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### Suggested citation:

Westecott, Emma (2023) Connections: An intergenerational feminist game art timeline. In: DiGRA 2023 Conference: Limits and Margins of Games Settings. Available at https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4576/

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## Connections: An intergenerational feminist game art timeline

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### **ABSTRACT**

A growing collection of art games can be identified as feminist, this paper gathers historical precedents to create an archive for future research. By identifying key feminist performance, interactive media, technology-based and game artworks over the past fifty years and placing them on a timeline we explore connections across time and context. The initial focus on Canadian artists moves forward to reference key international artists that contribute to a canon of feminist game art. The selection of work is partial, problematic, and inevitably reflects the biases of the authors, but aims at starting a process in the hope that others will diversify the works and framing selected. The research is intentionally promiscuous and pragmatic, offering future feminist game artists a heritage to draw on, a continuum to situate themselves in, or against, and tools for grant writing by identifying historical connections and contexts. By connecting game art to precedents, we look beyond the margins of game studies in a call for new conversations on art games.

### **Keywords**

feminist game art; art histories; intergenerational; artist interviews; feminist timeline

### INTRODUCTION

This research aims to connect and amplify themes common to feminist game art practices in related expressive forms. Through interview and analysis links are drawn across the work selected. There are important similarities and differences between generations relevant to the times and technologies engaged that will emerge from a brief discussion of key works. Our timeline features performance, interactive media, technology-based and game artworks, connecting multiple generations of feminist artists on a timeline. We sought input from experts in feminist interactive media art in Canada to address potential omissions and extended into primary research via a series of interviews with artists named on the timeline to explicitly include their voices in the project. This paper offers an all-too-brief survey of a significant body of work to illustrate one way that feminist timelines can generate connections across time, place, and practice to imagine more inclusive and equitable approaches to canon formation.

### **GAME ART CONTEXTS**

Much contemporary academic writing about game art has been successful in moving beyond early definitional challenges i.e., the question of whether games can be seen as an art form. The work of academics such as Flanagan (2009), Schrank (2014), Sharp

### **Proceedings of DiGRA 2023**

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(2015), Upton (2015), etc. have, thankfully, become more concerned with situating a range of game art practices within particular frameworks than justify the status of games as art e.g., Sharp's discussion of game art, art games and games by artists. While these approaches have been productive in situating a range of expressive practices in and around game form within legible frameworks for pedagogic, curatorial, and critical ends we seek here to problematize these approaches. Approaches that, for example, categorize game art by positioning the work within art historical movements like the avant-garde can perhaps be prematurely constraining the potential of multiple emerging game art practices, as one interviewee said: "The avant-garde is from the past." Jay David Bolter's introduction to Schrank's Avant-Garde Videogames (2014) talks through some of the complexities of situating game art as avant-garde practice. Bolter reminds us of some of the goals of the historical avant-garde to challenge the high art establishment before in time becoming part of the very same traditions. He points to the irony of the drive to accept videogames as an art form requiring legitimization by a patriarchal and elite establishment while this establishment becomes increasingly challenged by increased access to and consumption of popular culture. Usefully for this project Bolter does suggest that whilst art has not saved culture in general that: "...feminist performance art, could still perform a critical cultural function" (Bolter in Schrank, ix). Schrank suggests a functional approach to avant-garde games: "We can evaluate the avant-garde according to how it opens up the experience of games (formal art) or the experience of being in the world (political art)." (Schrank 21) Yet art goes beyond the functional, and a whilst a feminist approach to aesthetic practices would agree that all representational practices express the ideologies of their makers it would seem more challenging to cleave form from politics.

However, the intention here is not to dismantle this important work on game aesthetics but to ask of it fundamentally feminist questions: Who gets to say what game art is? The academic? The art establishment? The player? Or the artist themselves? How might those of us holding the multiple privileges of academic tenure open and support the multitude of emerging artists, practices, and forms that game culture spawn? The response suggested here is to start by speaking to those engaged in a range of game art practices to seek to understand how they situate their work.

### **METHODOLOGIES**

We have used both primary (interviews and expert consultation workshops) and secondary research (archival research, online database research, artist documentation, academic work) approaches to this project. Building from initial steps that pulled together a range of interactive media, game art and performance work over the past fifty years we created a timeline to sketch connections between different generations of feminist interactive art. It has been possible to connect this work via shared affinities for aesthetics of action, embodiment, and audience-centered experience.

However, this has only been possible because of individual practices of documentation from artists, communities, curators, critics, and the academic record. Without artist archives like vTape in Toronto or the Langlois Foundation<sup>1</sup> in Montreal or the art historical work of academics like Dot Tuer and Caroline Langill it would have been impossible to trace work across generations of feminist artists. Whilst many of the artists placed on the timeline do not necessarily know each other's work it is relatively straightforward to see a range of thematic connections across the practices. Interest in technology, interactivity, embodiment, audience, and performance span the nearly fifty years of art chosen for the timeline. Work was selected to fit a loose intersection of feminist art practices and as such can be seen as exclusionary and subject to the selection bias of the authors. The hope is that others will develop and extend this work to be more widely inclusive of future feminist game art practices.

Timelines continue to be an important feminist technique that aim to push back against

the ongoing erasure of female histories pervasive in patriarchal society. The process of building a timeline to share with emerging game artists has been enriched by indepth interviews with select artists that explicitly work with games to identify more general contexts of contemporary game art.

### The Timeline



**Figure 1:** Connections Timeline - See accompanying PDF for zoomable and legible version

Work was selected from a concentrated period of desk and archival research and adopted an intentionally wide scope in identifying work drawn from contemporary art and installation contexts. Publications about the selected work were surveyed to assess impact in terms of generating curatorial, cultural, and academic outcome and keywords were assigned to the work selected to explore forms, themes, and delivery.

### The Interviews

Feminist approaches to gameplay performance look to apply critical approaches drawn from gender studies, feminism, and queer theory to explicate the potential of gameplay and game-making as a site of resistance (Westecott 2018). This paper moves on from this foundational interest to explore the perspectives of artists engaging games across a range of generations, who happen to identify as feminists in varying ways, and then to discuss some thematic connections across the intersections of feminist artistic practices presented on the timeline. The artists interviewed were Judith Doyle, Myfanwy Ashmore, Auriea Harvey, micha cardenas, Elizabeth LaPensée, Angela Washko and Hannah Epstein. Most interviews took place over Skype and the artists responded to a short set of questions that explored their relationship to games, game art, feminism, and players. The selection of artists was important to the discussion that follows because of the intersections of their identities, timespan, range, and impact of their practice, and the cross-generational implications of the study.

The interviews indicate both an increasing identification as a gamer and a growing proximity to game culture across generation on behalf of the artists interviewed. This is not surprising given the growth of digital game culture over past decades in which young artists have grown up playing mainstream games and finding in them personal meaning and significance. Access to both the internet and to videogame play has opened digital games to artistic curiosity yet the commercialization of these technologies complicates the ways in which artists can function in and around game culture. For example, Auriea Harvey said that both spaces she has made art for, net.art and games, seemed initially to offer possibility spaces to do interesting work and build direct relationships with an audience yet subsequently became "less interesting," due to commercial pressures. Tale of Tales have always been interested in a direct relationship with their audience and have rarely made work for galleries. Their art practice can be seen as 'born digital', moving from net.art in the nineties to independent game making in the noughties before explorations in virtual reality in more recent work. As artists, their interest in this direct connection is relatively rare and motivated a body

of work that succeeded in opening possibilities for future generations of game artists in terms of form, content, and distribution. This has been a far from comfortable experience that led to an abandonment of games as a culture they are interested in engaging. It is not coincidental that many artists interviewed here exist in academic spaces to survive and continue to make work. More established artists interviewed position themselves as outside of game culture whilst acknowledging that videogames provided both material and practices inherent to their artwork (Doyle and Ashmore).

All artists interviewed laughed in response to a question about their relationship with the art market and although their approach and perspective varied there was generally a lack of interest in monetizing work. Judith Doyle, for example, placed heavy emphasis on non-commercial practices that prioritize a community of artists interested in building new forms of social interaction. Harvey said that historically her work was not created for gallery spaces, and normally showed badly in the art market although curators were now savvier about how to exhibit work. LaPensée emphasized that she wants her work to be as accessible as possible and not to be stuck in galleries or limited spaces - her communities and the people who play her games are primarily indigenous and there are a lot of access issues. In the indigenous art context, the notion that artwork shown should be 'traditional' had further complicated matters although with more indigenous curators the shift in understanding that indigenous artists have the right to express themselves in any medium they chose has become more prevalent. Sharp (2015) talks about the range of audiences for game art works, importantly splitting out different communities of interest and practice. For example, Sharp suggests that game art is more directed at contemporary art communities whilst art games are more focused on game communities. However, the response from interviewees suggest that these artists inhabit and address multiple communities and often those outside, or at least peripheral, to the machinery of either contemporary art or game culture. For example, does LaPensée's insistence on making games for her indigenous communities preclude an identification of her games as an art practice?

When asked about the emerging frameworks for discussing game art proposed by game scholars most interviewees expressed an aversion to having their practices labelled in such ways. Myfanwy Ashmore for example acknowledged that whilst Sharp's discussions of game art as that which used games as material for practice did lend itself to the way she works that this approach did not recognize that most of her work is informed by her own personal experience. Ashmore spoke about how she spends a lot of timing thinking about multiple aspects of the technology she uses both personally, culturally, and socially and lets that inform her artistic choices. This does not negate Sharp's point nor intent to expand the field but suggests that there are multiple layers at play (pun intended) in framing artistic practices.

Other interviewees emphasized that for them games were about an explicit relationship between the maker and the audience and that as a playable form of art that games are meant to be played and that emerging aesthetic frameworks did not necessarily acknowledge the co- dependencies inherent to these multiple interactions (Harvey and Epstein). When asked how important the player was in their work the response varied dependent on the specific artwork, for example in Ashmore's *Mario Battle No 1* (2000) the player was important because "...they had expectations of a game that was not giving them what they expected.", however in *Grand Theft Lovesong* (2010): "...the player was me, I was using the game controller as a vehicle for expression to control Nico, to make him dance". For Angela Washko it varies depending on whether she is making games or performing in them. When performing the other players are those that she is interacting with and their relationship to the game space and other players is what she is exploring as artist-researcher. In Washko's *The Game* (2016) the role of the player is to have "...an embodied experience of being engaged by pick-up artists."

Washko is interested in putting the player, especially male players, into a role that they may not have experienced before. Hannah Epstein thinks of her art as a gifting practice for which she is crafting a certain experience, a bizarre interaction, that she wishes someone would create for her thereby hoping to set up a dialogue between herself and the player.

There were multiple responses to the question of avant-garde games, with the emerging artists agreeing that game art was an avant-garde practice to a more tentative response from established artists. Myfanwy Ashmore, for example, felt the term avant-garde was tricky in that as an artist she responds to things happening in her life and in the communities she interacts with or understands globally. Ashmore said that it made sense that artists looked to games regardless of whether they were hacking or using Twine but that she did not think that was necessarily an avant-garde practice. She feels that artists engage in a wider cultural conversation and that the way they do so may be avant-garde but that this is difficult to generalize. Perhaps 'playing-with' games need to be distinguished from 'playing-to-expand' as set out by Schrank's framing of avant-garde games?

The interviewees were asked if their work was feminist and if so, in what ways and not surprisingly this question generated a range of responses from personal identifications to acknowledgement of support from feminist networks to a positioning of work as counter to the dominant and default masculinity of games as they are understood commercially. It is important here to acknowledge the multiplicity of feminisms that exist and the intersections of oppression that those who identify as women occupy. Whilst the artists selected for interview identify as women and produce work that can be understood as feminist art by an audience, the matter of individual identification on the part of the artist is important, both in terms of their own identities and how they identify their work. The rich range of responses to this question reinforced the multiple ways in which feminist art can be approached. From those who connected their activism with their art practice, to those whose identification as a 'troublemaker' allow them to comment on their experience of being a woman in technology, to an insistence on a 'feminine' approach to game making that functions outside existing form to those whose feminism entirely motivates their game making practice these women artists illustrate some of the multiple possibilities for feminist game artists and feminist game art. Interestingly the only artist interviewed who did not identify as feminist in some way did so because of her cultural heritage. Elizabeth LaPensée spoke about her Anishinaabeg upbringing, language and culture as creating the context for her work being interpreted as feminist and said that this was not necessarily intentional but grew from the way she was raised in an indigenous community.

### **Gameplay Performance Art**

Many of the artists interviewed made explicit reference to games as a performance form. Auriea Harvey identifies as "...at least 50% performance artist," for her, game design creates a stage for play to be completed by the player. Tale of Tales often use theatrical techniques in their art. In *Sunset* (2015) the player sees the player character through mirrors, and the protagonist does things that you do not necessarily agree with, the interest being in the differences between player and the player character. In *The Path* (2009) the girls look back at you which is intended to make explicit that you the player are always present. In *Bientot de L'Ete* (2012) at the end of the beach the player is confronted with a mirror. In Tale of Tales games, you are always confronted with yourself in some way. Harvey talks about how in working with Virtual Reality that this becomes extremely clear, that the artist is working with bodies. For Harvey, VR is not done at home which implies that players need to come to it, and in designing for new experiences it is important to consider how to ease that self-consciousness. Virtual Reality also almost always comes with bystanders so as an artist Harvey is curious as

to what are they doing and acknowledges that the artist is always actually creating two experiences at once, one for the player the other for the audience.

Washko's interest in reflecting ludic and real-life experience in her art practice creates a rich intertwining of artistically motivated social interventions in online game worlds. This is framed by Washko as performance art in relation to being a body in space that in MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) offers a specific context for performance by facilitating the taking on of the persona of a given avatar. Washko's performance as MMORPG avatars is invested in the idea of "...somewhat gently disrupting the everyday flow of the social game space." Washko discussed two of her WoW (World of Warcraft) performances: *The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft* (2012) in which she talks about feminism in-game to other players and *The World of Warcraft Psychogeographical Association* (2013) where she takes players on tours of uninhabited parts of the WoW map. With both works the experience is performed, documented, and shared online.

The artist interviews suggest that the evolution of game art would benefit from further open research that looks beyond canonical works, shows, or formal classification to be inclusive of a range of artist voices. The following brief discussion of major themes arising from the timeline suggests some common interests in feminist-identified work.

### MAJOR THEMES FROM THE TIMELINE

Whilst a deep analysis of all the works selected for the timeline is beyond the space available here the following discussion suggests some shared interests. Here we will focus on approaches to bodies, technologies, and interfaces — as one interconnected lens through which the art selected can be discussed - and these summaries prioritize themes evident across much of the work over detailed discussion of form.

### **Bodies**

An early project on the timeline *Demo Model* (1978) by Elizabeth Chitty illustrates the ways that much performance art engages a performer's body as interface between a performance, the technologies deployed and an audience providing one example of the ways in which feminist artists engage their bodies as central to their art practice. Digital performance practices form an important vector for the timeline indicated via the presence of the work of Isabelle Choinière whose dance pieces Le Partage des peaux I (1994) and La Mue de l'Ange (1999) explore the relationships between software and choreography by capturing motion and transforming it into video and sound, the performances function via the interplay of real and virtual bodies proposing a sense of expanded and extended bodies. Diana Burgoyne's Digital Body (1983) created tension in its use of technology in this audio-based interactive performance that she characterizes as 'Folk Art in the Digital Age', in that the choice of low-cost materials enables the piece to be created by anyone. This accessibility to the means of creation persists across much feminist art including that of game artists Hannah Epstein and Kara Stone. Later work by Burgoyne He Transmits/She Receives (1990) continues her exploration of the trace of the user's body in technology through handmade objects which: "...draw their strength from their handmade construction and their close connection to the everyday gesture of the body."2 This interest in the handmade resonates thematically across practices highlighted via the timeline.

The development of Virtual Reality art in the early nineties was led by a significant number of female artists. From Catherine Richards first Canadian Virtual Reality artwork *Spectral Bodies* (1991) to Brenda Laurel and Rachel Strickland's *Placeholder* (1992) to the internationally recognized work of Canadian artist Char Davies *Osmose* (1995) and *Ephemere* (1998) this early wave of VR art developed by women indicates an interest in the ability of these technologies to extend and reconfigure embodied

experience. A detailed investigation of these histories will be developed in future work but in the currently re-emerging area of VR it is evident that women have led new fields of artistic exploration. These patterns of technological innovation in which early activity by women is passed over in future mainstreaming of a particular industry is all too familiar to those of us invested in feminist work.

By the end of the noughties, with the convergence of online distribution, wider cultural interest in games, and more accessible tools it becomes possible to see a rise in both personal and political game making activity. This game art addresses the body of both the maker and the player in a range of ways: from exploring queer identity via game design in the work of Anna Anthropy or Christine Love; the exploration of female voice in work as diverse as Tale of Tales or Hannah Epstein; to Rachel Weil's celebration of girly games to themes of self-care, mental wellness, cybersex and romance in the art practice of Kara Stone much feminist game art centers on an embodied human experience.

### **Technologies**

Whilst not all artworks chosen for the timeline requires the use of computational or digital technology, all works do engage a range of technologies in their construction, display, and documentation. Here it is possible to understand technology in a wider sense: as subject, as tool and as material for artistic intent. Some work is concerned with the technologies of participation and interaction with art, culture, and society regardless of any digital component whilst others engage directly with the expansions to human experience made possible via technological evolution.

The works that do directly engage digital technologies do not do so as an end but always to make a larger point, to carry out a deeper artistic inquiry. This can be seen as a type of prescience, for example, the work of Nell Tenhaaf since the nineties has been interested in "...the idea of novel social relations that emerge in our interactions with digital media...[and] draws out the agency that an artificial entity can exhibit..."3. Tenhaaf ascribes agency to technology itself and believes that it is the role of art to make people aware of the ontologies of emerging technology. Her view is that the artifacts arising from computational research refigure a human-centered view of social relations. Some twenty years from the start of this work much of human society is built on computational technologies, an often-invisible layer holding increasing power over human existence. Tenhaaf's ongoing interest in technology, partly focused on genetics and artificial life has manifest in user-activated works including UCBM (1999) that explores notions of control in which the user is implicated in the development of genetic algorithms. PsXXYborg (2013) by Epstein, Yee and Leitch explores similar themes as an art game dealing with issues of agency, gaze and mirroring in a mythic world presented on dual screens.

One key difference across the generations of artists featured lies in their approach to technology, early work shows a deep interest in how digital technology impacts the human condition whilst more recent work appears to accept computation as part of the tools to hand for the artist, and not necessarily of interest in and of itself.

### **Interfaces**

In a similar manner to the above brief discussion of technology beyond computation, the term interface can be understood as a point of connection at which two things meet and interact. In computational terms this normally refers to how a user communicates with a computer and in the context of this paper we use the term to refer to the ways in which an audience member interacts with an artwork. The first work selected Audrey Capel Doray's *The Wheel of Fortune* (1968) consists of a barrel-shaped electronic sculpture that invites viewers to spin a disk that triggering light and sound that when it

stops shows a fragment of a collage with audio, the viewer response can then activate the wheel. Using the iconography of a fairground game the viewer is invited to play with the art piece. Interfaces to the art shown vary from the tacit to the social, with much of the performance work explicitly including the audience for example Anna Banana's *Banana Olympics* (1975) invited the audience to participate in a shared social experience following the rules of a televised formal game.

Across the timeline, the expectation of engagement on behalf of the audience varies from a more traditional passive viewing experience to movement-triggered audiovisual experience to hypertext choices to full-body immersion via Virtual Reality technologies. The range of interfaces to the artwork presented can be situated on a continuum of action from viewing to inhabiting. Whilst the level of engagement with the artwork provided by the artist varies across the timeline, later works are not necessarily more interactive than earlier ones. One key difference lies in the growing accessibility of technologies of distribution and delivery. Since the introduction of the internet and digital distribution, physical exhibition is not the only way that an audience can access a particular artwork. Many art games, for example, are available for download, or playable in browser, which potentially increases the reach of the work to a much wider audience.

Many of the early works shown on the timeline use a series of conceptual approaches to interface with their audience. For example: the early work of Doray, Frenkel, Kikauka and Paterson use elements of chance to provide variance in their work. By widening definitions of technology and interaction beyond current assumptions it is possible to see the shift in interfaces with audiences over time. Across the timeline there is use of humour and absurdity to make more serious points, for example in the performances of The Peanettes, Anna Banana and The Clichettes, Paterson and more recently the work of Epstein. Further, issues of sexuality occur in the art of Mars, Sterbak, Fisher, Love and Stone. From the use of chance, humour, the body (via wearable art and as interface) as unifying metaphor; themes like intimacy, the handmade and sexuality, to practices like hacking (whether bodies or reality) and modding and via an ongoing interest in collaboration and process much of the work shares a common interest in the aesthetics of action, embodiment, and audience-centered experience.

Situating these works together on a feminist timeline is a speculative act and can be seen as "promiscuous" in Childers et al. (2013) sense of a feminist methodology that seeks "re-politicization...in the negotiation of desires and material reality" (518) wherein tools from feminist histories are taken up in service of feminist futures.

### CONCLUSION

Whilst in many ways the interviews complicate discussions circling more widely around game aesthetics, the timeline itself proved a useful tool to explore, in a very general way, commonalities in approach across generations of feminist artists. It is interesting to note that despite the significant differences in technological adoption in the almost-fifty-year span of the timeline that many shared issues of personal and political interest can be seen in the small section of work surveyed. Future directions could involve development of an online database for this work open to future addition to ensure a widely accessible and ongoing record.

Feminism has always been more effective when it has agreed to individual differences whilst working towards common goals and it is the hope here that enough commonality can be seen across these generations of feminist artists and art to show that there is ongoing benefit to maintaining a public record of feminist work of this nature. That it

is indeed necessary and productive to take an expansive view of art practices to seed more nuanced discussions for the future of game studies.

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# Remakina Garnes



























































































































































































































































































































