (Grosz, 23)

PsXXYborg attempts to avoid any unnecessarily narrow essentialist claims as to what a feminist game art approach should be, and connects longer traditions of feminism to ongoing activity in game art and culture. Approaches to feminist art game practice require a type of 'radical inclusivity' that allows for multiple practices to be counted as feminist. This is vital to accommodate diverse projects and in moving forward acknowledging the partial nature of any one project it is import to note the necessity of coalitions between different groups in order to shift dominant discourse. By fully acknowledging the need for coalitions of different voices to build momentum it is the act of 'radical inclusivity' that should be the operating system of contemporary feminist game studies, which names in it's roster of interests, the underrepresented and marginalized.

PRAXIS

Praxis is a classical concept widely taken up by educators such as Freire (2000) to explicitly foreground the activist intent inherent to any activity. Praxis can be seen as acts that shape and change the world. The outcome of praxis is a process, or action, that embodies certain qualities.

As a research project PsXXYborg has followed a feminist praxis; involving an explicit collaboration between art practice, technological development and theoretical engagement. Led by art, informed by theory and generating technology in order to deliver its gameplay experience the process of making this art game is as important as the resulting artifact. The development approach adopted by PsXXYborg can be seen as a type of bricolage in which the improvised use of feminist theoretical approaches, cyborg mythos, psychedelic imagery, open source traditions and collaborative processes proved efficacious to the creation processes of an art game. The concept of bricolage originates from Levi-Strauss's (1962/1966) work on different approaches to knowledge that distinguish between 'primitive' and 'civilized' thought (that of the bricoleur and the engineer) before using these concepts to discuss the production of myths. In one contemporary usage bricolage can be interpreted as a type of 'do-it-yourself' (Boisvert, 2003), and the bricoleur is an amateur who can turn her hand to practical work. In this usage the term bricoleur refers to someone who uses whatever is at her disposal to get things done and has been connected to the act of play more generally (Turner, 1982). Boisvert's (2003) online article states:

> The bricoleur thus displays concern for recuperation, and thereby responds to a profound need: that of creating meaning through reassembly, by (re)organizing and weaving meaningful relationships among apparently heterogeneous objects. (Boisvert)

Standing as both an artistic technique and as an interdisciplinary research method, bricolage suggests an arbitrary and playful quality to creative activity in which the end is not specified in advance.

Whilst PsXXYborg the game is not necessarily a comfortable experience for the player this paper is primarily concerned with the playful praxis of game making itself.

As an arts-led process the priority of PsXXYborg has been the development of a collaborative authorial voice engaged in playing with feminist techniques and mythos. As a film and video maker, Epstein has a strong and specific voice and her previous game projects have built on this expertise through the appropriation of tools like YouTube to deliver game experiences[10]. With PsXXYborg this practice was expanded to novel

gameplay contexts (across multiple monitors) and developed open-source and accessible tools for future game makers. PsXXYborg is played on a minimum of two screens, where an iPad acts as a controller for a second, or even better, multiple screens that display synchronous FMV (full-motion video) respondent to player choices. By engaging a game development technique originating from before the emergence of 3D production processes it becomes possible to empower film makers - and with the pervasiveness of domestic digital film making technologies we are all now film makers - to make games. Within the wider growth of user-generated content and DIY game practices it is productive to look at ways that makers can bring existing skills and literacies to bear on the process of making games. The experimentation involved in making PsXXYborg runs counter to prevalent approaches to game making and strives for abstraction at multiple levels; from imagery to game rules to game structure to context of play as an intentional questioning of prevalent attitudes on what games are in favor of an imagining of multiple possible futures.

Playing with Form

The game title itself is tied to an ambiguity of technology and an ambiguity of gender; the blending of physical variations often attributed to gender in those born with XXY chromosomes is used reflexively in PsXXYborg to indicate a state of post-body identification. Our gender mutability is highlighted in the game.
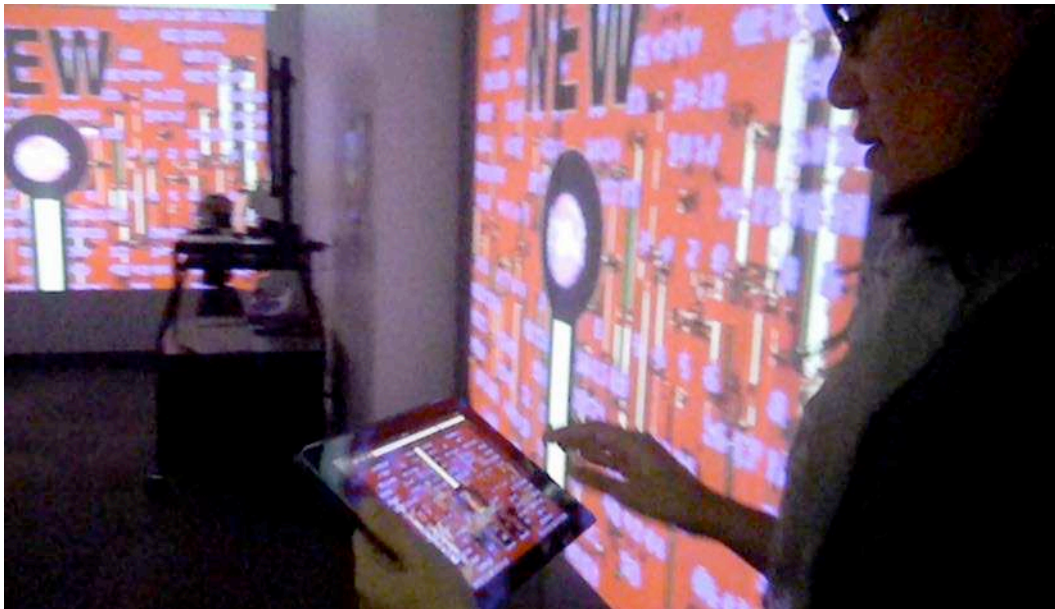
Figure 8: PsXXYborg screens

PsXXYborg adopts a first-person camera, in fact a driving decision in its design is the removal of the avatar. The player is not asked to inhabit any other character's point of view when playing PsXXYborg, they are asked to be themselves. There are multiple tensions in this encounter as the game controller (iPad) offers explicit, and restricted, ways to play via multiple choice options (akin to a psychological test) whilst the screens play back a polyphony of psychedelic and dream-like imagery in a barrage of media that feed multiple strands of meaning back at the player on all screens. The contrasts between the hand-drawn and computer generated imagery used in PsXXYborg is intended to draw the player's attention to the meeting point between person and machine required by contemporary gameplay. One disjuncture at play (pun intended) within this imagery is the

tension between the mythopoeic imagery of the forest drawn from Epstein's childhood experience of growing up raised by her Latvian grandmother, or Omi, and the cyborg (represented in-game via the Orb screen presence). For Epstein "…the visual depictions of cyborgian evolution should also carry the watermarks of the world that supports it." and to this end digital game space "…is inescapably populated with the mirrored images of our physical inheritance." (2013)

Figure 9: A collection of PsXXYborg stills, the forest has all been filmed in areas around Nova Scotia, significant to Epstein's childhood.

Epstein's process of game making has brought in many collaborators at different stages of the project and these creative partners have acted as both provocateurs and co-creators. For example, Epstein's collaboration with Sagan Yee brought an emphasis on clarity and structure that helped establish the centrality of "…a sense of undirected openness, of ongoing possibility and unclear barriers. PsXXYborg didn't have to feel like one thing, it had to feel like it could be many." (2013)

Connections between cyberfeminism and mythic structures that have fed the cultural understanding, and anxiety, inherent to 'becoming machine' pervade the process (invoked in discussion and development) and content (via the specific address of the game to its player) of PsXXYborg. The game's diegetic world is constructed of multiple appropriations of contemporary popular digital theory and culture mixed in to a singular and monstrous experience. The game responds to the player via custom made and heavily treated video moments that articulate a bricolage of address and edit techniques.

Figure 10: PsXXYborg screenshot.

Specifically the game addresses the future player in its somewhat abusive demand for action, whilst the visual feedback of the game is a multi-layered sensorial overload. The intent is to reflect the sense of player frustration when encountering an unresponsive system. This can be seen and heard in the fuzzy and glitched content. The recorded moment in time is bound to disintegrate. The characters presented to the player provide opportunities for self-reflection and tease the player while still offering the promise of fulfillment. For example, Sagal's second appearance at the end of the introduction states: "You don't play PsXXYborg! PsXXYborg plays you." The significance of the Sagal character is to provide moments of reflexive honesty where the underlying politics reveal completely in full knowledge that this admittance will not deter a player who seeks entertainment even though they are told that what they seek will not be found. Moving forward a central element of the game is the Psych Test in which a seemingly random set of questions are asked on screen, by offering questions with no discernible connection the player can't help but query the game's underlying logic. Again, this is a calling out of the player, who has been trained to play the game. However PsXXYborg is, of course, not assessing your response but is rather testing the player's compliance. Key moments in engagement with PsXXYborg address the wider game context, for example one Psych Test question asks "Which weapon is most effective at achieving alien death toll?" but PsXXYborg is not interested in testing skill but in parodying late twentieth century anxieties and game culture tropes. Needless to say when test results are displayed back on the game screen they present a particular critique on contemporary society, to complete our example the alien question is answered: "The weapon you selected is ineffective against alien life forms which possess no physical attributes capable of sustaining harm." This points to the normative practice of scoring in games and the expectation that the player must develop only certain types of skill to progress.

Figure 11: PsXXYborg's multiple screen questionnaire.

PsXXYborg moves on through introduction of the Orb, who beckons the player further in to the game by explaining the touchscreen as a window into her wonderful world. "You sit, head down, like in prayer, in front of a screen that DEMANDS your COMPETE COMPLIANCE." This alludes to the care with which we treat technological objects. A new computer might as well be a new child. The computer screen is compared to Islam's holy Mecca, which must be faced when in prayer. Once the player has touched the hand scan screen, Sagal appears on screen to mock you: "Eww! Your flesh is a disease." The player then moves on to the final major section of the game, the Labyrinth. In this part of the game the video played provides hints to correctly progress to the next stage and reinforces the explicitly BDSM framing of the game's demands on the player. The ritualized power play undergone in consensual BDSM relationships can itself be understood as a parody of larger, systematic power structures. PsXXYborg hopes to capture this similar spirit, in replicating a system of power which offers illusions of choice whilst demanding complete submission, the player, like the citizen, is told to crave a position of subservience, least they follow their own creative paths. Successful navigation of the Labyrinth draws the game to its penultimate end in which the Orb returns to tell you the process is complete and that you and your flesh are no longer needed, the only option at the end is to click a glowing red heart inscribed "Thank You PsXXYborg."

Figure 12: PsXXYborg's authoritarian orb.

Emergent Themes

Beyond the imagery engaged in the development of the art game PsXXYborg discussed above it is possible to identify a set of themes that the work engages, these can be summarized as:

Removal of agency

One play in PsXXYborg is in the lack of actual agency on offer to a player, and the broader critique behind this as to the lack of individual agency evident in technological encounter more broadly regardless of a pervasive rhetoric of individual choice. Driven by a desire to critique the ideological structures built in to the digital fabric we all increasingly inhabit PsXXYborg makes an insistent address to the player as ironic comment on the myth of agency. The question as to whether we have meaningful control over our own existence, ludic or not, remains contingent and forms part of the foundation upon which PsXXYborg has been built. Videogames maintain an illusion of choice within representational form in which the player is offered superhuman abilities as reward for playing by the rules of the game. It is not radical to note that even in the most open of game worlds someone somewhere has made a decision as to how the world works.

Fragmenting the gaze

PsXXYborg is played on multiple screens, a touch-screen controller in the hand of the player co- joined to remote screen/s display unfolding gameplay. The insertion of an extra screen to the intimate connection between a player, the controller and her game disturbs said intimacy to productive ends. Directly connected to techniques of distanciation evident in other dramatic form (Diamond, 1997) the nested screens of PsXXYborg both fragment the object of play – where does the player look? - and challenges first-person game conventions by obstructing direct action. By distributing the game gaze across multiple sites and removing the gendered avatar as subject of player control PsXXYborg questions the widespread gendering of digital play experience.

Mirroring

A significant ongoing theme of PsXXYborg is the use of mirror imagery used to instill a sense in the player that all may not be as it appears. Delineated but inspired by other world voyages such as, "Alice's Adventures through the Looking Glass", PsXXYborg calls the player forward in to "The Mirror Land Forest" alluding to views from psychoanalysis as to the conception and development of self-image.

POLITICAL CODE

PsXXYborg has been developed on a basis of accessibility and shared knowledge. Web standards are open and publicly set, and specific technologies for development have been chosen based on their legibility, which is to say their public libraries of development information. This practice is political, as the web is no longer guaranteed to be open and accessible, or even basically legible, to all.

Basic legibility of public information is a concern primarily in the writings of Aaron Swartz and assorted members of the Net Neutrality movement. In his unfinished document "The Programmable Web,"[11] Swartz (2013) lays out the basic principal and difficulties of a legible, semantic Internet that can be coded by anyone, anywhere. PsXXYborg relies on these technologies, and is structured to be legible within its code, and predictable, despite not being released for play online (due mainly to bandwidth restrictions). These principals of legibility are a kind of grammar, which promotes the

idea that all people, not just some people, should be able to read and work with their technology. The underlying intent is one of literacy.

Literacy, or the ability to read, is associated with the ability to control one's world and one's destiny, an association attached to feminist theory in the seventies by Helene Cixous, who famously stated that women must write themselves into being (Cixous et al. 1976). This is as true in code as it is elsewhere; without performing a role and presenting work to the world, women cannot hope to have a say in how the world, which is now largely a written work, functions. Code is the writing that creates a material experience, and controls much of how the developed world will continue to develop. Without literacy, one cannot hope to have a vote in how this development occurs. We should have a role in the programmable web, least the web become the opaque property of people who would like to once again restrict literacy, and with it mobility, to the privileged classes.

The second reservation of PsXXYborg, or political statement, is the use of video over web at all. Video is a contested zone due to its ownership by legacy structures that change laws to reserve their copyright in court. This is a popular concern of neo-futurist writers such as Cory Doctorow, whose fictional text Pirate Cinema (2012) directly addresses the issue. Under American legislation, people can lose their Internet connections for unsubstantiated claims of copyright violation - "piracy" - and assorted misuse of video. Although Fair Use, protects them in practice, this becomes expensive to defend in court, with occasionally fatal consequences; people die for their debts, now. Information is a hotly contested zone.

The technology of PsXXYborg involves copying, remixing, altering, and moving through video footage as par for the course. This sort of motion has only recently become widely possible; previously, this practice would rely on a much more costly type of computer setup. As ever, cost is a barrier to participation that can be got around by sharing information; split up the "screens" required for the game, and we can project it anywhere, in any circumstance. The technology is light and, though presently optimized for a Mac will play on almost any technology capable of running the HTML5 standard.

At its heart, serving media to a polyphony of playback devices is a resistance to the increasing levels of copyright control in the West. Copyright wars have restricted our access to our own cultural history, whilst mash-up genres take advantage of Fair Use in order to create new original things out of old original things. There is a tier system to creation: use a recognizable property and you will probably not have control over what can be created with it. However, as Cory Doctorow famously points out in his supporting documents for the book "Little Brother" (2008)[12] it will never be technically more difficult to copy any property than it is today. The Internet works through making copies; things make other things.

We use the newest systems, created with massive capital to make serving content much easier, then shared free of charge in order to expand the influence of the company that has made the technology. On top of this foundation, PsXXYborg itself has been programmed to be open and legible, more exactly reusable. It can be changed to make something that is derived from the original at the discretion of those who engage the tools. This is important because it lets new things come forward quickly. It promotes learning from existing materials, which is the easiest way to learn to make any new thing.

CONCLUSION

> An ironic dream of a common language for women in the integrated circuit (Haraway 1991, 149).
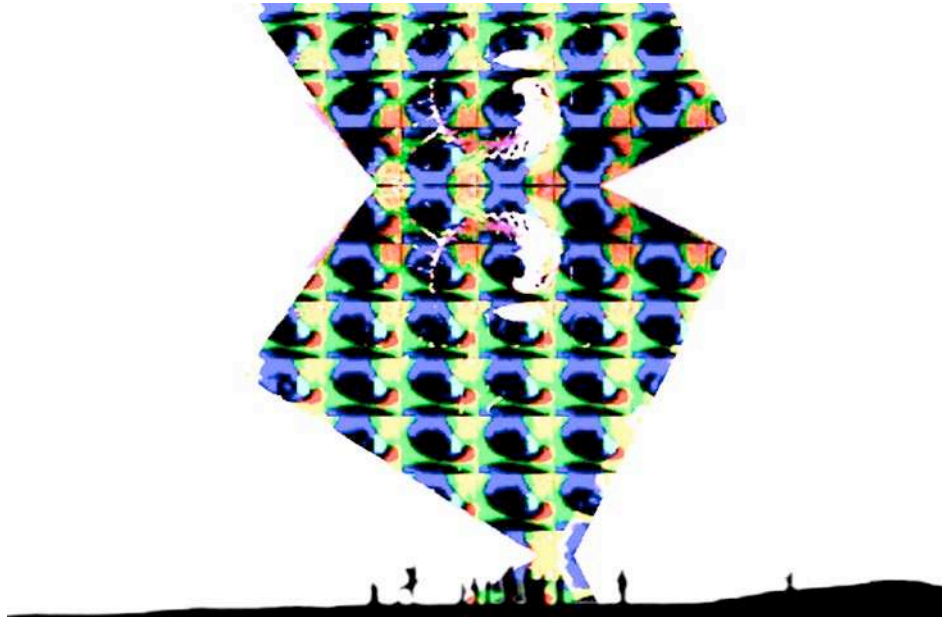
Figure 13: PsXXYborg still of audience silhouettes viewing the improbable.

As a research project PsXXYborg can be placed in a feminist theoretical tradition and explicitly draws on cyber-feminist playfulness in its approach to the intertwining of theory and praxis. Fully acknowledging the fragmentation of feminism across discipline and generation that has tainted the wider social perception of the feminist project PsXXYborg explores the possibilities of an open dialogue between theory and practice as one way of approaching feminist game-making.

This project hopes to open up a possibility space in which theoretical approaches can generate games and game making tools to broader benefit. This has more to do with opening to ongoing questioning rather than to suggest any singular, and reductive, view on how to answer the challenge at hand. Without making any definitive statements as to the existence of a specifically feminine voice in game-making PsXXYborg is interested in how a feminist approach to the process of game design and development might yield a series of conceptual tools, spaces and approaches that dilate – however temporarily – what we understand games to be.

ENDNOTES

[1] http://psxxyborg.com

[2] http://www.feministsingames.com, a research network led by Dr J Jenson of York University out of Toronto, Canada funded by SSHRC.

[3] See http://www.ludicjunk.com/fig/fig-funded-projects/ for a list of projects.

[4] See http://research.ocadu.ca/gameplay/home

[5] See http://lx.sysx.org/vnsmatrix.html

[6] See http://www.sysx.org/gashgirl/VNS/TEXT/PINKMANI.HTM

[7] Later developed for her monograph Critical Play (2009)

[8] It is worth noting here that some early efforts in feminist game studies aimed at identifying feminine play preferences, somewhat problematically adopting an essentialist position on women gamers (see Jenson and de Castell 2010).

[9] See http://queerarcade.tumblr.com/post/54195802116/psxxyborg-is-the-vision-of-artist-hannah-epstein

[10] See The Immoral Ms. Conduct at http://www.differentgames.org/hannah-leja-epstein-the-immoral-ms-conduct/

[11] See http://www.morganclaypool.com/doi/pdf/10.2200/S00481ED1V01Y201302WBE005

[12] See http://craphound.com/littlebrother/about/

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