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Special Issue: Queer Analog Game Studies

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Be Queer, Do Games: An Introduction to Queer Analog Game Studies

Games are opportunities. Games are diversions. Games are responsibilities. Analog games, in particular, have offered designers, players, and critics an embodied medium to imagine, render, and transform "social realities into playable form."¹ However, it is this flexibility and manipulability that also allows for problematic biases, gatekeeping, toxic fandoms, and exclusionary practices particularly versus already marginalized people and communities. In the face of these issues, Black, brown, queer, and non-stereotypical gamers and developers have created ways to speak up, call in, and take for themselves the pleasure *and* politics of play. For instance, actor, writer, and dungeon master phenom Aabria Iyengar told *PBS News* in 2023, "Growing up and acculturated as 'other' on several axes of identity, my brain automatically defaults to that...Even though it is uncomfortable to be othered constantly, it is what I know and it feels right...it feels like a fun opportunity to play in 'What if being markedly different came with fun benefits?'"²

For many "marked" players, games are a chance to express themselves, to engage other people, places, and histories, to find family and community, to escape, to delight, or to change the world. This special issue, then, takes up Iyengar's question, and specifically, explores the radical possibility of analog games to examine and experiment with gender, sexuality, queerness, and other identities and embodiments as engines of play, desire, collaboration, even critical analysis. In fact, the special issue's call for participation invited these questions and responses, prompting:

Analog games are here...but are they queer? What's queer about analog games? What does it mean to queer tabletop, board games, or LARP?...Inspired and informed by the volume [*Queer Game Studies*]³ and the growing field of "queer game studies," this special issue of *Analog Game Studies* (AGS) seeks to assemble definitions, provocations, articulations of and experimentations with

¹ Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 17.

² Quoted in Christopher Thomas, "How a New Generation of Gamers is Pushing for Inclusivity beyond the Table," *NPR News*, January 2, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/how-a-new-generation-of-gamers-is-pushing-for-inclusivity-beyond-the-table>.

³ Adrienne Shaw and Bo Ruberg, eds., *Queer Game Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

queer/queerer/queering analog games and *queer/queerer/queering* analog game studies. Possible topics and lines of inquiry include:

- What is *queer analog game studies*? What does it mean to define the field of *queer analog game studies*?
- What makes analog games queer? How might analog games be queered? Are analog games better/differently suited to queerness?
- Analog games and queer mechanics, queer design, queer gaming, queer play.
- Analog games and queer embodiment, affect, bleed, performance, pedagogy, space, time, failure, or futurity.
- Analog games, queerness, and intersectionality, anti-racism, anti-fascism, Indigeneity, post/decoloniality, ludic justice.

Meanwhile, *Analog Game Studies* (AGS) has been at the forefront of queer and trans game studies since the journal's beginnings, including groundbreaking scholarship like Michael Stokes's "Access to the Page: Queer and Disabled Characters in *Dungeons & Dragons*,"⁴ Miguel Sicart's "Queering the Controller,"⁵ Tanya Pobuda and Shelly Jones's "An Analysis of Gender-Inclusive Language and Imagery in Top-Ranked Board Game Rulebooks,"⁶ and Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen's two essays "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books"⁷ and "Queer While Larping: Community, Identity, and Affective Labor in Nordic Live Action Role-Playing."⁸ This special issue builds on these previous ideas and analyses to expand the definitions and explorations of queerness and analog game studies, recognizing that "where queerness meets games is a site of radical potential. At this intersection stands the invitation to radically reimagine games and play: their forms, their meanings, their politics, and their place within the world."⁹

This special issue is also inspired and motivated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically."¹⁰ For Sedgwick, queerness emerges from "experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures,"¹¹ which sounds a lot like making, studying, and playing games. The essays herein offer provocations and possibilities for queer analog game studies extending the promise "that some of the most innovative and progressive movements

⁴ Michael Stokes, "Access to the Page: Queer and Disabled Characters in *Dungeons & Dragons*," *Analog Game Studies* (May 2017), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2017/05/access-to-the-page-queer-and-disabled-characters-in-dungeons-dragons/>.

⁵ Miguel Sicart, "Queering the Controller," *Analog Game Studies* 4, No. 4 (July 2017), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2017/07/queering-the-controller/>.

⁶ Tanya Pobuda and Shelly Jones, "An Analysis of Gender-Inclusive Language and Imagery in Top-Ranked Board Game Rulebooks," *Analog Game Studies* 7, No. 2 (December 2020), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2020/12/an-analysis-of-gender-inclusive-language-and-imagery-in-top-ranked-board-game-rulebooks/>.

⁷ Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books," *Analog Game Studies* 2, No. 5 (July 2015), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2015/07/out-of-the-dungeons-representations-of-queer-sexuality-in-rpg-source-books/>.

⁸ Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen, "Queer While Larping: Community, Identity, and Affective Labor in Nordic Live Action Role-Playing," *Analog Game Studies* 6, No. 4 (December 2019), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/12/queer-while-larping-community-identity-and-affective-labor-in-nordic-live-action-role-playing/>.

⁹ Bo Ruberg and Amanda Phillips, "Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction)," *Game Studies* 18, No. 3 (December 2018), https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 7.

¹¹ Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 7.

in gaming recently have been analog,¹² a kind of prescience that the early editors of *AGS* recognized over a decade ago. These interventions also come with contingencies, caveats, and further questions, but the guiding spirit of the special issue is one of generosity, capaciousness, what Sedgwick would name “reparative reading”¹³ and Aaron Trammell would call “repairing play.”¹⁴ Given that most games are already genre-bending, polyvalent, multimedia, and multivocal, the hope is that queer analog game studies allows for continued reciprocity, interdisciplinarity, productive ambivalences, and the invitation and investment in new, underrepresented, and innovative voices and worlds.

The Essays

Up first in the special issue is Kaelan Doyle-Myerscough’s “A Queer OS Powered by the Apocalypse: Feminist Platforms and TTRPG Engines,” which analyzes post-apocalyptic tabletop role-playing game systems as queer “game engines” to consider ways that analog games and feminist platform studies might imagine “alternative computational and relational structures for digital game engines.” The essay meditates on the bridges between analog and digital, queer and medium, process and platform. Doyle-Myerscough close reads Vincent Baker and Meguey Baker’s *Apocalypse World (and its spinoff games)* to speculate on the interconnected relationship between analog and digital games and how “analog games imagine forms of computation and human-computer interaction that are not yet possible for digital game engines.”

Next in line is Brandon Blackburn’s “Fluid Dynamics: Precarity and Porousness in Ecological Solo Journaling Games,” an analytical account of the author’s playthrough of Madeleine Ember’s *The Crushing Dark: A Solo Journaling RPG* and Seb Pine’s *Dwelling: A Solo Game for Ghosts*. Drawing on environmental humanities, queer theory, and queer game studies, the essay explores the precarity and porousness of queer bodies, affect, and subjecthood. According to Blackburn, the occasion, affect, and materiality of each game’s journaling mechanics reveals “a slippage often missed in queer theory, especially high queer theory that derives abstract concepts from queer subjects without centering the material limitations of those subjects’ lived realities.” For Blackburn, fluidity and slipperiness, porousness and precariousness are necessary and often undertheorized indexes of queer identities, bodies, spaces, and lives.

Susan Haarman’s essay “Is There Room for Queer Chaos at Yazeba’s?: Cozy Aesthetics and Queer Domesticities” is the third offering in the special issue. Haarman’s close plays the aesthetics of Possum Games’s *Yazeba’s Bed and Breakfast, a legacy-style TTRPG* that encourages players to change, manipulate, and personalize the physical game materials, rules, as well as the collective gaming experience. The essay ruminates on the personal, social, and ludic norms and expectations that players and designers bring to the table, sometimes unintentionally, that may or may not disrupt the radical potentiality of a game. For example, given that *Yazeba’s* presents of vision of queered, cozy, domestic life, Haarman asks, “[D]oes its very domesticity undercut the potential for queer play?”

Finally, closing the special issue is “liches, lampreys, and the moon: an incantation for trans life & lyrical play” by PB Berge and Percival Hornak. The essay weaves together personal playthrough,

¹² Evan Torner, Aaron Trammell, and Emma Leigh Waldron, “Reinventing Analog Game Studies,” *Analog Game Studies* 1, No. 1 (August 2014), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2014/08/reinventing-analog-game-studies/>.

¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1-37.

¹⁴ Aaron Trammell, *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023).

queer game studies, and experimental games to reflect on and respond to “the formation of queer analog game studies at the moment of its emergence with a lyrical and trans-informed critique of academic field-building.” Berge and Hornak offer a thoughtful, creative, and cautionary explication of the messiness of knowledge making, discipline mapping, and relationship building as illuminated by their playing of Avery Alder’s *Teen Witch* and Laurie O’Connell’s *Lichcraft*. Form and function, ludic and lyric, magical and critical mix and mingle in “liches, lampreys, and the moon” to invoke alternative pathways for analog games and analog game studies.

All four essays argue in some way that games matter, queerness matters, and playing queer games and playing games queerly matter. They tell stories about the act and affect of play, about the pleasure and politics of games, and reveal the range of relationships to and desire for different types of games. Gathered under the wondrous and weird umbrella of “queer analog game studies,” these essays push and pull “the gaming community, including academic game studies, to take seriously the longstanding warnings, analysis, acts of resistance, and pleas for help from marginalized folks who play and work on video games.”¹⁵ In other words, games are political. Games are reciprocal. Games are survival. Games, like their creators and players, are full of ambivalent gaps and lapses, overlaps and underlaps, dissonances and resonances, and entrances and exits.

Coda

As an aside, as the incoming Editor-in-Chief of *Analog Game Studies*, it has been an honor and great pleasure to create and curate this special issue for the journal and the AGS community. Since I started with AGS, I have always imagined and lobbied for the space and opportunity to make “queer analog game studies” happen. Thank you to my fellow editors, scholars, thinkers, and special thanks to the authors who submitted and took seriously the call for participation. I invited folks to the table, and you all came to play. As I was putting the finishing touches on the issue, a line from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* kept murmuring in my head: “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players.”¹⁶ In the context of the play, the line is a lament, a eulogy of the seven stages of a person’s life from birth to death. Initially, I thought I would use the line to open the introduction playing on the idea that all the world’s a *game* and all the *peoples* merely players. However, I got stuck on the “merely” for we are not *just* players or *only* players or *simply* players. Games are legion, and so are we. Luckily, it turns out that “merely” has an archaic meaning, a different Old English root that means “magnificently, excellently, splendidly, wonderfully” (it is related to the word “merrily”).¹⁷ And what rhymes with “merely” but “queerly.” With this wordplay and worldplay, then, I repurpose Shakespeare’s line and offer it up as a theme for the special issue. Games are indeed magnificent. Games are splendid and queer. Games are joy.

—Edmond Y. Chang, Special Issue Editor
July 4, 2025



¹⁵ Ruberg and Phillips, “Not Gay as in Happy,” https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

¹⁶ “All the World’s a Stage,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 2, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_the_world%27s_a_stage.

¹⁷ “Merely, Adv. (1).” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, September 2023, accessed July 2, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3064839443>.