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“It’s just part of being a person”— Sincerity, Support & Self Expression in Vignette Games

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ABSTRACT

Personal vignettes are encapsulated game works with minimal interactions, focused on aspects of lived experiences. Often created by under-represented games creators, they draw on techniques of poetry, art and theatre to tell diverse and complex stories in small spaces. This study explores the experiences of personal vignette creators and their creative processes. The study conducted a thematic analysis of 16 interviews with creators, focusing on how they engaged with their practice and their audiences. The findings suggest that facilitation, experimentation, disruption and expression are cornerstones of the vignette game ethos; a form of game creation under the creator's own terms, which utilises design *through* positive restriction, *as* a playful creativity and *for* self expression.

Keywords

Personal games, vignettes, DIY, self expression, design

INTRODUCTION

Within game design and scholarship, autobiography and its position in games has become an area of increasing interest, with a variety of approaches examining the application of game techniques to personal narratives (Haggis 2016); (Poremba 2007); (Werning 2017). Providing a potentially unique perspective on designing narrative and play, games about ourselves are growing in numbers and in popularity. Personal vignette games provide an ample field of study for the overlap of games and autobiography, as well as an opportunity to investigate the personal significance of intimate game design. This study aims to examine personal vignette games as both an act of creativity and a tool for disenfranchised creators, to reveal the principles and ethos behind the movement.

Scaffolding the work of autobiographical games studies are explorations of the emotionally persuasive (Isbister 2016), the empathetic (Belman and Flanagan 2010) and the eudaimonic potential of game spaces (Oliver et al. 2016) which explore a diverse range of narratives. Despite the ground covered on games as spaces for human growth and reflection, and while there are studies highlighting the benefits of reflective experiences in *play* (Mekler, Iacovides, and Bopp 2018), there is less work on reflective experiences in *making*. Some investigations into designing reflective games do agree that context and intention are important components of reflective game design (Goodine and Khaled 2019), but a creator-focused rather than object-focused approach may close some gaps between our examination of personal *games*

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and the experiences of personal *design*. Such a contextual approach is taken in this paper.

RELATED WORK

The Vignette Form in Games

In the context of games, the title ‘vignette’ is an extension of the term as used in art, film, literature, poetry and others. A vignette generally comprises of “a brief evocative description, account, or episode”, or an image “which fades into its background without a definite border” (Oxford Living Dictionary). These principles translate into the digital games that share the moniker—they too are short, expressive experiences lacking clear edges. Vignette games briefly highlight specific moments, feelings or senses of character.

Game designers and scholars have also discussed the vignette game along the principles identified above. In 2008, Ian Bogost dedicated one of his Persuasive Games columns to exploring the game *Hush* (Jamie Antonisse and Devon Johnson, 2017) as an example of “how vignette might be used successfully in games” (Bogost 2008)—although much of the article criticises overly mechanical and indelicate interactions overshadowing the character of the vignette. Among independent games communities the term begins to surface noticeably in 2014, rooted by developer Nina Freeman after she began discussing the nature of her own personal works. Freeman identified the 2014 games *Ladylike* and *How Do You Do It?* (Nina Freeman, Emmett Butler, Dalia Coss and Marina Kittaka, 2014) as personal vignettes inspired by her own childhood experiences (Ellison 2015). Relating her work closely to works of confessional poetry, Freeman described this style of game design as the intention to tell a story in minimal ways—*Ladylike* and *How Do You Do It?* offer us a snippet of conversation during a car journey and a moment of sexual curiosity with Barbie dolls respectively. By narrowing the experience to one scene, one aspect of character, or one memory, the vignette game can then offer a rich atmospheric depth to the narrative fragment it depicts (Saltsman 2015).

Vignettes as games, then, like their siblings in other media, bring us brief evocative descriptions without definite borders. In this focused yet narratively untethered form, vignette games seem almost primarily defined by their absences—they often forgo the conventions of context, back-story, narrative resolution, or linearity. They provide a snapshot of a narrative without explicitly advancing or resolving it and often decline to provide the player with a wider context of the game world. They rarely feature traditional videogame objectives, challenges or rewards (such as scoring points, win/fail states, or quest lines to follow) and often abstain even from a clear final goal or narrative ‘ending’ (Boudreault 2017), in favour of a momentary atmosphere. In emulating and adapting poetic and artistic techniques from elsewhere, vignette games open up possibilities for transgressive design approaches and unconventional narratives in play.

Self Portrayal, Poetics and Vignette Dynamics

Where vignettes provide space for unconventional storytelling methods, they make room tell unconventional kinds of stories—an appealing opportunity for personal experiences outside the conventional norm. A range of complex, conflicting inner dialogues find representation through the evocative yet unspecific vignette form. Mary Flanagan’s *[domestic]* (2003), for example, “uses a software engine normally used to generate violent first-shooter video games” to present a collage of memories to explore. The game uses genuine photographic images of the author’s past, and provocative text is displayed around the environment (Poremba 2007), creating a museum of self and a space for performative reenactment. Sadie Lee’s *What Now*

(2014) uses the escalation of a glitch aesthetic and a slowly imposed restriction of the game space to portray the experiences of anxiety disorders, depression, and trauma that Lee describes as “the accumulation of a lot of my emotions”. To evoke a specific lived experience, the game takes place solely in a room which is almost unbearable to navigate; aesthetic glitches, a shrinking field of view and the dissonant sound leave players trapped in a deeply unpleasant space.

Larger and more complex games are also borrowing from vignette methodologies to share personal experiences. *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016) tells a tale of illness and grief through a series of short vignette scenes both light-hearted and tragic. The game recalls the authors coming to terms with their son’s terminal cancer prognosis, and the vignettes come together to create an effective, often abstract experience of helplessness and loss of control (Schott 2017). This is not to imply that vignettes deal exclusively in realms of trauma: Siobhan Gibson’s *FitBitch* (2015), for example, presents a bold and bright flip-book style tale about deciding whether or not to attend a morning exercise class; Marlise Chu’s *Pick It Up* (2017) sees us fight frantically with a sibling to grab food from a table in front of us. Both of these vignette games offer us a strong sense of the author’s character through minimal interaction and a small moment. Whether they explore a specific part of an author’s life story, or are more loosely crafted around the idiosyncratic thoughts, behaviours and experiences of the author, vignette games offer a great deal of room for nuanced narrative despite their inherent limitations of size and scope.

DIY Games: Culture, Creation and Craft

Vignettes and other personal games have found the traction largely in the realm of DIY Games—games made using free tools and assets, often by those not traditionally trained in game development. To understand the games in context (with relation to their authors, their players, and their political intentions) requires a brief examination of DIY cultures and their influence on digital media. DIY crafts frequently centre around *social creativity*, exchanging and publishing creations, extending beyond the networked practice of self-producing and sharing artifacts to provide “an emerging mode of collective identification for many people invested in the idea and practice of autonomous cultural production” (Kempson 2015).

Social creativity is seen when creators transform intangible relations and social bonds into reconciled, tangible artifacts—such as games—enabling an assertion of self into market-centric world spaces (Chen and Chandler 2010). The construction and free swapping of zines (self published, miniature magazines), for example, circumvents the traditional publishing and purchasing modes of consumerist culture. Doing so empowers individuals to insert themselves into media narratives and redefine their positions within existing power structures. In this act, creators establish groups and provide each other with a better understanding of power, representation and access—narrowing gaps between those who control media and those with the power and possibilities to create it (Jenkins 2008); (Kafai and Peppler 2011).

This culture of DIY groups, personal expression and social activism is well established in game creation. There are a number of tools providing potential creators with access to digital creativity while removing many or all of the technological barriers that may hinder the novice game designer. It is possible now to make games and distribute them online with no programming experience required (Anthropy 2012). Chris Klimas’ *Twine* tool, for example, is a free online editor for interactive fiction which allows created games to be exported to files widely compatible with web browsers. It provides users with a visual user interface and a reference manual that focus not on code and technical capabilities, but on aesthetic and the value of digital storytelling. Through these approaches, Twine has fostered a sprawling

community of creators putting out a consistently personal style of creative text-based games (Friedhoff 2013).

Beyond the internal support of the small games communities, active efforts are being made to encourage people previously uninvolved with games to provide their own voices. Events designed with ease of participation in mind—the 2016 debut of the *Flatgame jam*, for example—are encouraging hobbyist participation in game making. *Flatgame* participants are provided a complete Unity project, already set up with scenes and movement controls, and a game can be made by dragging and dropping art into the project. Creators are encouraged to base their games on a memory or event from the past year, and in the hosts' own words, “all you need to make a game and to present an idea is a couple hours, a laptop, and some markers” (Dreamfeel and Hackett 2016).

Creativity-focused, approachable game jams in particular have become a significant component of the efforts to build larger communities of alternative game makers. The focus of many of these jams is not on the polish or technical achievements of the games, but on building diverse and empowering networks of creators from new voices—who will share their accumulated knowledge and support one another in their efforts (Westecott 2013). While game jams can be used to develop technical or interpersonal skills for industry environments, “the different modes of practice, lack of commercial focus and playful designed constraints make [game jams] a practice in their own right, independent to the needs of industry” (Locke, et al., 2015); an ethos overlapping that of the DIY crafts cultures discussed earlier.

RESEARCH AIMS

This study aims to examine the creative and emotional experiences of people making personal vignette games. It looks at the ways creators engage with their games, tools, audiences and selves. This study specifies an interest in “personal” rather than “autobiographical” games, specifically due to the less rigid genre implications of the former. This choice was made in an effort to include a broader range of works—creators may not have identified highly symbolic or abstracted works as strictly autobiographical, for example, despite the games being self-representative.

The aim of the analysis was to capture the experiences of the creators throughout their creative process. Studies in the field of personal games and experimental design often focus on the games as objects (or on specific applications of tools and techniques). Many offer analysis from an entirely external perspective, interested in reading the game text as an artifact through the lens of an imagined player. While there is great value in the critical analysis of personal games and the vignette game as a form, this research aims instead at the processes, people, and ecosystems that support and sustains their creation.

These interviews attempt to centre creative practice and communities in the dialogue around the games they create, contributing to the ongoing conversations of inclusion, diversity and expectation in game creation. By exploring the common threads between the authors' experiences, this study hopes to provide insight into the personal and social effects of autobiographical game creation, publishing and play.

METHODS

Overview

Participants were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews, to obtain rich exploratory insight into the experience of personal games practices. Interviews offered the opportunity to be more adaptive to the creators' varying interests and

contexts than set surveys; as the nature of the study was primarily interested in personal experience, rather than the game events themselves, the ability to investigate each participant's unique path was deemed to be beneficial to achieving richer data. To reduce potential negative interview experiences for participants a list of various online support networks was provided alongside their consent forms, and care was taken to continuously check in with participants as new topics were discussed.

Participants

16 semi-structured interviews were held with participants who had self-identified as creators of personal vignette games. Around half of the participants were approached directly to request an interview, due to the interviewer's familiarity with their published works (which the creators had publicly described as "personal" games). Some of these games were sourced by browsing content tags and search results similar to 'personal games' on sites such as itch.io and Twitter. This was to ensure that games with media attention were not the only ones considered. The remaining participants were recruited online via a post on a personal Twitter account. Respondents needed to fit only the self-selecting criteria of "personal vignette creator", and the ability to hold the interview in English. The respondents' games did not have to be completed projects or published and publicly available, although potential candidates were filtered to exclude those who had offered example games falling definitively outside the broad category of "vignette" (such as long-form roleplaying games).

Participants were selected across a range of backgrounds, gender identities and locations—they were, however, predominantly western creators. Contact with non-western creators was limited by language constraints, difficulty negotiating time zones for interviews, and the nature of pre-existing contact networks. Nearly all participants self-identified during their interviews as a marginalised creator; most participants spoke on one or more matters of gender and sexuality, health issues, or trauma. Participants' levels of active involvement with games development were varied, ranging from full-time professional game developers and designers, 'hobbyist' creators and interactive artists, to at least one participant no longer involved with game creation of any kind.

Although anonymous interview data was the standard for the study, all participants chose instead to waive anonymity in favour of being named alongside their works and discussions. To allow for better context to the findings from the interviews, each participant has been listed alongside a handful of their personal games works (Table 1. Authors and Games).

Name	Games Discussed
Emilie Reed	<i>Roadtrip, dead wife game, oh no, & others</i>
Jennifer Raye	<i>Boa Retina, Imperishable Memories, I Locked Myself In My Room For Three Weeks And Just Looked At Anime Smut Online</i>
Nina Freeman	<i>Cibele, Ladylike, We Met In May, & others</i>
Becky Leigh	<i>A little birdy & others</i>
Sam	<i>Iapetus, Night Drive</i>
Rose	<i>Fill The World With Your Rainbow, My Name Is Rose</i>
Jenny Jiao Hisa	<i>Consume Me, and i made sure to hold your head sideways, chat with me & others</i>
Cel Davison	<i>i've been late, Friary Road, No Longer Home</i>
Vaida	<i>Where the punks at & others</i>
Marie Claire LeBlanc Flanagan	<i>Other Hands, undertow, & others</i>
Florencia Rumpel Rodriguez	<i>Doom Fetito, Like Civilized People, & others</i>
Alex Camilleri	<i>Memoir en Code: Reissue</i>
Hannah Rose	<i>Small Talk, Personal Space</i>
Becca	<i>Tutorial: Get Chunks, Talk to Your Friend The Bird</i>
Amy	<i>Mushrooms red as meat, Four Corners</i>
Lisa Janssens	<i>Reason</i>

Table 1: Authors and games discussed

Interviews

Interviews were held over Skype or face-to-face and lasted between 35 to 60 minutes. Interviews explored methods of creation (design habits, tools, etc.), motivations for making and sharing, and the games themselves. Personal creative experiences are, by their nature, personal; as this study is interested in the creators' experiences and perceptions, participants were not provided with strict definitions for areas of interest (such as 'game', 'narrative', or 'mechanic'). Instead participants were encouraged to describe their experiences using their own terms. Each interview began by establishing the creator's history with games and their initial forays into creating them, before moving on to open discussions. Topics included the nature of their games, creation processes, perceptions of player presence and overall experiences making and sharing personal games. Top level prompt questions such as "Would you

say you create for yourself or for players?” or “Who do you think the player is, in your games?” allowed participants to reflect on their works after the fact. Interweaving self, process, game and audience-focused questions aimed to make space for complex (potentially contradictory) relationships with personal experiences and game design to emerge. A number of the interviews touched on games developed in response to traumatic events or distressing personal experiences; some of these discussions were provided for additional context to the analysis, but have been omitted from explicit inclusion in the findings by request.

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews was conducted by the interviewing researcher to identify and interpret themes, as codified by Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke 2006). After manual transcription and additional familiarisation with the dataset, codes capturing both semantic content (i.e. the participants’ spoken words) and latent concepts (i.e. participants’ assumptions underlying the semantic content) were developed.

The analysis of the data was iterative, with each developed set of codes and themes applied to the dataset as a whole to examine the overall fit. Due to the interpretive nature of the analysis and the required knowledge base for rich insight, this reflexive approach is not concerned with inter-rater reliability (Morse 1997). However, the codes and themes developed by the first author were discussed with the second author at each stage of revision.

These revisions gradually shifted the coding from broad codes (such as “low expectations”) and person-specific codes (such as “friendly [local] game group”) toward more descriptive conceptual codes, such as “supportive creative communities”. In later iterations of the coding process, these codes were grouped into more complex themes, e.g. “access to safer creation spaces”, and regrouped to explore potential alternative connections. In the final stages, the provisional themes were applied to the coded data set for final fit and adjustments. The thematic analysis produced 67 codes in total, which led to 7 provisional themes, and 5 final themes.

FINDINGS

The final set of themes highlight 5 main motivations and methods of the personal vignette game ethos. These broadly fell into the areas of *facilitated game creation*, *playing with form*, *managed terms of engagement*, *challenging perceptions of games*, and *seeing and being seen*. It should be noted that each of these themes has elements of both motivation and method, and that 5 themes are not discrete or mutually exclusive categories. Themes are discussed alongside selected illustrative quotes from creators.

1. Facilitated Game Creation

The first theme centres the literal act of making. It focuses on how the barriers to tools, ideas, and support can be reduced. Paths around prohibitive factors of game creation, such as cost or knowledge assumptions, were frequently discussed; creators mentioned bypassing these barriers with free design tools and self publishing platforms. Time cost was also identified as a potential hindrance, with rapid creation and results highlighted as beneficial. Free, simplified online tools such as *Bitsy*, *Twine*, and *Flickgame* were frequently mentioned as facilitated gateways into creation, and their use overlapped heavily with the desire for positive constraints:

“I specifically chose bitsy because I felt like I needed to limit myself to get anything done. Trying to make a Unity game for instance, there's like an infinite number of things you can do, you know? Well, I guess it's

true anything but you know what I mean? There's too many choices and I was getting tangled up in them.” (Becca)

This desire for lowered barriers also presented with regard to audience engagement. The open digital marketplace *itch.io* saw numerous mentions, and the majority of the games discussed were published for free (or with a ‘pay what you want’ option):

“games were a way of bypassing that real [monetary and access] restriction that's on [installation] artwork, and also of making it much more accessible. Because it's not then in a gallery for two weeks. It's on the internet for as long as until some update decides that nothing is gonna work anymore, which is longer than at least two weeks.” (Amy)

Tangible barriers such as expensive design software or lack of training were presented alongside more conceptual barriers, such as the availability of safer spaces to create. Community support featured heavily here, with some game jams, discord servers and local minority-focused courses or events being named as spaces welcoming new and unconventional game creators. These spaces were praised for community support, exchanging information or ideas, and forging social connections:

“I have a group chat with some friends, and usually that's the first place where my games get shared. We all share our games with each other, because we all make things in the chat. So it's always like ‘Hey I did this thing. What do you think? If you find any bugs let me know!’. And we give each other feedback, it's really nice.” (Rumpel)

Local, friendship-based, minority-focused or DIY spaces were often mentioned as a welcome contrast to experiences of community gatekeeping and creative isolation within the larger games and creative industry, with many of the participants also praising the low pressure environments they fostered. Difficulties avoiding commercial expectations outside of these smaller community groups was another common topic of discussion.

2. Playing with Form

Where barriers to the technology, creativity or knowledge required to create games were lowered or removed, so too were rigid ideas of design best practice. Creators expressed design motivations strongly linked to exploratory creativity, and experimenting with the boundaries of their games. Shared aims were to explore past the perceived limits of the form, content, and the tools of a game, in order to make something new:

“The thing that I would want the player to feel at the end of it would be like "wow, this was different". And I know this can have the connotation of "this was shit", but at the same time, to me it was not important to feel like the players loved the game, the players hated the game. It was more like making the player feel like they played something new.” (Alex)

In regard to both the form their games took and the act of creating, motivations were frequently rooted in curiosity—such as when aiming to translate poetry skills to the format of games, “I wanted to see if I could, and then it worked which was exciting” (Nina), or the desire to take a game design rule and “twist it around” (Lisa) to see new results.

Many creators spoke of self taught skills acquired during this interest-led process of making, and of process directed creation where the context of each moment shaped the games they produced. Led strongly by intuitive or impulsive design methods,

creators were often seeking a way to “express an idea” (Jenny) not fully conceptualised yet, consciously or subconsciously trying to emulate lived experiences:

“I actually never did think about that, it's just one of those things where a lot of people like me specifically are conditioned not to take up space. Not to make things emotionally about you. So I made a game, possibly unconsciously, about taking up space.” (Rose)

Form and interaction were a primary focus of the experimental nature of creation. Poetic interactions and unexpected behaviours were favoured, with games often featuring unclear or missing endings. Creators spoke of playful manipulation of game space, player perspectives and senses of time—attempting to find what felt right by intuition:

“I wasn't thinking about it when I was making it, but I think I was playing around with the idea of being a ghost and like drifting through these places, how the time blurs in memory.” (Cel)

Traditional dramatic tensions feature very little, in favour of arc-less and timeless narratives, or representing brief mundane moments—“you can flick through little channels of music, just look at things. It's a game about wasting time” (Hannah). Player-focused spaces were swapped for de-prioritised players or openly hostile mechanics. Whatever focus they took, player entities were a complex issue; the space the player occupied was often a fuzzy or uncertain role, left undefined even for the creators—many creators were certain the character in their games *was* them, while simultaneously being certain that it was *not*. Some creators spoke of intentional distancing between the player and the game's author-persona, and most creators mentioned an awareness of needing to balance their games' personal aspects with their own privacy and agency:

“I want to make it clear that this is a personal experience. This is not like a role-playing game. I feel like it's more, sometimes it's someone who's kind of looking around, or sometimes it's just kind of someone who sits back and just observes what's happening, in a very carefully removed way, but while still allowing them to kind of get close up and personal with it.[...] I think I don't want them to be the narrator of the story, but I want them to be able to still kind of put themselves in the shoes of someone.” (Vaida)

3. Managed Terms of Engagement

With regards to both finished games and the act of game development itself, there was value in the creators' ability to set their own terms of engagement. This theme linked very heavily with the safer spaces that were discussed in relation to creating games, as much of the concern over audience interactions stemmed from distrust or fear of “typical” games culture. Creators spoke in terms of curated audiences, and choosing specific small circles of friends, family or interest groups to share their work with. Some background worry over overlapping with general games audiences was mentioned, with the concept of a general games audience being “kind of scary sometimes” (Lisa). This was especially true where game content was centered on negative or difficult experiences.

This feeling of distrust extended beyond fear of mainstream games audiences and their expectations—a number of creators touched on concerns about the tendency for “empathy tourism” in personal game spaces, and of experimental game scenes being co-opted by professional or academic movements. Of particular concern were the expectations of representation, where “if you expect a game to be a representative

experience it's always going to let someone down" (Emilie). Similar worries occurred over the intensive policing around games exploring marginalised creators' experiences:

"I think especially as a queer creator, there's the tendency for, I don't know how to phrase it, harsher critical analysis? It seems like media made by marginalised people is looked at with a much more critical eye, and I think it does need critique, but my worry is how that can be limiting what people then create." (Cel)

Creators described their efforts to appropriately set expectations through game aesthetics or paratextual elements (such as announcement tweets, *itch.io* game store pages, physical objects/displayed text at event installations, or how they described the game in person). This management of audience expectations extended as far as how the game genre or type was identified. From "interactives" and "vignettes" to "trashgames" and "smol games", careful negotiation of qualifying terms was a noticeable presence. The deliberate *use* or *avoidance* of the term 'game' was a common talking point, the conflict between the two choices (and the implications of both) often occurring not just across the interviews but from a single creator. Participants explained that the unusual format of their games could require some upfront acknowledgement:

"I describe my games as micro games or trash games generally, because I think describing them in that way kind of puts people in the right mindset to accept that, if that makes sense? They are a little bit rough around the edges, they're unpolished. They're made in a short space of time for a short burst of playing and that's what they are. I'm not pretending, I have no illusions otherwise" (Becky)

It may be important to note that this desire to manage audiences did not extend to a desire for full authorial control; most creators acknowledged that they have little desire to explicitly control how their work is interpreted. What many did express an interest in was to see their work earnestly engaged with and not immediately dismissed as weird—"as soon as you kind of have any kind of surreal imagery people can and take that stuff a little bit frivolously" (Amy). Goals of *respectful* engagement were the priority here, creators largely holding that any player's interpretation of their work is valid, providing it comes from a place of considerate good faith.

4. Challenging Perceptions of 'Games'

While personal vignette games as a movement may be aiming to distance themselves from the larger games culture, they are not created in total isolation from its influence. Creators spoke not only of being aware of expectations about how games 'should' play, but of purposefully pushing against these expectations to "expand what games are" (Vaida). Much of the experimental nature of their creation stemmed from personal drives, but many creators spoke equally of more political motivations—the desire to publicly challenge what makes a 'real game':

"I like the idea of like my experiences still being called games because that's just kind of where a lot of it comes from. And also I like the idea of just changing that definition just a little bit like, you know games can also be like an experience." (Jenn)

This challenge of public perception was not just a defiant one, but a supportive one; beyond confronting the notion of what makes a game, creators wanted to provide implicit creative permission to anyone seeking to do the same. A recurring topic was the "moment of realisation"—many unconnected participants spoke of the works of

other interviewed creators—where seeing an unusual game work inspired them to create their own. This often matured into a desire to provide permission to others:

“I see so many people putting themselves down because they're like, oh I can't code or I can't do X, so nobody cares about my games. And I'm like, it doesn't matter who cares about your games, it matters how you feel about them! So I sometimes hope that me putting myself out there makes them feel like they can put themselves out there.” (Becky)

Beyond broadening the genres of game and the ways of creating them, there is also some desire to see the *use* of games change. Creators spoke of making games as gifts for friends or partners, as in-jokes to be shared like memes, or as cathartic releases without serious games implications:

“I generally try to stay away from serious games because that means that there has to be like a clear solution, and I wanted to leave it more open to interpretation.” (Lisa)

5. Seeing and Being Seen

Featuring significantly as both a motivation and a method of practice, the concept of being known underpinned the majority of conversations. Loose, impressionistic desires—such as sharing feelings or a sense of a space—were identified, and tied strongly to hopes of ‘seeing and being seen’ (an extension of the self toward others, with little goal beyond the act itself). The creators spoke of attempting to make artistic statements that aligned with their “emotional landscapes” or ineffable experiences. Game spaces here were used to express sentiments beyond words, which creators struggled to conceptualise through other mediums:

“It was like my mental process of how I was processing those feelings that I hadn't actually been able to put into words, and so I didn't really want to use words. Alright, I use words, but you know, I didn't want to just directly describe those feelings. You arrive at that through the gameplay.” (Becca)

Though these fragments of self were sometimes formed into purposefully inward-focused reflective experiences, aspects of “creating a space” or “curating an aesthetic” served as more of an *extension* of the self outwards. This stemmed both from a knowingly self-indulgent “making for myself” motivation—creating to explore the creator’s own interests and desires—and of utilising some core sense of self to guide design work:

“I'd like to hope that I'm sort of funny, and my work is just an extension of that, you know? Like how I want to interact with people. I like making people laugh. So I guess it just feels natural to be like, oh, I'm gonna make something that will also put a smile on someone else's face.” (Jenny)

Often these desires sprang from easy access to self as a convenient subject. Several creators mused that beyond their personal vignette games, all their other work is self-representation of some kind. The reach for a subject to hand often instigated or followed an immediate need to say or make *something*. This need manifested as an instinctual and driven creative process, feeding into the impulsive design practices of making:

“I make my games because I need to. It's not really like for myself or for anyone else, it's like a thing that needs to come out. Like when you're feeling a really intense feeling and you just kind of need that howl or

scream, you know or laugh or I don't know, cry. But they need to come out.” (Marie)

DISCUSSION

Where reflective approaches have begun to consider the possibilities of game design as an ongoing dialogue with the self (Harrer and Schoenau-Fog 2015), and as a practice in which the context of the creator is key to uncovering the tacit knowledge at work (Marcotte and Khaled 2017), there is a gap in this understanding of game design when it comes to DIY vignette games. By centering the exploratory, creative ethos of the personal vignette in the context of its communities and creators—by acknowledging and respecting individual motivation and circumstance—we begin to understand the benefits of a personal, democratized ethos of design.

This discussion, then, considers the interview findings through three facets of the game design process (design *through* restriction, design *as* playful creativity, and design *for* self-expression) within the shared design ethos to engage on the creator's own terms. From careful selection of community, through to when to call a game “a game”, self-direction and the importance of personal choice underpins much of the creative process.

Game design through positive restrictions

These findings highlight potential areas in which creators may bounce off initial attempts at the creative process, due to unexpected or frustrating barriers. The theme of *facilitated game creation* outlines a number of stumbling blocks; technical struggles, assumed knowledge, lack of community or poor audience/mentor reception of early works were all noted as prohibitive to unplanned and impulsive creativity. Some constraints, though, acted not as a barrier, but as a buffer to being overwhelmed by the creative process. The frequent praises of limited design tools such as *Twine*, *Puzzlescript*, *Bitsy* and *Flickgame*, for example, describe beneficial positive constraints which echo the creative appeal of those tools which Compton coins as “casual creators”. These are tools that support autotelic creativity—that is, creativity as its own purpose (Compton and Mateas 2015)—allowing creators to experience joy in the act of making.

While the discussion of positive constraints as part of *facilitated game creation* may seem counter to the idea of an impulsive and experimental design ethos, Compton's ‘no blank canvas’ concept makes a case for the two desires co-existing; she argues that a restricted creative space scaffolds the user's understanding of what is possible. Alongside constrained tools, *restricted* creative spaces offer a similar positive scaffolding experiences. Arguments have been made that the structure and focus on development themes found in many game jams aid in fostering creativity (Locke et al. 2015), a possibility reflected in the discussion of game jams throughout these interviews (the monthly “*bitsy jam*” hosted by the tool's creator, Adam Le Doux, being a particularly high frequency code).

Game design as playful creativity

The provision of positive restriction is a major component of providing approachable, playful design. Where the initial possibilities are reduced, creative potential can be met, and a focus on *playing with form* and *challenging perceptions of games* becomes possible. Much like Anthropy's exploration of games as an extension of subversive zine culture (Anthropy 2012), personal vignette creators represent part of a radical larger games community encouraging exchange, destabilising the perceived conventions of creation, and reimagining the potential of the medium. The exploratory, intuitive motivations position the act of making as part of the play—an autotelic creativity driven by experimentation, experience and playfulness. Emerging

from these motivations is an extension of personal and communal identity, built around playful creativity.

We see this drive for radical, playful creativity reflected in the tools emerging around, and perhaps in response to, this autotelic culture. The *electric zine maker* (Nathalie Lawhead, 2019), which describes itself as both an ‘art toy’ and a ‘playful piece of freeware’, is a messy digital space in which creators can design folded one-page zines for printing. The tool, which promises more “game like” interaction in the future, is heavily animated, colourful and aims to be “sweet, playful, disarming, and explorative”. Positively received at a variety of game-centric events and spaces, *electric zine maker* exemplifies the desire to play with tools; pushing the boundaries of an object, focusing on the joy of making with a tool that is fun to explore. The relationship between personal vignettes and the tools used to create them share this ethos—playful creativity shapes the artifact and the tools in equal measure, and is both a means and an end of the process.

Game design for self-expression

The changes in engagement with game making tools and practices discussed above herald the slow shifts in perceptions of “value” sought by many personal vignette creators—a drift (or an active push) away from a consumerist standpoint, and a repositioning of “value” into a personal, social and cultural significance instead. Creators spoke mostly of self-focused and practice based needs. The ambivalent stance many creators took on creating simple solutions, or making games to make explicit statements, is reminiscent of the ethos of many queer games cultures and their related studies:

“The forms of identity, desire, intimacy, and disruption that we are drawn to in games are not surface level representations of difference. They do not promise, in uninterrogated terms, to make the cultural landscape of video games a more “diverse” place. Nor do they strive simply for increased representation and inclusion, drawing marginalized subjects into the existing hegemonies of video games. Instead, they challenge norms.” (Ruberg et al. 2018)

The focus for personal vignette creators, then, lies not in molding or co-opting the vignette medium to fit grander scales; instead it is in producing something authentic of the self, and learning to value the cultural and creative works as they are. This is especially evident in the managed terms of engagement that guide the negotiation of terms and audience; an ongoing attempt to make games with unique and personal appeal, without being criticised by an audience for not meeting their expectations. The new lexicon of game-types allows for a careful mediation of creator intent and audience assumptions, where the games can exist as they are outside the general ideal of ‘a game’. This serves both to express the creator’s ideals for the game (seen in terms such as ‘trashgames’ and ‘smolgames’), as well as to signify some of their complicated relationship with the larger “games scene” through the conscious choice to distance themselves from it.

There was little discussion of personal recognition as a motivation for making, beyond that of being seen or valued through a lens of their choosing. Personal vignettes put aside the idea of the teaching tool, the visionary auteur, or the independent games masterpiece, and instead seem to foster a self-focused, self-reflective, playful creativity for their creators. With low barriers to entry and strong buffers to support experimentation and self-expression, they offer a quiet everyday revolution of game creation being re-envisioned, repurposed and reclaimed.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of personal vignette creators such as these make an argument for deeper investigation into experimental, transgressive and personal stories from a process-first perspective—examining vignette dynamics as emergent and context-shaped elements of design. The establishment of the medium within safer creation spaces, through free tools and DIY-style communities also reinforces existing arguments for prioritising *inclusion* in creative spaces over *representation*, creating spaces for people to playfully engage with their own personal dialogue. This may require the continued shift to expand what the term “videogame” permits—an important aspect of disruptive design identified here. In particular there is an argument to be made for expanding our notion of eudaimonic experiences in games beyond profound and teachable moments, and into brief and playful snapshots of human connection for its own sake.

We also see in these interviews an inherent value to smallness—as a design approach, an ethos and an expectation. From casual creators and self publishing to game jams and gift exchanges, we may benefit from smaller spaces that encourage creativity through reducing the overwhelming vastness of potential, and the creative abyss of large-scale game development. There is much to encourage us into further investigation of creative tools and spaces built around the notions of approachability, community and imperfection. Personal vignettes creators offer up sincere, inventive, honest games; “reaching out to touch” (Marie) through mediated game spaces. They speak to the value of human connection, and of being heard, through the mediums that allow us to express ourselves playfully and meaningfully. They remind us that to hear clearly, we must be open to novel ways of speaking; and perhaps most importantly, that we must provide the tools to amplify those pushed to the margins of our craft.

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