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Research-creation at the crossroad between game production and game research. How do the design of a roguelite deckbuilder and queer games studies fuel each other?

Gabrielle Lavenir

Hélène Sellier

Hello everybody.

We are delighted to be here with you today and discuss how game studies and design can meet in fruitful ways. We will present how research-creation “played out” in the development of a game, *Robots & Theatre* (title is a work in progress), a roguelite deckbuilder whose design is informed by queer theories and epistemologies.

Before getting into it, let us tell you who we are and where we speak from. We are both part of *The Seed Crew*, a small indie game studio from the South of France that creates “games for change”, that is, games that aim to positively contribute to social change. Hélène has been part of The Seed Crew since 2020 as an artist-researcher working on interactive narratives and narrative design. Gabrielle joined the studio earlier this year as a researcher, with a focus on reception studies and UX research. Finally, one significant characteristic of the studio is its work organization: the design process is collective, in the sense that all team members are invited to all design meetings, whatever their job title. As a result, and even if designers have the final say on design decisions, the game features are discussed by the team as a whole.

The studio has produced two games before *Robots & Theatre*, which is set to come out in early 2024. The first game is also the studio’s flagship project. *RecovR* is a game designed to foster discussion and exchanges about various forms of discrimination, and it is used in companies for HR training. The studio’s second game, *Alix & Yanis – The Hamster’s Disappearance*, talks about disability and ablism and is geared towards schoolchildren.

And today, we are going to use the studio’s third game to talk about the interaction of games research and design. In line with the conference’s topic, we want to highlight the role of research in game production and the need of game production for research. We argue that research-creation (Gosselin, 2006), its methods and ethos, can bridge the gap between game studies and game design. Looking at the development of *Robots & Theatre* over the past year, we show how different types of research-creation can be part of the life of a game studio. Even “fundamental” research is enriched by practical design problems and, in turn, broadens the perspectives of the creative process.

In a word, research-creation ambitions to enmesh theory and practice, the conceptual and the experiential, in order to bring about a subjective, sensory relationship with knowledge. Research and creation are conducted together, in a cyclical, iterative process. There is an alternance between phases of action and reflection that sustain each other. In Chapman & Sawchuk’s widely-used categorization, there are four types of research-creation:

- Research for creation
- Research from creation
- Creative presentations of research
- Creation as research

Nowadays, research-creation is not a discipline, but a multitude of practices, according to Louis-Claude Paquin and Cynthia Noury (2018).

Research-creation is applied to a variety of objects, including video games.

Among research-creation projects, some focus on their object as media rather than art. Louis-Claude Paquin and Cynthia Noury identify several criteria for media research-creation, including:

- A reflection on media processes
- Action and creation are collective
- The object is valued in media circuits (e.g. on broadband radio) rather than the artistic field (e.g. art galleries)

At *The Seed Crew*, research-creation is anchored in this approach. It is also embedded in a company and a cultural industry, with the ensuing financial, material and social implications.

To support and illustrate our argument, we study the development of a game created by our studio, using a method inspired by Louis-Claude Paquin's "récit de pratique" (2019). This can be loosely translated as "narrating artistic practice", in the sense of retracing the creative process. To do so, we consulted design documentation, research documents (at all stages), tracking tools and calendars, as well as Discord conversations on the studio's server. Drawing on Paquin's approach, but also on methods such as participant observation and collective auto-ethnography (Bourguignon & Boeck, 2022), we have established an analytical distance with our material. The analysis identifies key events and important themes in order to understand how research-creation works on the ground. Using the studio's latest game as a case study, we explain how the concrete design of a roguelite deckbuilder and a theoretical inquiry on queer games fuel each other.

In a word, *Robots & Theatre* is:

- a solo roguelite deckbuilder where players are robots trying to save a theatre by putting on plays... with a distinctly machinistic twist
- a visual identity inspired by *Art Nouveau* and *Art Deco*

The interest in queer approaches and queer games did not appear in a vacuum.

We find mentions of queer theory and queer game studies in the Discord very early in the studio's history. The post you see on the screen dates as far back as 2021, two years before the development of *Robots & Theatre* started. At the time, H el ene was already working with Laura Goudet on queer games and sharing her reflections with the studio's team. On the screen, you can see a post with Bo Ruberg's canonical definition, for instance, which has become a common point of reference for everyone in the studio whenever we talk about queer-ing our game. You can also see that it is not always the researcher who initiates the discussion (with a screen capture of a producer sharing an article on queer games), and that theoretical discussions are not always easy (as the dismayed gif in the third screen capture suggests). But the idea of "making games queer" is now familiar for everyone in the studio, and the topic "naturally" finds its way into the development of *Robots & Theatre*.

There was another pre-existing research topic that shaped the early design of the game: robots as the Other. H el ene had already explored questions related to robots, IA, machines,

and the relationship they have with humans in other projects. This had spawned conference talks (with Laura Goudet on “Artificial Intelligence and the Equilibrium of Failure”, presented in 2021) but also games, such as *Lundi 4 décembre 2084*, a game created during a game jam with another member of the studio (Bérenger) in 2021 as well. The Discord post on the screen even mentions a half-joking suggestion to include an AI-themed narrative in the studio’s flagship game *RecovR*.

In this phase, before the project, we see that

- game studies theories are a regular conversation topic in the studio. They come up on their own, not necessarily in connection with any specific project, simply because they reflect team members’ personal experiences or interests.
- the link between the studio and academic research is mediated in unconventional ways, for instance, through interpersonal relationships with academic researchers or in the liminal spaces of academia such as scientific game jams.

We are now in February of 2023, at the very beginning of the game’s development. At this point, nothing is set: we don’t know what the game, its themes or its protagonists will look like. During an early conversation between Hélène and the producer, the topic of queer games comes up, and Hélène begins the research-creation process with a very classical, academic task: a literature review.

A brief overview of queer game studies lead to the identification of several key aspects of queer games. Firstly, queer is more than a reference to non-hegemonic sexual orientations and gender identities. In fact, the queer games avant-garde explores queerness beyond representation. This connects with Alder’s notion of structural queerness: what makes a game queer is its subversiveness, its refusal to follow conventions and its embrace of bare systems. According to Clark, it is what allows games to tell the stories of queer existence. The queerness of video games can be expressed through disruption in control and controllers (Marcotte), non-linear temporality (Knutson), or an emphasis on failure and other forms of not-performing or not-knowing (Halberstam, 2011). What constitutes a queer game is, almost by definition, elusive. Kopas and Clark propose to use “queer” as a verb rather than a noun (2014), and Lee argues that “there isn’t really a way to do ‘queer mechanics’ as much as there is a way to generate queer or unqueer fictions.” (2019) Bo Ruberg goes further and argues that video games are inherently queer, insofar as they create spaces for being differently in the world and subvert power structures through unpredictable play.

This review of the literature provides the studio with a sense of what a queer game could look like. Some of the more radical theoretical proposals are hardly applicable for a commercial game studio, even an indie one. But there are takeaways: we decide not to focus on representation or embrace specific mechanics, and instead to imagine a queer game accessible for everyone. In this phase of anticipating the project, we see that theoretical research bring to light blind spots and unexplored areas, and in turn, new and exciting opportunities for creation

In March, things are starting to shape up. After several intense meetings, the team agrees on the main features of the game: its genre, its protagonists, its atmosphere, and its gameplay. Several of those features will change later, but a first idea of Robots & Theatre now exists. At the same time, and often during the same meetings, a research project based

on the game is outlined. The simultaneity of these two processes is characteristic of a research-creation dynamic.

As mentioned above, these decisions were informed by a reflection on queer games and subverting conventions. This led to one major design decision, with many ramifications: we would make a roguelite deckbuilder with no combat and no violent interactions, in contrast with the usual format of the genre, steeped in militarized masculinity. On the design front, this led us to imagine a game that revolved around storytelling in which protagonists would perform in front of a crowd, more or less successfully, but without violence or hostility. The initial game idea featured storytellers from diverse eras and places, but the idea was nixed because there was a significant risk for cultural appropriation. An alternative came out of the studio's earlier research projects, as mentioned above: the game would feature robots instead, deteriorated robots with a sudden interest in human theatre and other forms of live performance. This connected back with our interest in queering the game, as it introduced issues of Otherness and the cyborg metaphor while offering an original way to comment about gender (and the absence thereof). This is reflected in the research programme defined during one of the design meetings. The Discord post on the screen sums it up: queering a commercial game, subverting the roguelite deckbuilder genre by eliminating combat, commenting on dis-assembled identities, and making queer games accessible for the general public.

In this phase, ideation, we see that:

- research sustains discussions, renews reflections, and ultimately helps us avoid major pitfalls
- the research project and creation project co-constitute each other, rather than staying distinct processes.

During pre-production, between April and August, queerness is a peripheric topic that nonetheless keeps coming back, particularly when we're talking about the robots and their representations. We decided to keep our distance with traditional robot representations, and it proved challenging, or at least thought-provoking. In media fictions, robots are usually both anthropomorphized and depicted as slaves, or at least in a conflicted relationship with humans (Cave, Dihal, Dillon, 2020). They are more valuable and respected when they have human-like characteristics such as consciousness or feelings (Yolgörmez & Thibodeau 2021). We went in the opposite direction and endeavoured to make the robot a queer figure, in line with Haraway's cyborg, an assemblage of parts and identities on the margins of the social world. Keeping in mind the limitations of our approach, we nonetheless tried to imagine what truly robotic forms, cultures and socialities would look like.

Our intention not to anthropomorphize robots proved challenging for the narrative design, but visual elements are particularly telling in that regard. We did not want to personify the robots, meaning that they could not have faces or face-like features nor human expressions, and that they were animated in ways that reflected their materiality, i.e. with repetitive and constrained movements. This raises the question of empathy in the relationship between the player and the robot, as well as issues of understandability and lisibility for the game. To phrase it as a designer would: does the camera robot still look too human? Can the player relate to a fridge-set-up-on-a-tractor-with-innumerable-robotic-arms? Are we respectfully representing

a properly robotic identity? Are the robots still Other(ized)? Do we see them as beautiful? Are those robots, and our relationship with them, queer?

We can't answer these questions. But in this phase, preproduction, we see that:

- creation brings theoretical concepts back into the game and allow us to assimilate and question them more thoroughly. Creation questions our relationship with Others, with robots. This constitutes an instance of research through creation: the design challenges make us realize that non-anthropomorphization is a matter of degree rather than a black-or-white phenomenon.

Since September, we have entered a production phase, both for the game and for its analysis. For instance, we (as in, the researchers) have submitted a paper about the design of a deckbuilder and its implications, drawing on the Robots & Theatre experience. Our research work therefore examines the game itself, but also the creation practices around it – a double focus that is characteristic of research-creation.

Following up on the question of queerness, we are also interrogating how our collective game design process is a queer experience. This is inspired by research on how “gamemaking can function as a playground in its own right for exploring queer messes”, to quote Ruberg. For instance, Kara Stone describes game design as a restorative practice in relation to queer life experiences. In our case, the question is whether chaos, solidarity, multitasking, failure and defiant joy in game production are somewhat queer – while questioning our use of the word, because after all, if everything is queer, then nothing is!

In this phase, research and creative production, we see that:

- studying creative practices can be used to improve working conditions and organization
- this type of analysis also support self-knowledge and knowledge of the team, in an effort to create deep social connections. This is particularly significant, because in a neoliberal context, research-creation has to resist being used to control and exploit workers.

In conclusion, the main takeaway is that research has a role to play in game production, as game production needs research.

Research and game creation function similarly, contrary to common misconceptions:

- the process is iterative in both research and design: our account may seem linear, but in practice, the process is a chaotic mess!
- bricolage is decisive in both research and design: making a robot slightly less anthropomorphic, finding a research question that everyone finds fun...

Research fuels design and design fuels research, as knowledge circulates between both:

- research is tangibly useful in the design process, to avoid pitfalls and anticipate problems (e.g. cultural appropriation) but also to explore new patterns and representations (e.g. a non-violent roguelite deckbuilder, non-destructive robots).
- design provides new topics for theoretical inquiries. For instance, design is useful to understand creation practices, the negotiation between artistic and economic principles, and other processes that are of great interest for game production studies.

Research and creation alternate:

- this fosters reflexivity: am I designing something that already exist elsewhere? Are my research questions/hypotheses too abstract and meaningless for people who make games?
- This also facilitates “self-distancing” and moving on with the project.