



## GROPING IN THE DARK: INTIMACY IN *NYCTOPHOBIA*

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### Abstract

This essay argues that analog games function as platforms that mediate affect through their specific combinations of rules, material components, and the player relationships and experiences. The purpose here is to examine the way that affect is mediated through intimacy during play through a close analysis of *Nyctophobia*, a board game designed by Catherine Stippell and published by Pandasaurus Games. This paper will examine the way *Nyctophobia*, which draws on classic tropes from horror slasher films, produces a type of mediated intimacy that orients the affective experience of play in relation to the assemblages of analog play.

### Keywords

board game, *Nyctophobia*, affect, feeling, touch, mediated intimacy, queer intimacy, larp, mechanics

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*Nyctophobia* (2018),<sup>1</sup> designed by Catherine Stippell and published by Pandasaurus Games in 2018, draws on classic tropes from horror slasher films pitting one player, the axe wielding hunter, versus the rest of the players, the hunted. The goal of the game is simple, the Hunted must complete a series of tasks then escape the forest. The Hunter's goal is also simple, to incapacitate the hunted before they escape. The twist is that the hunted players must wear blackout glasses and play entirely by touch. Board game Critic Ava Foxfort describes the affective experiences that emerge from something as simple as closing your eyes at a table surrounded by people:

Closing your eyes is an act of vulnerability, an act of trust. [...] Board games are an agreement to step into a shared world. To turn a table into something that doesn't follow the usual rules of the world. With your eyes closed, you open up a whole new world of possibilities, and you stop, and you wonder, and you play.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Stippell, *Nyctophobia* (Pandasaurus Games, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Ava Foxfort, "Tactics and Tactility #2 – With Your Eyes Closed," *Shut Up & Sit Down*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.shutupandsitdown.com/tactics-and-tactility-2-with-your-eyes-closed-close-your-eyes/>.



Figure 1: "Horror Eyes" by MamboZ. CC BY-SA 2.0

While Foxfort is not writing about *Nyctophobia* in particular, their description captures the affective experience of playing with the senses. I argue that analog games function as platforms that mediate affect through their specific combinations of rules, material components, and the player relationships and experiences.<sup>3</sup> These three taken together form what I call the player-rule-component assemblage, or more concisely the analog play assemblage.<sup>4</sup> My purpose here is to examine the way that affect is mediated through intimacy during play. Emma Leigh Waldron defines the term "mediated intimacy" as intimacy that is "given specific, shape, direction, intensity, or meaning" through a mediating practice, such as playing a game.<sup>5</sup> Mediated intimacy describes how the flow of

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Altice, "The Playing Card Platform," *Analog Game Studies* 1, No. 4 (November 2014), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2014/11/the-playing-card-platform/>; Nicolas LaLone, "A Tale of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the Origins of the Game Platform," *Analog Game Studies* 6, No. 3 (September 2019). <https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/09/a-tale-of-dungeons-dragons-and-the-origins-of-the-game-platform/>; Ian Bellomy, "What Counts: Configuring the Human in Platform Studies," *Analog Game Studies* 4, No. 2 (March 2017). <https://analoggamestudies.org/2017/03/what-counts/>; Thomas Apperley and Jussi Parikka, "Platform Studies' Epistemic Threshold," *Games and Culture* 13, No. 4 (June 2018): 349-69; Jan Švelch, "Platform Studies, Computational Essentialism, and *Magic: The Gathering*," *Analog Game Studies* 3, No. 4 (July 2016), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2016/07/platform-studies-computational-essentialism-and-magic-the-gathering/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Murray, "More Than Just the Table: Analog Games as Computational Platforms," in *International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (FDG '20: International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games, Bugibba Malta: ACM, 2020), 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3402942.3402974>.

<sup>5</sup> Emma Leigh Waldron, "Mediated Intimacy: Performing Sex on HBO, YouTube, and in Analog Role-Playing Games" (Dissertation, UC Davis, 2018), 192.

affect is oriented through play and how intimacy functions as a vector to describe the relationship between bodies. Exploring the ways that affect and intimacy are mediated in games allows us not only to examine how they prime players for specific affective responses but also allows us to think about games as spaces of possibility rather than closed and bounded spaces.

*Nyctophobia* plays with the senses of the players and foregrounds touch to induce a kind of phenomenological imprecision which echoes what Laine Nooney describes as “Spelunking.” Nooney describes spelunking as an intentionally “phenomenologically imprecise” encounter with a historical moment that aims to feel along the limits and embraces the “non-continuity and the inability to apprehend the historical field in its wholeness.”<sup>6</sup> However, rather than employing spelunking on the historical level, I take cues from Aubrey Anable who uses spelunking in *Playing with Feeling* to describe the phenomenological imprecision of spelunking during play as both a mechanism for disorienting the player at the moment of contact with the interface and as a way of describing the affective relationship between players and the apparatus of play.<sup>7</sup> This complication of the play experience opens the possibilities for new orientations to emerge from analog play assemblage as a system of interacting pieces.<sup>8</sup> This paper will examine the way *Nyctophobia* produces a type of mediated intimacy that orients the affective experience of play in relation to the assemblages of analog play.

## Affect

Affect is, broadly speaking, a way of thinking about feeling. How do we feel? How do things influence how we feel? In *Playing With Feelings* Aubrey Anable uses affect to refer to “aspects of emotions, feelings, and bodily engagement that circulate through people and things, but are often registered only at the interface.”<sup>9</sup> The interface is taken literally to mean the interface of a technological object, such as the touch screen that is used for the basis of Anable’s analysis. Interface, however, can also be understood as the points of contact between objects that emerge from their position within a network of affect. Affect is interested in the interrelations between bodies. This interrelation is what makes affect useful for studying games as technologies, in that they specifically mediate affective relations through contact. Anable identifies and makes two important claims about affect. The first is that, in this application of affect, it flows from the individual experience and manifests from responses to interactions with objects with affective force. The second is that by framing affect as a way to speak about an in-articulatable experience, Anable foregrounds how affect plays a part in how a subject comes to know, understand, and interact with the material conditions of being.<sup>10</sup> This occurs through what Brian Massumi would refer to as an operational logic that combines modes of being (ontology) with systems of knowledge (epistemology) in such a way that it has a power of self-replication within the network of relationships in which it exists.<sup>11</sup> This observation describes the interpolating nature of affect by viewing affect both as a system of relations and as a semiotic process of interpretation.

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<sup>6</sup> Laine Nooney, “A Pedestal. A Table. A Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History,” *Game Studies* 13, No. 2 (2013), <https://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney>.

<sup>7</sup> Aubrey Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Murray, “More Than Just the Table.”

<sup>9</sup> Anable, *Playing with Feelings*, xviii.

<sup>10</sup> Anable, *Playing with Feelings*, xviii.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Massumi, “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Duke University Press, 2010), 52-70.

Through these assemblages, analog games perform a mediating role that influences both the capacity to affect something and the capacity to be affected by orienting players towards the assemblage of play. As Cole Wehrle notes, “[Board game] aesthetics, like the rules that structure their play, are essentially political in that they organize the relationship between the players. [...] For, if games structure play, so too do they structure feeling.”<sup>12</sup> Games replicate familiar affective structures that provide a frame for affective responses based on the subject position of the affected within the network.<sup>13</sup> However, whereas other relations may solidify as they become actualized, the relationships within analog games retain the flexibility of affect as a system of potential. This dynamic is afforded by the assemblage of analog games as the interactions between the rules, components, and the capacity for the game to enforce not only formal structures,<sup>14</sup> but also employing what Evan Lauteria calls “Affective Structuring.”<sup>15</sup> Lauteria suggests that affective structuring is an informal mechanism through which games “facilitate play through cueing and priming of certain emotional responses and the interpolation of certain relational subject positions in players.”<sup>16</sup> Affective structuring, as an operational logic is useful because it precisely describes how affect functions within analog game platforms as an orienting force.

### Grasping and Searching: Queer Intimacy and Touch

Spelunking is a particularly evocative metaphor for describing the process of fumbling and grasping that is central to the survivor’s play experience in *Nyctophobia*. The turn of phrase not only brings certain affects to the surface but also describes how the limitation of such imprecise encounters influences the relationships between bodies in this space. *Nyctophobia* revels in this imprecision, inviting players to explore the space where play is happening. The act of spelunking “foregoes the use of rational, Cartesian perspectives” creating a haptic space that manifests through players’ hands reaching out in an attempt to make sense of their own disconnected space within the game.<sup>17</sup> The use of touch between players and the plastic components of the board, as a mechanism for discerning the play space is the unique haptic experience of *Nyctophobia* that demonstrates the ways that the haptic space disrupts the striated structures of the game into the smooth spaces that Deleuze and Guattari observed to be primed with affective potential.<sup>18</sup> Eddie Lohmeyer notes the “synesthetic experience” as the combination of sight and touch that smooths space to make way or the emergence of affects,<sup>19</sup> however *Nyctophobia* removes the element of sight from some players rendering them reliant on the optical experiences of another player, the hunter. As mentioned earlier, the hunter is tasked with guiding the survivor players’ hands to the space where their exploration takes place each turn. The touch between players is at once sensual and caring, but also antagonistic and threatening. This is because of the oscillation between the two worlds of play.<sup>20</sup> Touch is contact between a trusted companion (or a stranger entrusted with the task) guiding the player towards the destination. Touch is contact between a terrified survivor fleeing harm and the

<sup>12</sup> Cole Wehrle, “Affective Networks at Play: *Catan*, *COIN*, and *The Quiet Year*,” *Analog Game Studies* 3, No. 3 (May 2016), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2016/05/affective-networks-at-play-catan-coin-and-the-quiet-year/>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> LaLone, “A Tale of *Dungeons & Dragons*.”

<sup>15</sup> Evan W. Lauteria, “Affective Structuring and the Role of Race and Nation in *XCOM*,” *Analog Game Studies* 3, No. 1 (January 2016), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2016/01/affective-structuring-and-the-role-of-race-and-nation-in-xcom/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Eddie Lohmeyer, “Navigating Haptic Space in Video Games,” *Analog Game Studies* 3, No. 4 (July 2016), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2016/07/smoothsketch-or-navigating-haptic-space-in-the-video-game-composition/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Wake, “Token Gestures: Towards a Theory of Immersion in Analog Games,” *Analog Game Studies* 6, No. 3 (September 2019), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/09/token-gestures-towards-a-theory-of-immersion-in-analog-games/>.

hunter who wishes them harm. In both cases contact between players is a reminder of the presence of the hunter player and it is this mechanical and physical interaction that I argue opens players to the possibility of being affected. In short, touch creates intimacy between players.

The most common definitions of intimacy tend to focus on belonging and connection, primarily through “embodied and carnal sensuality.”<sup>21</sup> Other Scholars, such as Marks describe intimacy as a “sensuous closeness” through points of physical contact. For Marks intimacy is erotic, meaning that it describes the ability for bodies to oscillate between near and far, the ability to change the relations between subjects. To be erotic is for the power relationships between subjects to be constantly in flux.<sup>22</sup> Sedgwick breaks this relationship down even further<sup>23</sup> and as noted by Bo Ruberg, Sedgwick does not explicitly use the word intimacy, rather the relationships are described in terms of desire and bonds.<sup>24</sup> Ruberg’s reading of Sedgwick argues that if intimacy is “an interpersonal closeness that is at once affective and erotic.”<sup>25</sup> Desire, then, is a way to describe the way intimacy orients subjects. Ruberg goes on to note that intimacy, for Sedgwick, is implicitly, and often explicitly, tied to the carnal desire for sensuality. Ruberg draws on Marks’ theory of the erotic to expand the relations of power beyond sex and into the virtual, while still encompassing the desiring of bodies. As such, Intimacy is a function of desire. Because queerness is about alternative forms of desire, this necessitates an understanding of a form of queer intimacy that “resists the hegemonic logics that dictate what it means to be an acceptable, valued, heteronormative (or homonormative) subject.”<sup>26</sup> A queer intimacy encompasses not only the relationships between queer/queer or queer/straight bodies, but also alternative emergences of intimacy.

Like Ruberg, I do not wish to concretize what intimacy means, as it is something highly experiential, in that it differs based on subjective experience, and virtual, in that it exists as a path for potentiality. The provocations Ruberg lays out in *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, function to maintain the possibility for non-normative formulations of intimacy.<sup>27</sup> This queer intimacy “describes forms of interpersonal connection that do not conform with relationality and closeness. That is, queer intimacy describes a connection that differs from or actively resists the heteronormative vision of intimacy...”<sup>28</sup> For Ruberg, the formulation of a queer intimacy is one that is always mediated, one that is oriented differently, and one that brings into question both the connections of parties and what it means to be “close.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Waldron homes in on the idea of intimacy as a sense of proximity which “can take on different cultural meanings and values” and through mediation “can be dammed up and diverted, augmented or diminished.”<sup>30</sup> Intimacy is more than just an emotional or affective emergence. Intimacy is a way of orienting desire, and in doing so influences, describes, and even produces the affective bonds between bodies. A queer intimacy rejects intimacy as an inherently pleasurable, healthy, or “good” experience and viewing it as something that is inherently good forecloses the possibilities of examining the full spectrum of relationality and affect that is oriented through intimacy.

Because affect is virtual and constantly in the process of actualization and re-actualization, it is particularly susceptible to processes of mediation. However, as a precondition to its mediation, affect

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<sup>21</sup> Shaka McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Bo Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York University Press, 2019), 40.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ruberg, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ruberg, 41.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Waldron, “Mediated Intimacy.”

must first be directed. The phenomenological experiences that make up the other piece of Ahmed's orientations describe how affect becomes directed through contact with the experiential apparatuses that mediate power.<sup>31</sup> Rather than frame orientation as requiring a purely phenomenological frame, we can draw on Lauteria's affective structuring because it describes a similar idea but reaches beyond the individual into the affective network itself. Shaka McGlotten comes to a similar conclusion in *Virtual Intimacies*:

Intimacy is not itself a form of affect; rather it is more like affect's own immanence – proximity, connection – a necessary precondition for certain affective states to bloom, especially those that have to do with other people. Affect happens in and through intimacy.<sup>32</sup>

Games, then, are just one of many avenues through which intimacy can be mediated. Namely the ways in which players, components, and rules are positioned to foster specific affective structures between subjects, and the way that desire and intimacy are mediated to produce specific affective experiences during play.



Figure 2: "Board game night" by gfairchild. CC BY 2.0

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<sup>31</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations. Objects. Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies*.

## Embodiment and Physicality in Analog Games

Live Action Role-Playing games, or LARPs, are a type of large-scale roleplaying game, similar to *Dungeons & Dragons*, though instead of playing around a table, players are meant to physically embody their characters. This often incorporates elaborate costumes and sets. Nordic LARP is a school of LARP design and play that foreground more intense character embodiment and simulation aspects into play. Emma Leigh Waldron and Aaron Trammell note that this type of roleplaying specifically appeals to immersive player experiences through “embodied practices that produce affects within players.”<sup>33</sup> Because of this Nordic LARP employs several different mechanisms to amorous and sexual connections between players that “coalesce diegetically around ideas of character role-playing [so that it] presupposes a fundamental distinction between player and character.”<sup>34</sup> This distinction is important because the expectations for how players and their characters engage in these experiences differ drastically. While there are many different methods that have been employed, the focus on touch makes larpwright Emma Wieslander’s *Ars amandi* an ideal comparison between LARP and *Nyctophobia*. *Ars amandi* describes a system in LARP in which players express romantic or sexual interactions through contact between hands and other predetermined locations on another player’s body. This method of invoking affect is particularly effective because “*ars amandi* focuses on simulating an embodied sense of sensuality for the player...*ars amandi* has the capacity to elicit extremely strong experiences for the player.”<sup>35</sup> The effect of this contact is opening a state of affective vulnerability between players that denotes the willingness or ability to be affected by another that points players towards each other in specific ways. This re/orientation is Intimacy.

## Case Study

In an interview Stippell says the impetus behind *Nyctophobia* was that in order to play with her blind uncle, they would have to modify or redesign. Stippell designed the game so that it could be played with people with visual impairments, as a result, the design pays careful attention to the tactility of the components.<sup>36</sup> The game has been lauded for its commitment to accessibility, but just as important, Stippell’s attention to the way bodies are imbricated in play means that her design identifies the way that games like *Nyctophobia* highlight the variety of lived experiences within the analog gaming community.<sup>37</sup> The board itself is a vacuum formed shell of plastic with alternating circular divots for player pieces and tokens and smaller square holes where the hard-plastic barriers of trees form the maze where players roam around playing out the climax of the slasher’s hunt. The trees and player pieces are of a harder textured plastic, formed so that they have distinctive patterns so that they can be identified by touch. The effect is one of players fumbling around and exploring the game components with gently probing fingers. In order to prevent the players from scattering the game pieces across the table or otherwise slowing down the pace of play, *Nyctophobia* relies on the Hunter player maintaining the privilege of sight. In addition to hindering the progress of the survivors and preventing them from escaping, the Hunter player must also facilitate playing the

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<sup>33</sup> Aaron Trammell and Emma Leigh Waldron, “Playing for Intimacy: Love, Lust, and Desire in the Pursuit of Embodied Design,” in *Rated M for Mature: Sex and Sexuality in Video Games*, edited by Matthew Wysocki and Evan Lauteria (Bloomsbury Media, 2015), 177-93.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Phoebe Wild, “Blinded by the Dark: How Designing for Accessibility Inspired a New Type of Horror Game,” interview with Catherine Stippell, *Board Game Geek*, June 6, 2018, <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2005142/blinded-dark-how-designing-accessibility-inspired>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

game. This comes in part through in the turn-to-turn administration work necessitated by the algorithmic systems of the game rules. In addition to doing the upkeep, the hunter also guides the players to their pieces. This is done by physically touching the other players' hands. The hunter comes into physical contact with every other player while occupying two distinct roles during play, helpful guide, and murderous opponent. The haptics of both the game pieces and the contact between players function as a threshold between the space of the narrative space of the board and the space where the players exist. Paul Wake notes that this produces an oscillation of subjectivity that foregrounds the positions of the players as characters, and players as players.<sup>38</sup> It is precisely this property of analog games that gives them the unique ability to orient players towards the affective play experiences. *Nyctophobia* in particular uses this oscillation between subject positions in such a way that the power relations between players are constantly in flux. Other games, such as *Just One*, *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*, or a plethora of social deduction games require players to close their eyes temporarily as a way to obscure information. *Nyctophobia*, on the other hand, removes vision from players for the duration of the game to set up a specific relationship between players.

When playing a turn in *Nyctophobia* players engage, on a micro level, what Laine Nooney refers to as spelunking.<sup>39</sup> Through this *Nyctophobia* uses the desires of players and the haptic space to foreground the possibilities for intimacy that opens players to the network of affects. This heightened vulnerability is how analog games create intimacy among players. *Nyctophobia* makes this process explicit by design. *Nyctophobia* occupies an interesting position because of its reliance on the physicality and the way that it explicitly foregrounds the capacity of touch for defining relationships between the players, the components, and the rules. *Nyctophobia's* unique mechanics require the players to grasp and fumble resulting in an incomplete understanding of the game board, especially as the layout is prone to change, but also it disrupts the traditional sighted player experience of traditional analog games. *Nyctophobia* makes use of the materiality of the game and the relationships between players, both existing and defined by the game, as a way to orient players towards a specific affective experience of play.

Touch in *Nyctophobia* functions primarily as a means to an end. In this case touch is necessary for play to continue and neither the hunter nor hunted can achieve victory without it, producing what McGlotten calls instrumental intimacy.<sup>40</sup> McGlotten argues that this type of intimacy functions as "a normative script in which one's connectedness is constrained by normative aspirations and ideals..."<sup>41</sup> In this case the normative ideal is one of continued play in a manner that is coercive based on the flow of affect between players stemming both from a desire to play (which is often supplanted by the desire to win). Instrumental intimacy is a specific form of mediated intimacy with the goal of orienting players towards the game assemblage in a coercive fashion. This is not unique to *Nyctophobia* nor even touch, rather it is a function of how intimacy is expressed through play. That being said, *Nyctophobia's* use of touch in conjunction with the immersive properties of player pawns and tokens opens players up to a specific kind of affective vulnerability that is less coercive than what is implied by instrumental forms of intimacy.

In *Nyctophobia* the player tokens are barrel shaped pegs that fit into the circular depressions on the board. Each player token has a unique shape or pattern cut into the top of the piece that makes it easy for players to immediately identify themselves or others through touch. This forces the players

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<sup>38</sup> Wake, "Token Gestures."

<sup>39</sup> Nooney, "A Pedestal. A Table. A Love Letter."

<sup>40</sup> McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies*.

<sup>41</sup> McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies*, 47.

to become disoriented both within the context of the game and in relation to the material components and the players that they stand in for.<sup>42</sup> This disorientation functions so that players become reoriented towards the assemblage of play through touch in such a way that the player is affectively vulnerable, in a sense becoming intimate with the game. In becoming intimate, players are open to be affected by the process of the game, actions of the players, and the tactility of the components thus opening up what Wake refers to as an awkward, messy, and unsettling third space that describes the liminal boundary between the tabletop game space and the space occupied by the players of the game.<sup>43</sup> This in between space is an immanent plane of possibility where immersion, intimacy, and affect exist close to the surface.



Figure 3: *Nyctophobia* board courtesy of Pandasaurus Games.

There is a limitation, however, in *Nyctophobia*'s attempt to produce certain affects, particularly its ability to maintain the level of tension and anxiety. Player reviews identify a few places where the

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<sup>42</sup> Wake, "Token Gestures."

<sup>43</sup> Wake, "Token Gestures."

promise of the game falls short, whether it is a lack of buy in on the part of the players,<sup>44</sup> dissatisfaction with the production of the components,<sup>45</sup> or discomfort with physical contact with other players.<sup>46</sup> This last concern is particularly interesting in regard to the way intimacy is mediated through touch in *Nyctophobia*. In Episode 84 of Shut Up & Sit Down podcast, board game critic Paul Dean says "...there is the factor that somebody taking your hand and guiding it, it takes a little while to get used to that. And I just find that a little strange. It's a little strange!"<sup>47</sup> Dean's comment echoes a number of other player responses, including things told to me during my own play sessions, and highlights the unique experience of being asked to take physical touch into account as a matter of course to make play function. Board gaming is a hobby where there is ample attention paid to the material and haptic components of play, however players are rarely asked to incorporate other players into the apparatus as something to be touch and touched by. Dean's cohost and fellow critic Quintin Smith follows up Dean's comment by pointing out that in heavily masculine play groups there was "an amount of 'Oh this is extra weird, because men don't like touching each other, turns out the patriarchy has filled us all with terrible ideas about our bodies.'" <sup>48</sup> It would seem that initial resistance to touch stems from constructions of masculinity, but as Dean and Smith both note this breaks down as players become more accustomed to intimate touch. The experience of playing *Nyctophobia* reshapes player's relationship to their body and its place within the assemblages of play.

*Nyctophobia* is not the first example of analog games using touch as a way to open players to intimacy, though its construction of intimacy is perhaps not as intentional. In LARP, intimacy is possible through touch because players physically embody their characters. *Ars amandi* stands in for rituals and practices of care between players and functions to mediate affect through intimacy.<sup>49</sup> Because intimacy is a state of affective vulnerability, it can exist between partners in sensual interaction, as with *ars amandi*, or as the intimacy between the hunter and the hunted as in *Nyctophobia*. The only difference is how players embody their characters in board games like *Nyctophobia*. Paul Wake notes the ways that the component pieces, and specifically player tokens "anchor the player within the horizon of the game world, simultaneously gesture (vertically) to the world of the player"<sup>50</sup> and initiate an "oscillation of subject positions."<sup>51</sup> The argument is that players come to identify with their tokens because they mark their presence within the world of the game.<sup>52</sup>

To return to the role of the Hunter as a player who also must aid in orienting the hunted, the effects of touch and intimacy between players becomes an important factor for the narrative and affective themes of the game. When the hunter and the hunted come into contact it is an affective reminder that the hunted character is in danger and that despite the helpful contact the hunter means them harm. This not only places an antagonistic tension between the players, but it also foregrounds the thematic affective structures of slasher films that *Nyctophobia* draws inspiration from, specifically that there is a paranoia in the survivors that the hunter is always aware of their location. As we can

<sup>44</sup> J Ford, "Nyctophobia: Fumbling in the Dark, Sometimes Fun," *Board Game Geek*, August 20, 2019, <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2260583/nyctophobia-fumbling-dark-sometimes-fun>.

<sup>45</sup> Quintin Smith and Paul Dean, "Podcast #84: The Post-Gen Con Blowout!," *Shut Up & Sit Down*, August 17, 2018, <https://www.shutupandsitdown.com/podcast/podcast-84-the-post-gen-con-blowout/>; Dave Kelly, "I Should Have Been Better than This," *Board Game Geek*, August 17, 2018, <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2044876/i-should-have-been-better>.

<sup>46</sup> Smith and Dean, "Podcast #84"; Ford, "Nyctophobia."

<sup>47</sup> Smith and Dean, "Podcast #84."

<sup>48</sup> Smith and Dean, "Podcast #84."

<sup>49</sup> Trammell and Waldron, "Playing for Intimacy."

<sup>50</sup> Wake, "Token Gestures."

<sup>51</sup> Wake, "Token Gestures."

<sup>52</sup> Wake, "Token Gestures."

see through *Nyctophobia* analog games produce an intimacy that becomes narratively motivating for players. While it is difficult to escape the coercive nature of instrumental play, the possibility for alternative affects and orientations towards play hold a central space within the relational network of the analog play assemblage.

## Conclusion

The aesthetic and mechanical design of *Nyctophobia* demonstrates the ways that analog games are able to leverage their material components and the algorithmic structure of the rules. *Nyctophobia* is a vehicle for the interaction of components parts of the analog play assemblage, namely the physical pieces of the game, the players and their attendant relationships to each other and to the affective and aesthetic dimensions of the game, and the rules of the game that deploy manifestations of affects that are co-constituted through the theme and algorithmic functioning of play. *Nyctophobia's* utilization of touch uses the haptic properties of play to disorient the players rendering the experience of play imprecise in such a way that players are positioned within the network of affect. The haptic is again used to reorient players towards the affective experiences of playing *Nyctophobia* through the sensual experiences of touch. When being touched or touching another player, there is a shift in the relationship between the two players. In *Nyctophobia* the survivor players relinquish themselves to the guidance of the hunter player, who is simultaneously trying to guide them in the world of the tabletop and trying to destroy them in the world of the game. The players come together in the reality where they are subjects playing together and part as adversaries, subjects in the ludic fiction of *Nyctophobia's* atmosphere of horror. This refrain occurs repeatedly during the course of the game almost as a ritualistic oscillation between the two worlds, made possible by the materiality of the game, the haptics of touch, and the manipulation of other senses.

*Nyctophobia* is not unique in that it mediates affect through play, however the way that it isolates touch as a mechanism of orientation via intimacy between players is more explicitly foregrounded through the assemblage of the game platform. The thematic framing of play as a struggle between a group of survivors and a murderous hunter primes a specific affective response that is facilitated by the rules and components of the game. *Nyctophobia* shows us the importance of the haptic, tactile, and other sensory aspects of playing analog games and how they can be manipulated through the use of the mechanics and processes of the game to induce orientations that alter affective relationships. Intimacy is not the only vector for affect, though through the oscillation of subject positions, power dynamics, and desires, intimacy is easily identifiable. Intimacy describes the relationships between all active parties whether they are antagonistic, coercive, cooperative, or any number of permutations of intimacy.

By examining how games mediate intimacy in order to orient players towards specific play experiences we can examine the processes and decisions that mediate affect to achieve a specific experience for the players. This is useful not only for the insight into experiential game design. It also lets us examine how affect moves between bodies during the course of play. From this we can understand the experiences of play and ways that players can manifest nonnormative desires as an effect of engaging with the systems of play, and the effect this has on the systems of play themselves. This can answer several questions regarding analog games as a genre. Namely, what are the unique experiences that emerge through analog play and how does the aesthetic and procedural dimension of the game impact these experiences? This kind of analysis can also examine the different trajectories and orientations that might arise based on the player as a subject with external experiences and how that can influence the narrative or ludic aspects of the game. Finally, by looking at the affective experiences in conjunction with the split subjective experiences it is

possible to think about analog games as platforms for mediating affect and how the computational, material, and experiential aspects of play can be altered through remediation, adaptation, or modification.

When playing an analog game, there are many layers through which affect flows and emerges. From the simple haptic pleasure of handling components or solving the puzzle of the game, to the connections between players sitting around a board. All of these bring together the affective experiences of many different bodies into experiences that evoke strong emotional bringing players back to the same game again and again. Affective vectors and mediated intimacy are about describing how we inhabit the world in a way that makes these moments of connection visible, no matter how fleeting they might be. Approaching games through this framework, we can imagine games as a space of potentiality rather than objects that draw boundaries around play. Analog games encompass an entire space of experiential possibility and, to quote Foxfort once more, "If that isn't magic, I don't know what is."<sup>53</sup>



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<sup>53</sup> Foxfort, "Tactics and Tactility #2."