

AGENCY AND LIMITATIONS

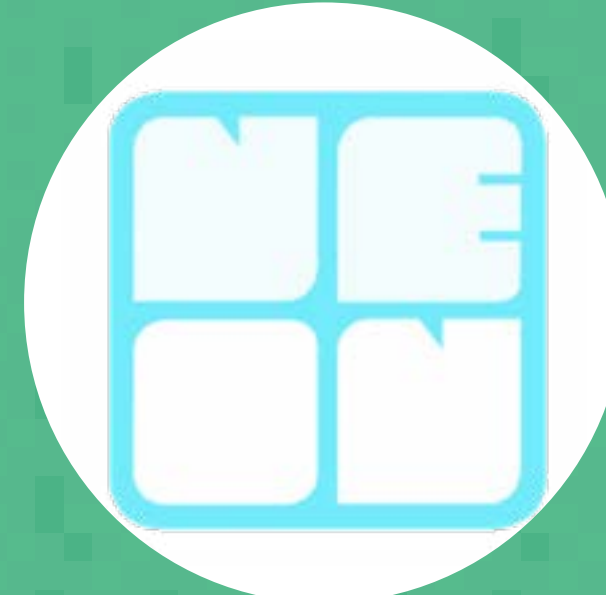
Zoyander Street

ABOUT ME

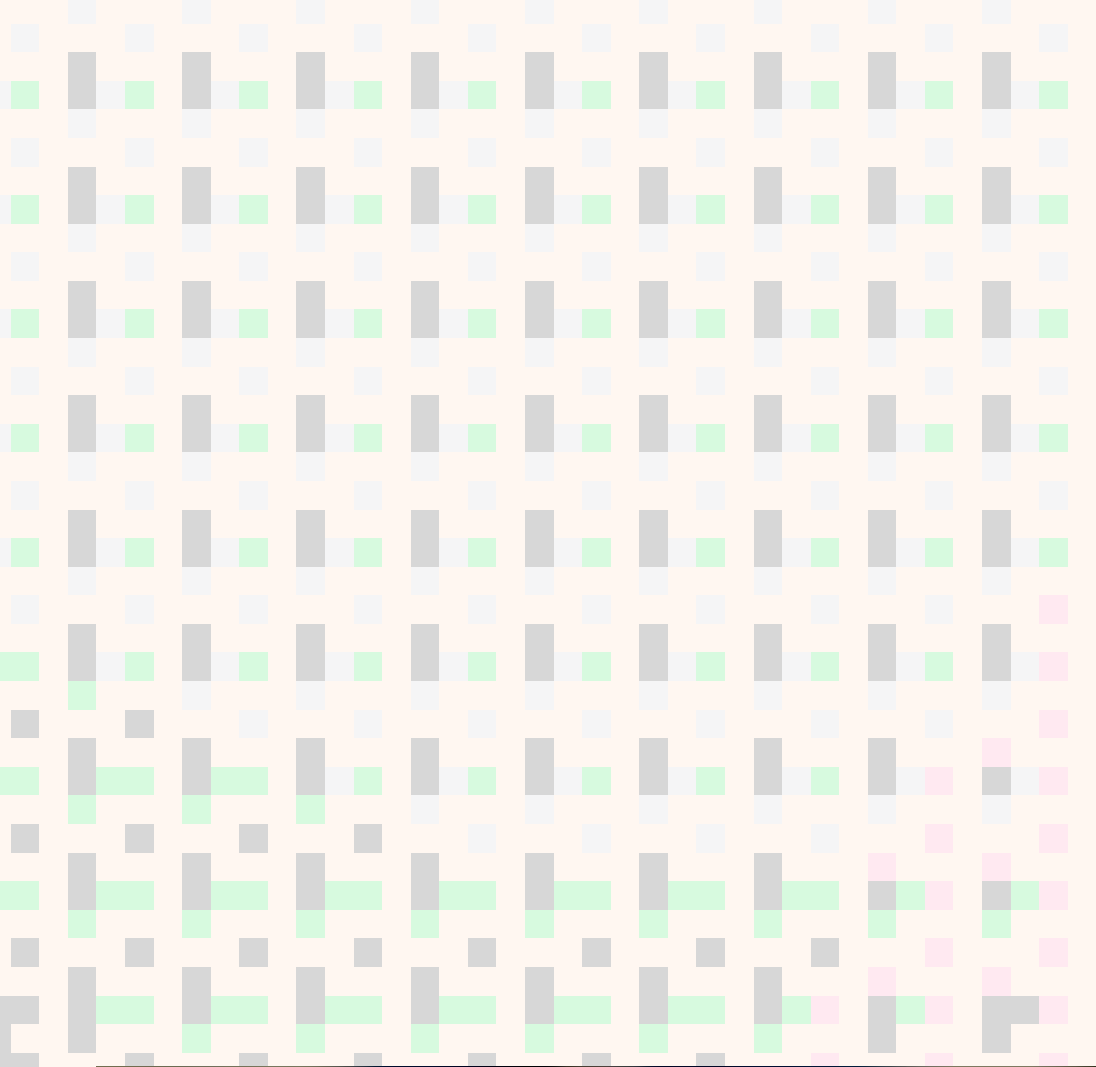
@zoy@merveilles.town

[@zoyander](https://twitter.com/@zoyander)

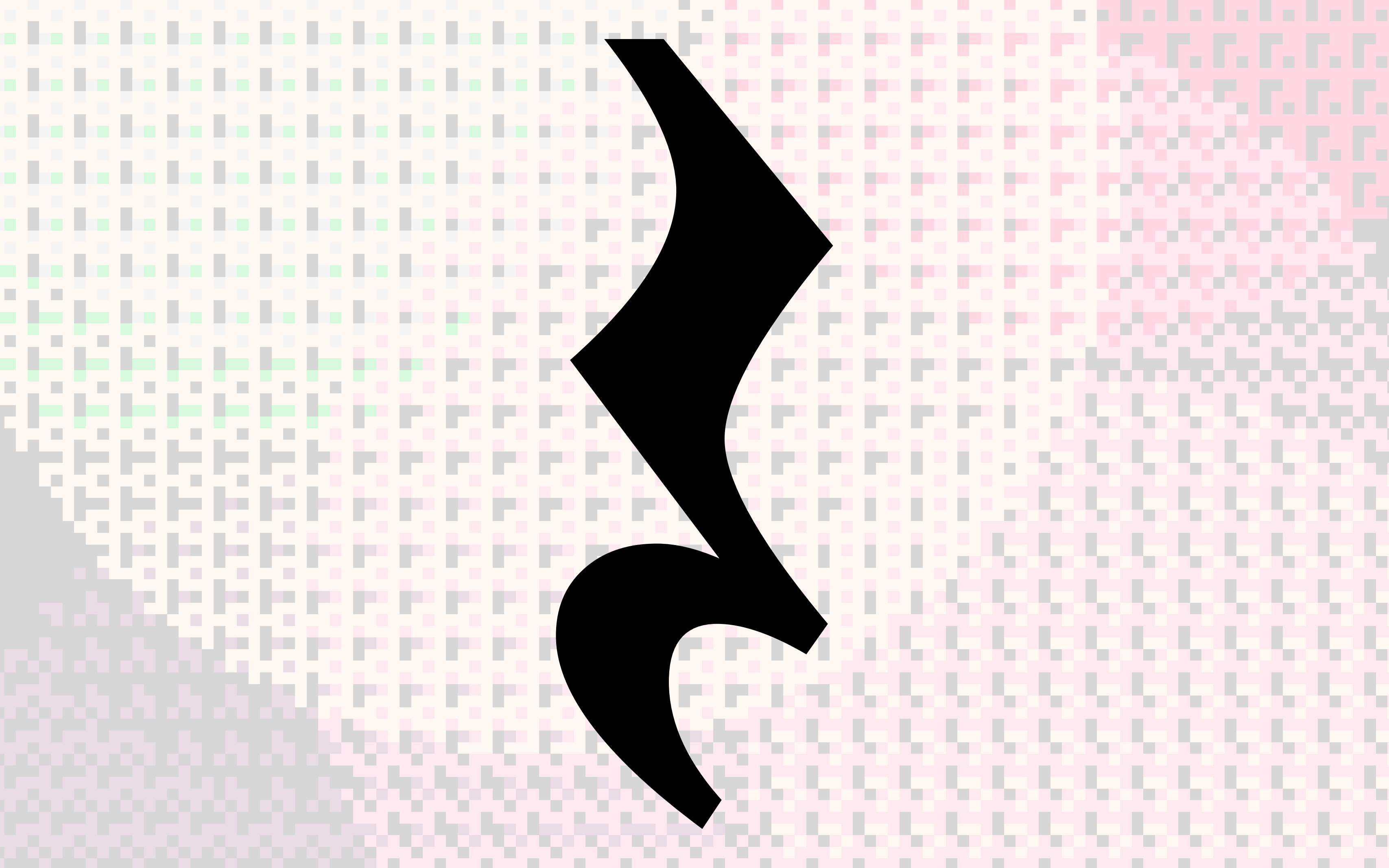
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AGENCY IN IMMERSIVE MEDIA



Interactive portraits - Trans People in Japan
Site Gallery, 2018. Photos by Jules Lister



Bettina Bódi (2019) 'Can Playfulness Be Designed? Understanding Playful Design through Agency in Astroneer'
Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture. 2021; Vol. 12 (1), pp. 39–61

THREE TYPES OF AGENCY

Representation


i.e. diversity and participation in communities as audience agency

Narrative

i.e. the player's ability to change the outcome of a story

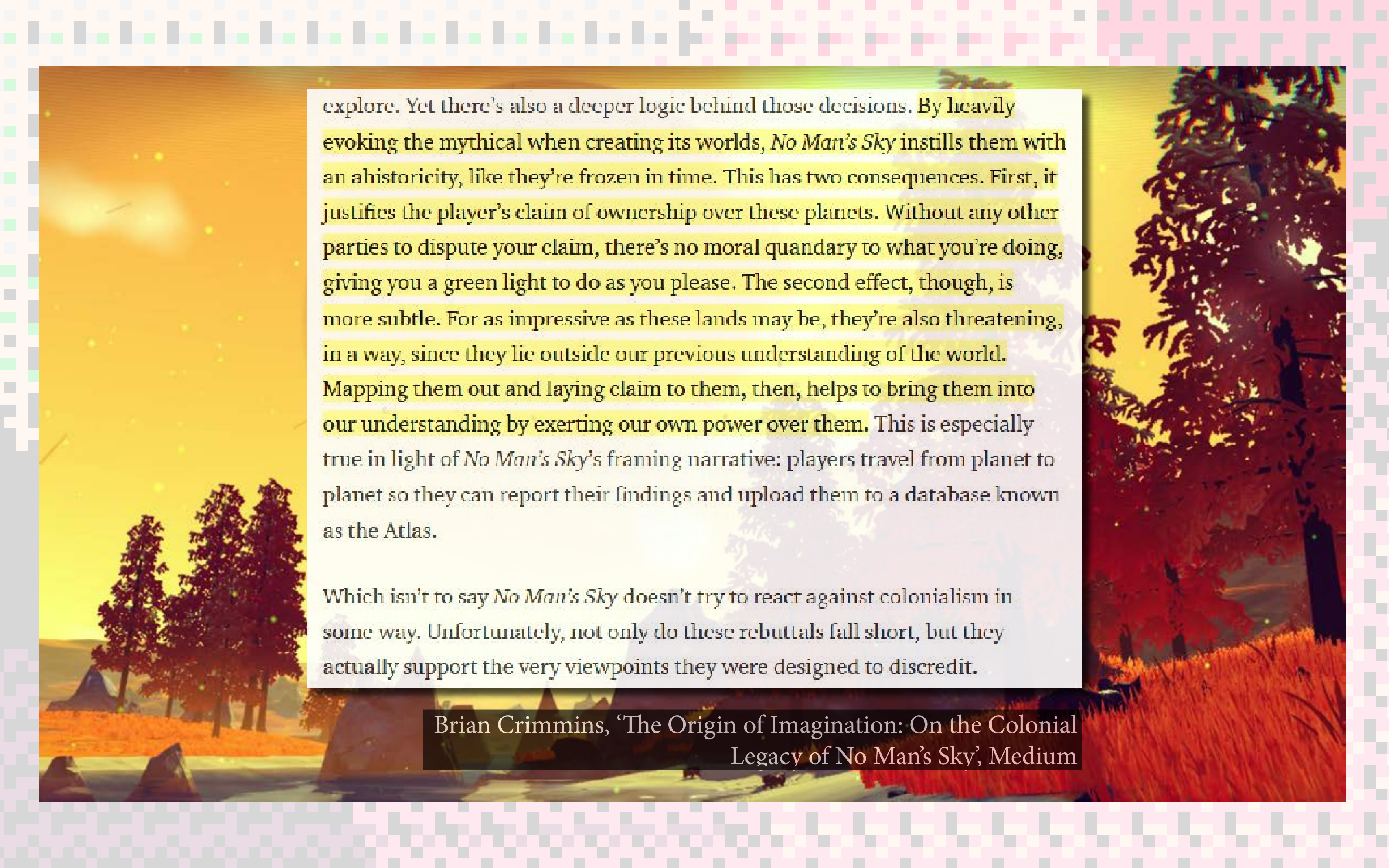
Mechanics

agency as the material affordance of interactive media



It's this story I always come back to while playing *No Man's Sky*. Cook and his crew, striking off into the unknown and reporting back to England. While Cook's voyages began as an effort to discover, they quickly morphed into an effort to observe — which is the primary action of *No Man's Sky*. While most space games are about conquest and colonization, Hello Games has given us a game where the player primarily discovers, witnesses, and attempts to catalogue the galaxy. Meeting aliens never devolves to outright warfare, but instead becomes a process of learning enough of their language to trade and resupply — and when things go wrong, it's through misunderstanding rather than malice.

Roberth Rath, 'No Man's Sky is a Captain Cook Simulator', ZAM



explore. Yet there's also a deeper logic behind those decisions. By heavily evoking the mythical when creating its worlds, *No Man's Sky* instills them with an ahistoricity, like they're frozen in time. This has two consequences. First, it justifies the player's claim of ownership over these planets. Without any other parties to dispute your claim, there's no moral quandary to what you're doing, giving you a green light to do as you please. The second effect, though, is more subtle. For as impressive as these lands may be, they're also threatening, in a way, since they lie outside our previous understanding of the world. Mapping them out and laying claim to them, then, helps to bring them into our understanding by exerting our own power over them. This is especially true in light of *No Man's Sky's* framing narrative: players travel from planet to planet so they can report their findings and upload them to a database known as the Atlas.

Which isn't to say *No Man's Sky* doesn't try to react against colonialism in some way. Unfortunately, not only do these rebuttals fall short, but they actually support the very viewpoints they were designed to discredit.

Brian Crimmins, 'The Origin of Imagination: On the Colonial Legacy of No Man's Sky', Medium

The Art of Failure

An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games

Jesper Juul



“[E]very day, hundreds of millions of people around the world play video games, and most of them will experience failure while playing. It is safe to say that humans have a fundamental desire to succeed and feel competent, but game players have chosen to engage in an activity in which they are almost certain to fail and feel incompetent, at least some of the time. In fact, we know that players prefer games in which they fail. This is the paradox of failure in games.”


EMPATHY ENGINES

Design Games That Are
Personal, Political, and Profound



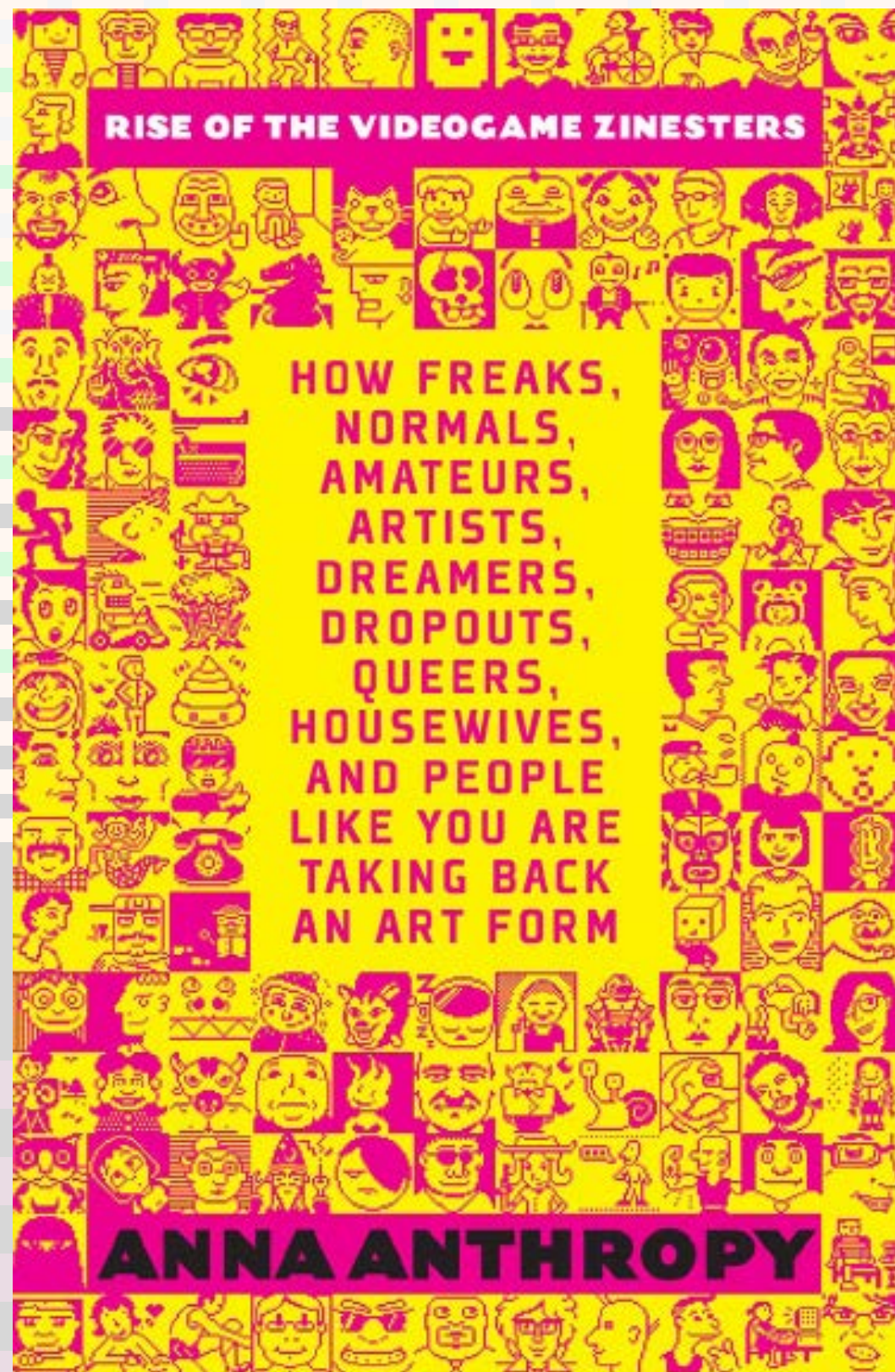
ELIZABETH SAMPAT

“By placing you in this circumstance instead of describing my own feelings, you’ll have feelings of your own. And at the end, you won’t feel sympathy—you’ll feel empathy, because you have a small taste of what it’s really like. That’s the immersive power of game systems in action.”



“More than four decades after Pong, players are tackling a range of heady subjects including cancer, depression and alcoholism. Instead of pumping adrenaline, these "empathy games" use the videogame form to tell stories that are far more personal than the Hollywood tropes most big budget games still rely on.”

(Conor Dougherty, Wall Street Journal, 2013)



“There’s nothing to stop us from making our voices heard now. And there will be plenty of voices. Among those voices, there will be plenty of mediocrity, and plenty of games that have no meaning to anyone outside the author and maybe her friends. But we’ll find new ways to sort that shit. And imagine what we’ll gain: real diversity, a plethora of voices and experiences, and a new avenue for human beings to tell their stories and connect with other human beings.”
(Anthropy 2012, 161)

Thank you very much... Miss- er, Mr? Brice.



Mattie Brice, Mainichi

Quinn
Dsey
Kler

game

you are, and the amount of work seems nothing less than insurmountable.

By the time you arrive home and change out of your uncomfortable work clothes the stress is weighing down from your desk. You want to sit down and work but the mere thought of trying to work sends *exhausted*, and feel a strong desire to simply hide in bed.

Do you...

- ~~1. Order some food, grab a drink, and hunker down for a night of work.~~
- 2. Reluctantly sit down at your desk and try and make yourself do something**
- 3. Turn on the TV, telling yourself you just need a quick half hour to unwind from work**
- 4. Crawl into bed. You're so stressed and overwhelmed you couldn't possibly accomplish anything**

You are depressed. Interaction is exhausting and you are more and more withdrawn.

Zoe Quinn (2013) Depression Quest

CRITIQUES OF “EMPATHY”

Pozo, T. (2018). Queer Games After Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft. *Game Studies*, 18.

Ruberg, B. (2015). No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt. *QED: A Journal in LGBTQ Worldmaking*, 2, 108-124.

Ruberg, B. (2019). Speed Runs, Slow Strolls, and the Politics of Walking. In N. Y. Press (Ed.), *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*.

Ruberg, B. (2020). Empathy and its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of ‘Empathy’ in Video Games. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 44.

Ruberg, B., & eds., A. P. (2018). Special issue on Queerness and Games. *Game Studies*, 18, 3.

four?

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Representation

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+ actions in the world?