Shifting Sensibilities, and the Uses of Dissonance

Interview with Melos HAN-TANI and Marina KITTAKA

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Salomé Honório (they/them) is a poet, writer, and researcher based near Lisbon, Portugal. They hold a PhD in Comparative Studies from the University of Lisbon, where they completed a thesis on political indeterminacy and contradiction in the writings of U.S. author Kathy Acker. They are currently a postdoctoral researcher with the FCT-funded project "UrbanoScenes. Post-Colonial Imaginaries of Urbanisation: A Future-Oriented Investigation From Portugal and Angola" (PTDC/GES-URB/1053/2021) at the Institute of Social Sciences of the same university. Their research interests include critical genealogies of queer theory and discourse; the problematization of the ideal of "trans visibility"; and the obviation of whiteness as a political and aesthetic category. Their poetry has been featured on platforms such as *Amberflora, ZARF*, the Earthbound Poetry Series, *Futch Press*, and *Smoke & Mold*.

Salomé Honório (S. H.): Looking at your collaborations over the years, we can trace a move from a design sensibility deeply indebted to classic 2D gaming, to one which draws on later eras (and technologies) for inspiration. What is your own perception of this gradual shift? And how do you feel about the discourse of nostalgia that seems to permeate gaming culture?

Marina Kittaka: Choosing what kind of game to make is always a very multifaceted process. Perhaps we feel like a certain lineage of design is underdeveloped. For instance, our current game, *Angeline Era*, takes inspiration from lesser-discussed action RPGs, like early *Ys* games' bump combat system. We also take into consideration what themes and narrative ideas we are interested in, usually based on things we are reading or experiencing. Visual decisions, like 2D or 3D, as well as what kind of genre or camera style we use, are also heavily influenced by our experience level and tools. Creating something interesting usually involves working a bit outside my comfort zone, but not so far out that it becomes too inefficient to finish. It is exciting to learn new skills, and I would not really feel content making a game that looks too much like one of my old games. The idea of mastering one particular 'look' is unsatisfying and makes me feel restless. Nostalgia is fine, but it is important to find other ways to connect with, evaluate, and create art.

Melos Han-Tani: From a formal standpoint, I have always been a bit more interested in 3D spaces in games, and how easy it is to plop down some geometry and create a space. There is a rich history of 2D games having a strong sense of space, perhaps created in part by the memory and resolution limitations of earlier games, which forced designers to abstract. Analogues to that in 3D exist, particularly in earlier 3D PC, PS1 or PS2-era games. But for the most part, the current generation of game designers does not understand – or does not even *realize* it does not understand – why 3D games feel lacking, relative to their sense of space. Evidence to my claim is the rise of checklists, quest markers, waypoints, external wikis and guides. Rather than making the best possible use of what 3D offers us as game designers, 3D games usually feel like a container for some mundane task, like pushing a block. Of course, most games – ours included – incorporate these elements to varying extents. But my point is that they often take precedence over the substance of 3D space itself. That 'lack' in 3D games might be why I am more drawn to designing them. Nostalgia is a comforting feeling in moderation. But in games, it often has a chokehold on someone's perception of what is pleasurable, often calcifying around sensations that childhood games gave them. I think it is important for adults to avoid the 'disappointment loop' of Zelda 20 not being just like Zelda 3, and to find other ways to enjoy games, or simply try new things. For designers, nostalgia can be a powerful motivation for analyzing why some games were enjoyable. But it can also be misleading, especially if an old game's design decisions are shallowly copied. It can also lead a designer to be too narrowly focused on what games might be useful reference points. Of course, if you are lucky enough to be okay with going for full nostalgia, then it can also be very profitable. As a developer, on the 'good' side, we might get pigeonholed as being a 'nostalgic reference' game. On the 'bad' side, there is a vocal minority, conjuring their own demons about our games representing an 'outdated past,' despite them often liking some choice old games. Either way, the game is not being engaged with on its own terms, but through a reductive lens of nostalgia.

S. H.: Correspondingly, how has the process of shifting from 2D to 3D projects – and even between the two, as is the case with *Anodyne 2* – impacted the ways you approach game making? Be it from a technical or a creative point of view?

Marina Kittaka: I love 3D. I think it is incredibly interesting to work with, and it feels in some ways like it is much easier to take inspiration from how it feels to move around in the world and put it into a 3D game. With 2D, I have always found it a drag to create polished images. Because the camera moves around in 3D, and creates new compositions of shapes, it feels a bit more forgiving in terms of meshing together varying degrees of art asset polish. On the downside, it can be exhausting trying to get a certain lighting effect in 3D, especially to create a really stylized look. And in general, it is a slow process compared to banging out pixel art. It would be a whole different level of fun and interesting if I could create 3D art faster.

Melos Han-Tani: Creatively, it is empowering, as we can generally look at any game and have an idea of what is making it work, having done much of it ourselves. Experience in 2D and 3D helps with confidence, as so much of game making is having to problem-solve as you go. Nothing is too hard, as long as there is time. On another note, working with different camera perspectives in 2D (top-down, side-scroll) and 3D (free camera, fixed camera) also expands our critical faculties when it comes to analysing other games or working on our own. I also feel like it is easier to take inspiration from everyday life with 3D games, in terms of thinking about spaces you walk through every day, and how they could be abstracted and represented in a game.

S. H.: *Anodyne* **makes rare use of semi-controllable glitches as a game (or post-game) mechanic. In retrospect, how do you feel about this decision to experiment with the game's final structure? And how do you feel it fits into the game's core themes and mechanics?**

Melos Han-Tani: I am happy it is there. It was a last-minute addition that made use of the game's existing structure, and thematically, it fit perfectly into Young as a character: either you end the game by meeting Briar, or you meticulously pore over every corner of the game, trying to find some alternate ending and meaning, only to be blocked by an impassable gate, with no answers beyond. On a character level, it feels like Young is searching endlessly. But for the player, I think it is a nice, quiet way to enforce the finitude of games, and how an important part of the playing process is to accept that there *is* an end.

S. H.: *Anodyne 2* **is, at times, a sharply discontinuous game, both at the level of narrative and in terms of gameplay. The horror sequence might be the single strongest example of this kind of deliberate dissonance, suddenly jolting players' expectations. Could you talk a bit about this particular segment, and what motivated it?**

Marina Kittaka: On a very basic level, the sequence was simply something I wanted to make in a general sense, and after consideration, it seemed like it could fit into Anodyne 2 in a beneficial way. I think one of the best parts of media by small creators is that there can be a very living sense of 'anything can happen'. With big, corporate media, there are certain assumptions that you can make based on the budget tier, target audience, etc. With the horror sequence, that is of course a deliberately jarring shift. However, there are many other oddities in Anodyne 2 that are more subjective: amateurish 3D models, weirdly obtuse jokes, unsettling characters… At no point was I trying to intentionally make 'bad' art. However, creating janky yet powerful art can have the effect of jostling the audience out of a 'consumer product evaluation' mindset. If you are playing a game, and inside your head thinking 'these graphics are 3/10', but then you have a deep and resonant experience with those graphics, then that might expand your experience of life a bit.

Melos Han-Tani: On my end, I riffed off the idea by including the 'debug area' content that happens right before entering the horror sequence. I think that moment helped to create the right sense of continuity between the 'regular game' and the horror sequence, rather than drop you right into it. Another note is that the horror section has the same controls as the 2D parts of the game, just slightly modified and with different art. I think it is a great example of slightly tweaking what we already had to convey something far different.

S. H.: Is the exploration of dissonance between different stylistic registers and forms of gameplay important to your creative process, more generally?

Marina Kittaka: Yes, I always want there to be interesting tension in my work. Contrasting styles is one way of doing that. One of the most fun parts of being a game designer is playing with expectations. Sometimes people think the goal is to ultimately fulfil the player's expectations or wishes. That is boring. I am always a bit scared of making art that is too instantly appealing or too perfectly captures a particular aesthetic. It is helpful for marketing, but I feel like it also kind of makes the work feel disposable.

Melos Han-Tani: For me, it is a powerful tool. It is kind of like juxtaposing two artworks in an art gallery: our perception of one object is different due to the context the other object adds. When I do get to write stories, I like intertwining different types of writing. There is a trend in games towards homogeneity, in which a glance at a trailer captures the entire experience. A game created to be the 'most action-packed,' the 'most heart-rending', etc. Kind of like buying 'orange juice' at the store. It will taste like orange. But life is full of jarring juxtapositions. Dissonance – huge jumps in the story's tone, different gameplay systems, 'contradictory' characters – feel truer to humanity. There is a point when a game is so polished, and its experience so 'perfect', that it feels like an odd, comforting illusion, almost. I want to see the imperfect human on the other end, when playing a game. In short, the world is complex and messy, and it is telling that people often say recent news would feel contrived in a piece of media. I feel like that speaks to an inherent failure in the collective imagination behind media-making.

S. H.: How – if at all – does this relate back to personal experiences, and ways of relating to social norms? Do you find that these kinds of discrepancies or discontinuities carry over from lived experience, to some extent?

Marina Kittaka: From a young age, I was always pretty insistent on having a funny or unique way of doing things. I think mainly it was just my personality. However, I also think it functioned as a kind of release valve for certain social and cultural pressures that I experienced. For example, I felt I had to be a 'perfect' Christian, student, etc... While simultaneously fearing that others saw me as a cold, robotic, 'high-achieving' Asian stereotype. Doing things my own way, even if it was just something small or insignificant, allowed me to carve out some space for my own sense of self.

Melos Han-Tani: Growing up in the American suburbs was a confusing experience. With non-dominant culture around me (Chinese language, Asian food, other minority friends...), this made life feel very shape-shifter-y in terms of what I should become: an athlete, a doctor, a banker. Or what friends to hang around: musicians, science kids, gamers. Neither

my mom (a Taiwanese 1.5-generation immigrant[1] who only rarely visited Taiwan) or dad (a mixed Irish/Japanese American) seemed to me to be as particularly situated within America's fabric as other families, although nowadays they have admirably eked out their own communities. As a kid I felt weirdness with our tiny extended family, and the relative smallness of trying to follow American traditions, like having barbecues or celebrating Thanksgiving. Every one of the hundreds of Asian friends or people I knew growing up had different family and living environments that felt unique in their own way of trying to fit into America, and which made me wary of easy-to-digest narratives about being 'Asian'. Since I did not have stereotypical 'Asian Parents', there was even less of a cultural narrative to hold onto. Generally, there was a sense of being an outsider in school and in college, and using academic performance as a way of fitting in, despite my grade school interests mostly being in music, games, or journaling. Nowadays, I see that this was in part just "How It Is Living in America", upwards class aspirations, and the effects cultural intermixing and immigration can have on kids. But I think it was informative on my taste in art-making, and a preference for works that speak to the ambiguities I experienced growing up, and still see around me today.

S. H.: With its strong emphasis on the Asian diaspora, *Sephonie* strongly arks back to *All Our Asias* (AOA), and the ways that earlier work explored personal and social perceptions of ethnicity, culture, and belonging. Would you consider this an important question in your work?

Melos Han-Tani: Yeah, although it has shifted a bit more outwards over the years, from specific questions of Asian-Americanness with AOA, to international 'Taiwaneseness' with Sephonie, and currently I am more interested in the cultural themes, and the different scales of culture in particular: from popular, state-led ones, like Corporate Pop Music, to local ones, like friends making games together. For a variety of reasons, I think one of the tricks to a better future is for people to feel less risk-averse about trying out new things (whether that be meeting others or consuming media) at smaller scales, rather than tuning in to the most heavily-marketed whatever. Rather than waiting for something to happen – a huge game or film to drop –, we should all be trying to make things happen, together. I think global media has tricked us into thinking people are really similar, when there is an inherent richness to every person.

S. H.: Do these factors impact your own experience of the gaming industry? What has it been like to navigate the primarily white, ciscentric, male-dominated and eurocentric spaces of western gaming culture? Be it in conversations with peers, or in interactions with larger forces in the industry?

Marina Kittaka: My experiences around this are all pretty squishy, and I am not sure how to compress it down. I do not recognize myself in most US discursive narratives about minorities and 'culture'. I do think that I communicate things about my experience in my art and writing. It has also been a lot of fun to team up with academics at the intersection of Asian American and games studies, such as C. Patterson[2] and T. Fickle.[3]

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1   Remark by the interviewer: The term 1.5 generation (abbreviated to 1.5G) is used to refer to people who immigrated as children, as opposed to first generation immigrants (born outside the country they migrate to) or second generation immigrants (whose parents were born abroad, but are born in the country their parents migrated to, themselves).
2   For more information, see: *Christopher B. Patterson.* [online]. [2023-11-18]. Available at: <https://grsj.arts.ubc.ca/profile/christopher-patterson/>.
3   See also: *Tara Fickle.* [online]. [2023-11-18]. Available at: <https://tarafickle.com/>.

Melos Han-Tani: I have met a lot of great people through games! Usually on the margins. However, I do come into contact with the dominating order of games a lot, and I mostly find it largely unimaginative, both on the part of other developers and on the business side. There is a slapstick quality to the way people in power self-justify their short-sighted practices, or how popular developers insularly co-network. Like, were we not in games to make good games? Maybe not. There is an absurdity to how people like me, on a smaller scale, are stuck reading tea leaves in order to market their way to a golden ticket (led on by the superstitious myths perpetuated by the 'upper indie class', who always seem to be making certain kinds of games)... Or, on the larger scale of big indie to corporate games, how people find themselves in a weird, quagmire-like cycle of making mediocre, platform-endorsed games in order to procure funding. I think games (or gamified apps like TikTok) are like the mental equivalent of oil and plastics companies, in terms of their pollution.

S. H.: How would you situate Sephonie within wider discussions about the ways in which we relate to nature – including discussions of climate change, the concept of the Anthropocene, and the irreversible effects of human action on the world at large? Are there any particular debates that influenced Sephonie's conception?

Marina Kittaka: Even though many of our games contain so-called environmental themes, my thoughts on this topic are fairly complicated. I am fascinated by biodiversity and learning about the natural world, and I consider it obvious that humanity's current relationship to the rest of the Earth is destructive and that it is incredibly important to change this for the better. However, I would say that Sephonie is not primarily *about* these themes. I tend to find 'green' pop culture frustrating – such as in the dynamic of D. Attenborough documentaries, vaguely scolding mankind, while actively obscuring context about things like colonialism, capitalism, urbanization, and their own production, that would give us a more meaningful and actionable understanding of our world.[4] With environmentalist themes in the media, there is so often a sort of compulsive push and pull dynamic of doom and hope, guilt and absolution, contamination and purity. I think this encourages audiences to anxiously turn inward, and also easily slips into an anti-human or eco-fascist logic. Sephonie is exploring very specific themes about borders and how we draw them: between nations, between groups, between organisms. It is not unrelated to environmentalism, but there is no desire to hook the player into that anxious push-pull cycle. It is a story about specific humans and the imperfect, sometimes frightening and beautiful ways that they experience connection.

Melos Han-Tani: Nothing inspired the environmental aspects specifically. For me, those stemmed more from how the game was founded around the limits of things like nationalism. A lot of problems seem to be caused by groups of people defining an identity that lets them exert superiority over other identity groups, and of course this is connected to the environment – e.g. for the middle class/'first world' countries to prosper, put the polluting factories in the lower class/'third world 's' backyards...

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4   For example, see: MARRIS, E.: *The Nature You See in Documentaries is Beautiful and False*. Released on 12th April 2021. [online]. [2023-11-18]. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/04/problem-nature-documentaries/618553/>.; TAN, J.: *Watching "A Life on Our Planet," or How I Ruined David Attenborough for Myself*. Released on 23rd May 2021. [online]. [2023-11-18]. Available at: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/watching-a-life-on-our-planet-or-how-i-ruined-david-attenborough-for-myself/>.

S. H.: We are witnessing a moment in gaming culture – and arguably, in pop culture at large – where trans creators are increasingly vocal, visible, and capable of reaching their desired audiences. How would you position yourselves in relation to this wider cultural landscape? Especially when it comes to the complexities of trans representation, and trans-affirmative storytelling?

Marina Kittaka: I do not really feel that plugged into gaming or pop culture these days, so it is difficult to situate myself. It certainly impacted my life positively, that being an indie game developer in the 2010s put me in circles with a lot of trans people. However, a lot of the promises of that cultural moment have kind of come to ring hollow, and in a broader sense, there is a significant cultural and political backlash against trans visibility, in the U.S. and beyond. So it is messy, but I am happy to live my life and make art, etc. I am genuinely happy if people feel represented or affirmed by my work, despite those concepts not really speaking to me that much, in terms of my own relationship to identity and art.

Melos Han-Tani: Although I am not trans, there is a lot about trans-created media that speaks to me from an angle relating to race, identity and cultural belonging – and likewise with queer media, more generally. So I would say my work has some overlap with those themes. Games are such a great space to unsettle your sense of self and open up the idea that you can change in some way. I feel very flattered that games like Anodyne or Anodyne 2 have been cited by some trans players as one of the pieces in their journey to gender self-discovery. Regarding representation... Generally speaking, I think the best work does not focus on trying to be perfect representation, and the best analysis does not try to hail something as universally representative. I think keeping this in mind, creators and critics can avoid pushing forward western-centric and white-centric narratives or frameworks of understanding – with regards to gender, race, etc. – the way it can sometimes happen with Americans criticizing other countries or work from other countries, with different histories.

S. H.: You recently announced Angeline Era, which seems to signal a move into more fantasy-based landscapes and tropes. What shaped this decision, and in what other ways do you feel the project stands apart from your previous work?

Marina Kittaka: Angeline Era has an Ireland-inspired setting, which definitely leads to more overlap with European fantasy genre media. That basically came from the fact that I got interested in Ireland for some reason over the past few years. Funnily enough, this is by far our most rigorously researched game yet, at least on my end. It is set in an alternate history 1950s Earth, and I have really dug into the history of Japanese Americans and the early Christian church, as well as Ireland and other topics. I had used up a lot of floating imagery from my personal life experiences in our previous games, so I really wanted to dig deep into whatever topics called out to me and replenish my well of inspiration. Many games draw on similar imagery, so it has been tricky to find Angeline Era's unique visual identity – the devil is really in the details, this time around. It is an exciting challenge, and I cannot wait to show more!

Melos Han-Tani: Early on in Angeline Era's development, we had a huge range of ideas that were moving in a kind of Anodyne-ish direction, in the sense that parts of the game felt self-referential to video games. Even with the bumpslash ideas in place, it felt a bit up in the air as to what exact world design we'd be expressing them within. The research

starting from Ireland helped give a more concrete basis for where the levels would be situated, as this is probably the most level design intensive game we have made. Compared to other games, there has been more focused research into games of all sorts (especially in the 80s and 90s), to get a more holistic sense of the evolution of action and its goals. Generally, what I have identified are two things. First, there is this still existing yet rare art of expression, through the shapes and spaces you can find in early action games like *Hydlide 2,* or a kind of raw power to the 3D spaces of something like *Brightis*, or the enemy compositions of *Dark Souls 1.* Playing a bunch of these games has helped me develop my direction in keeping the levels unique, intriguing, unusual, and communicating in a vocabulary unique to Angeline Era. Secondly, I hope playing Angeline Era gets people more interested about the physical aspects of their life, as well. This is more abstract, but I think action games nowadays tend to lack a connection to the sense of physically *being* in real life. Maybe it is because the internet takes up more free time, but you can see this most evidently in the high focus on animation, which in the most ridiculous cases – like *Genshin Impact* finishers, which amount to just doing 10,000 damage – are a kind of sensory overload. The other one is the concept of the dodge roll, which cancels out physical logic in favour of preserving action fantasy. The physicality of S. Arakawa and M. Gins' *Site of Reversible Destiny*, which I finally visited this year (2023), was an important piece in helping me put these ideas into place: the way in which environmental feedback – for instance, through slanted stones – can help us think more carefully about our relation to the physical environment. So I want to do a bit of that with my enemy and level design direction in Angeline Era*:* unusual ways of moving the character, anticipating enemy movements, etc… while using micro-frictions from stuff like sports to influence my ideas. I hope this can get players thinking more about their regular life, after they have played the game!

S. H.: The bumpslash system seems to present players with a surprising twist on standard, action button-based game mechanics. What design options does it open up? And what kinds of limits does it create, in terms of those productive constraints that help shape level design?

Melos Han-Tani: The bumpslash, combined with the top-down camera, lets us make fairly chaotic screens, since it is easy to see all the information at once. There is an athletic, playful physicality to the bumpslash that allows enemies and situations to feel almost sportslike. For one, fighting some enemies might feel faintly like certain types of ball games. By moving beyond the current standard of timing-based action (dodge rolls, parries, and combos), the level design allows you to be as aggressive as you want, judging for yourself what is the best time to draw away from a group of enemies. I am able to use enemies in a more compositional manner: screens full of enemies *feel* different to fight, sometimes in surprising ways. I can communicate all sorts of environments or moods with the vocabulary of these enemies, obstacles, and level geometry.

S. H.: Finally, what can we expect from Analgesic Productions in the near – and maybe not so near – future? Any hints of projects under development?

Melos Han-Tani: We are hoping to have Angeline Era out sometime in the second half of 2024. As far as collaborations between Marina and I go, we are not sure. It depends on how well Angeline Era sells, and our interests in the future! We have thrown around ideas like reusing the Angeline Era combat engine, returning to the Anodyne series, or Sephonie prequels… But who knows – maybe it will be something else! Personally, I have a lot of

story, game and research ideas that I am exploring in my spare time, so perhaps those will come to bear on whatever we do next.[5]

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5   For the latest on one of M. Han-Tani's long-term side projects, see: HAN-TANI, M.: *Sanpo Game Devlog: (006) – Moving on from "Shuffled World"*. Released on 15th September 2023. [online]. [2023-11-18]. Available at: <https://melodicambient.substack.com/p/sanpo-game-devlog-006-moving-on-from?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=reader2>.