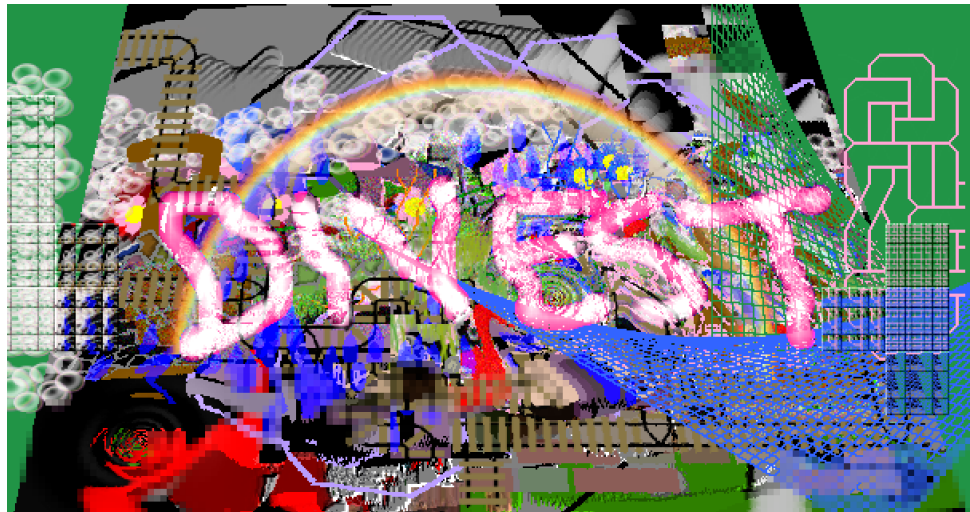Marina Kittaka Follow

Jun 25, 2020 · 18 min read · ▶ Listen

Divest from the Video Games Industry!

This piece seeks to contextualize the problems of the video games industry within its own mythology, and from there, to imagine and celebrate new directions through a lens of anti-capitalist and embodied compassion.

My name is Marina Ayano Kittaka (she/her), I'm a 4th gen Japanese American trans woman from middle class background. I work in a variety of different art forms but my bread and butter are the video games I make with my friend Melos Han-Tani, e.g. the Anodyne series.

I am not an authority on any of these topics, and it's not my intention to speak over anyone else or offer comprehensive solutions, only to be one small piece of a larger conversation and movement. I use declarative and imperative sentences for clarity, not certainty.

I seek to follow the leadership of BIPOC abolitionist thinkers such as Ejeris Dixon, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, adrienne maree brown and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, along with the work of local (to me) groups like Black Visions Collective and MPD150. I welcome feedback, especially if you believe that something I've said is harmful.

This piece is inspired by the latest wave of survivors bravely sharing their stories (it is June 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic and global uprising against anti-Black racism and the unjust institution of police). I believe and stand with survivors.

The Problems

The video games industry has many deep, tragic, and intertwining problems. It's beyond the scope of this piece to examine the entirety of games culture (I will focus on development and, to a lesser degree, distribution). It's also beyond the scope of this piece to convince anyone that these problems exist, but I'll be moving forward with the assumption that we agree that they do. Here is an incomplete list:

- Pervasive sexual abuse

- Workplace abuse, bullying, crunch, burnout, generally exploitative labor conditions

- Sexism, racism, and other bigotry — the above abuses are accentuated along these intersections (e.g. the sexual abuse of marginalized genders or the exclusion of racial minorities).

- Supply chain problems including conflict minerals and exploitative factory conditions

- Heavy environmental impacts

Non-Judgement

This conversation may spark hurt or defensive feelings. I want to address this directly. Many people love video games, and not only that, but are deeply invested in the world of games. I'm particularly sensitive to marginalized creators who have fought hard to find a foothold in the games industry and deserve to follow their dreams. I exist more on the periphery of the games industry and my goal is not to center my personal anger or disdain — but instead to push toward a world with better games, played by happier audiences, made by creators who feel safe and appreciated.

Additionally, this conversation is not about the merits of any individual AAA (large studio) game. It's not about creating strict rules about media consumption. It's not about shaming people into certain beliefs or behaviors. When we try to act like our personal tastes must align with our most high-minded ideals, we encourage shame or denial — things that distance us from others.

Nor is this exclusively about AAA. This is about any situation where *the power becomes the point*. There can be gradations of industrial complexes and power complexes existing from the smallest micro-communities to the largest corporations. We can divest on all levels.

The Industry Promise

I believe that many of us as game creators and audiences have (consciously or not) bought into the idea that happiness and wonder are scarce and fragile commodities — precious gems mined via arcane and costly processes. Life can often be isolating, alienating, and traumatic, and many of us cope by numbing some parts of ourselves[1]. The poignance and pleasure of simply *feeling* becomes rare.

In answer to this perceived scarcity, The Industry swoops in with a promise that technological and design mastery can "make" people feel. It does this not only blatantly in marketing copy or <u>developer</u> <u>interviews</u>, but also in unwieldy assertions that <u>games can make you empathic</u>, or through the widespread notion that games are an exceptionally "immersive" art form due to "interactivity". Embedded in this promise is the ever-alluring assumption that technological progress is linear: games overall *must* be getting better, more beautiful, more moving, because that is simply how technology works! Or perhaps it is the progress itself that is beautiful — each impressive jump towards photorealism delivering the elusive sense of wonder that we crave.

At this point, I could argue that the benefits are not worth the cost, that the aforementioned Problems outweigh even this idealized vision of what games provide. But I'm guessing many of you might find that unsatisfying, right? Why don't we simply reform the system? Spread awareness and training about sexism and racism, create more art that engenders empathy, encourage diversity? Isn't it throwing the baby out with the bathwater to "halt" technological progress in order to fix some issues of bad leadership here or abusive superstar there?

Here we come to my main purpose in writing this piece: to expand the imaginative space around video games by tearing out The Industry Promise at its roots. If wonder is not scarce and progress is not linear, then the world that rises from the ashes of the Video Games Industry can be more exciting and more technologically vibrant than ever before.

Precious Gems

Take a deep breath and picture some of the happy moments of your life. Maybe some of them look like this:

Staying up late and getting slaphappy with a friend; looking out over a beautiful landscape; a passionate kiss; collaborating with friends in a session of DnD or Minecraft; a thoughtful gift from someone you admire; a cool drink on a hot summer day; making a new friend who feels like they really see you; singing a song; a hug from someone who smells nice; getting junk food late at night and feeling naughty about it; the vivid colors and sounds of a rainy city evening;

drifting to sleep in the cottony silence of a smalltown homestead; getting a crew together to see a new movie; the scent of the air at sunrise; having a meaningful conversation with a nonverbal baby.

Picture the games you loved most as a child, the games that felt full of possibility and mystery and fun. Were they all the most technologically advanced? The most critically revered?

Maybe your happy moments look nothing like this. Or maybe you can't recall feeling happy and that's the whole problem. But my point is that happiness, joy, fun… these things are at their core fluid, social, narrative, contextual, chemical. In both its best and most common incarnations, happiness is not shoved into your passive body by the objective "high quality" of an experience. Both recent psychological research and traditions from around the world (e.g. Buddhist monks) suggest that happiness and well-being are growable skills rooted in compassion.

Think of all the billions of people who have ever lived, across time, across cultures, with video games and without, living nomadically or settling in cities or jungles. In every moment there are infinite reasons to suffer and infinite reasons to be happy[2]. Giant industry's monopolistic claims to "art" or "entertainment" have always been a capitalist lie, nonsensical yet inescapable.

The Narrative of Technology and Progress

Is this an anti-technology screed? Am I suggesting we must all go outside like in the good old days and play "hoop and stick" until the end of time? Let's start by unpacking what we mean when we say "technology". Here's one definition:

> *Technology is the sum of techniques, skills, methods, and processes used in the production of goods or services or in the accomplishment of objectives.*
> — Wikipedia

Honestly, technology is such a vague and broad concept that nearly anything anyone ever does could be considered technological! As such, how we use the term in practice is very revealing of our cultural values. Computing power, massive scale, photorealistic graphics, complex AI, VR experiences that attempt to recreate the visual and aural components of a real or imagined situation… certainly these are all technologies that can and have grown in sophistication over time. But what The Industry considers technological progress actually consists of fairly niche goals that have been artificially inflated because capitalists have figured out they can make money this way. Notably, I don't use "niche" here as an insult — aren't many of the most fascinating things

intrinsically niche? But when one restrictive narrative sucks all the air out of the room and leaves a swath of emotional and physical devastation in its wake… isn't it time to question it?

What if humans having basic needs met is "technological progress"? What if indigenous models of sustainable living are "hi-tech"? What if creating a more accessible world where people have freedom of movement opens up numerous high-fidelity multisensory experiences? These questions go far beyond the scope of the video games industry, sure, but in the words of adrienne maree brown, "*what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system*"[3].

What We Hope to Gain

The kneejerk reaction to dismantling an existing structure tends to be a subtractive vision. Here we are, living in the exact same world, but all blockbuster video games have been magically snapped out of existence… only hipster indie games remain! Missing from this vision is the understanding that our current existence is itself subtractive — what we cling to now comes at the expense of *so much good*. The loss of maturing vision and skill when people leave the industry due to burnout, sexual assault, and racist belittlement. Corporate IP laws and progress narratives that disincentivize preservation and rob us of our rich and fertile history. The ad-centric, sanitized, and consolidated internet that chokes out democratized community spaces. The fighting-for-scraps mentality that the larger industry places on small creators with its sparing and self-interested investment. Our current value system limits not only what AAA games are *but also what everything else has the capacity to be.*

Utopia does not have an aesthetic. We don't need to prescribe the correct "alt" taste. Games can be high and low, sacred and profane, cute and ugly, left brain and right. Destroying the games industry does not mean picking an alternate niche to replace it. Instead, we seek to open the floodgates to a world in which countless decentralized, intimate, and overlapping niches might thrive.

When we decentralize power, we not only create the conditions for more and better games, we also diminish the conditions under which abuse can flourish. Many of the stories of abuse hinge on the abuser wielding the power to dramatically help or harm the careers of others. The consolidation of this power is enhanced by our collective investment in The Industry Promise (not forgetting the wider cultural intersections of oppression). Mythologized figures ascend along a linear axis of greatness, shielded by the horrifying notion that they are less replaceable than others because their ranking in The Industry evidences their mystical importance.

What's Next?

Here is a fundamental truth: we do not need video games. Paradoxically, this truth opens up the world of video games to be as full and varied and strange and contradictory as life itself.

So. Say you agree with all or part of my assertions that collectively we may proceed to end the video games industry by divesting our attention, time, and money, and building something new with each other. But what does that look like in practice? I don't have all the answers. I find community very difficult due to my own trauma. Nonetheless, I'll do some brainstorming. Skim this and read what speaks to you personally, or do your own brainstorming!

Center BIPOC/queer leadership

I.e. people who have been often forcibly divested from the majority culture and have experience in creating alternatives. Draw on influences outside of media e.g. transformative justice, police abolition, and prison abolition. Books like Beyond Survival and Emergent Strategy are based in far deeper understanding of organizing than anything written here, and are much more relevant to the direct and immediate issues of things like responding to sexual assault in our communities.

Divest from celebrity/authority

Many people will tell you that their most rewarding artistic relationships are with peers, not mentors and certainly not idols. Disengage from social media-as-spectator sport where larger-than-life personalities duke it out via hot take. Question genius narratives wherever they arise. Cultivate your own power and the power of those adjacent to you. If you feel yourself becoming a celebrity: take a step back, recognize the power that you wield over others, redirect opportunities to marginalized creators whose work you respect, invest in completely unrelated areas of your life, go to therapy.

Divest from video games exceptionalism

Academics have delved into video games' inferiority complex and the topic of "video games exceptionalism", which is tied into what I frame as The Industry Promise above — the idea that video games as a technological vanguard are brimming with inherent value due to all the things they can do that other forms of media cannot. This ensures that gobs of money get thrown around, but it's an ahistorical and isolating notion that does nothing to actually advance our understanding of games as a form (Interesting discussion on this here, which reminds me of Richard Terrell's work regarding vocabulary).

Reimagine scale

Rigorously question the notion that "bigger is better" at every turn. With regards to projects, studios, events, continually ask "why?" in the face of any pressure to make something bigger, and then try to determine what might be lost as well as what might be gained. Compromising on values tends to be inevitable at scale, workplace abuse or deals with questionable entities. For me this calls to mind the research led by psychologist Daniel Kahneman suggesting that the happiness benefits of wealth taper off dramatically once a comfortable standard of living is reached. Anyone who's ever had a tweet go viral can tell you that it's fun at first and then it just becomes annoying. Living in a conglomerated, global world, we regularly have to face and process social metrics that are completely incomprehensible to the way our social brains are programmed, and the results are messy. Are there ever legitimate uses for a huge team working on a project for many years? Sure, probably, but the idea that this is some sort of ideal normal situation that everyone should strive for is based on nothing but propaganda.

Redefine niche

Above I suggest that AAA is niche. I believe it's true broadly, but that it's *definitely* true relative to their budgets. What do I mean by this? AAA marketing budgets are reported to be an additional 75–100% relative to development costs (possibly even higher in some cases). Isn't this mindblowing? If a game naturally appealed to proportionately mass numbers of people by virtue of its High Quality or Advanced Technology, then would we really need to spend tens or hundreds of millions of dollars just to convince people to play it? For contrast, Melos estimates that our marketing budget for Anodyne 2 was an added 10% of development costs and it was a modest commercial success. Certainly marketing is a complex field that can be ethical, but to me, there is something deeply unhealthy about the capacity of large studios to straight up purchase their own relevance (according to some research, marketing influences game revenue three times more than high review scores).

On a separate but related note, I don't buy that all the perceived benefits of AAA such as advancements in photorealism will vanish without the machine of The Industry to back them. People are astonishing and passionate! It won't always necessarily look like a 60 hour adventure world, but it will be a niche that we can support like any other.

Ground yourself in your body

Self-compassion, mindfulness, meditation, exercise, breathing, nature, inter-being. There are many ways to build your capacity to experience joy, wonder, and happiness. One of the difficult things about this process though is that if you approach these topics head on, you'll often be overwhelmed with Extremely Specific Aesthetics that might not fit you (e.g. New Agey or culturally appropriative). My advice is to 1) be open to learning from practices that don't fit

your brand while also 2) being able to adapt the spirit of advice into something that actually works for you. The benefit of locating our capacity for joy internally is that it reveals that The Industry is fundamentally superfluous and so we are free to take what we want and throw the rest in the compost pile.

As a side note, some artists (who otherwise have structural access to things like mental health services) fear becoming healthy, because they're worried that they will lose the spark and no longer make good art. Speaking as an artist whose creative capacity has consistently increased with my mental health, there are multiple reasons why I don't think people should worry about this.

- You carry your past selves within you, even as you change. "Our bodies are neural and physiological reservoirs of all our significant experiences starting in our prenatal past to the present."[4]

- You can lose a spark and gain another. You can gain 6 sparks in place of the one you lost.

- What is it that you ultimately seek from being "good at art"? Ego satisfaction? Human connection? Self-respect? All of these things would be easier to come by in the feared scenario in which you are so happy and healthy that you can no longer make art. Cut out the middleman! Art is for nerds!

Invest outside of games

Games culture often encourages a total identification with video games. This pressures developers into working and audiences into buying, conveniently benefitting executives and shareholders to everyone else's detriment. Investing in interests wholly unrelated to video games is beneficial in many ways and there's something for everyone! Personally, I love books. A novel is "low-tech" in nearly every way that a AAA game is "high-tech", and yet books are affordable, data-light, easy-to-preserve, stimulating, challenging, immersive, and entertaining. What is technology, again?

Another pertinent thought: while there's nothing inherently wrong with dating a fellow game developer, you should not enter industry/work spaces or events looking for romantic connection. Particularly if you have any sort of institutional power, you will inevitably put others in uncomfortable situations and prime yourself to abuse that power. If you want sex, relationships, etc, find other outlets, shared interests, and dating pools.

Work towards a more accessible world

In the context of an often systemically ableist world, video games can — at their best — be <u>fun, valuable, and accessible experiences for disabled audiences</u>. Consequently, when I say "divest from the video games industry", I don't want to gloss over the fact that divestment comes with a different cost for different

people. Certainly accessibility within video games continues to be as <u>important as ever</u>, but if I'm asking, e.g., for people to "invest outside of games", then a commitment to a more accessible out-of-game world is also extremely vital. For instance, non-disabled people can be attuned during this particular moment to the unique perspectives and leadership of disabled people regarding Covid lockdowns and widespread work-from-home, and be wary as we gradually lift restrictions of reverting to a selective and hypocritical approach to accommodations.

Invest in alternative technological advancements

What might we have the resources, attention, and energy to grow if our industry weren't so laser focused on a constricted definition of technological advancement? For example, <u>audio-only games</u> appear to me an incredibly fertile area for technological advancement that has been under-resourced. How about <u>further advancements towards biodegradable/recyclable microchips and batteries</u>? A fundamental rethinking of the "home console" model in which each successive generation strives to obsolete the last and sell tens of millions new hardware units? Something like an arcade or those gaming lounges (but do they all have to have the same aggressive aesthetics?). The success of Pokemon GO seems to gesture at potential for social, non-remote video game experiences with broader demographic/aesthetic appeal. At the Portland (Maine) Public Library, there's a console setup in the teen section where local kids would play and they also had a selection of console games for checkout — that was really cool! Local game dev organizations like GLITCH creating <u>events where local devs show and playtest games with the public</u>…

Look to small tools

Small tools such as hobbyist-centered game engines very naturally and successfully act as springboards to community. Look at ZZT, early Game Maker (e.g. gamemakergames), OHRRPGCE. Look at bitsy, PuzzleScript, Pico-8! Look at <u>Electric Zine Maker</u> as well as <u>this post</u> on small tools by Nathalie Lawhead. Small tools, by virtue of their limitations, tend to lend themselves to particular aesthetics and goals. Whether you're ultimately playing to or against the core gravitational pull of a small tool, I think it grounds you within a certain design conversation that is conducive to community. Participating in these communities as a child (even though I rarely interacted directly) fundamentally instilled in me ideas like: people make their own fun; wonder is uncorrelated with budget; being strangely specific has value. Can other structures learn from small tools? Events, meetings, parties… what happens if we think of these as communal "engines" — structures built around a conversational core that people can use to create things or express themselves…?

Something that crosses my mind often is that it may be fundamentally healthy for us all to be "big fish in small ponds" in one way or another. The idea that there exists One True Big Pond that reflects all of our collective values simultaneously is a harmful myth that serves to direct all admiration and energy towards corporate interests and robs the rest of us of our accomplishments.

Sucking as praxis

"Professional artistry" as the capacity to maintain the shared illusion that there are indisputable measures of beauty and worth. When you allow the illusion to fail — often against your will — 1) capitalist powers will be disappointed in their inability to wield you with proper efficiency and 2) fellow small creators will be heartened because you bypassed the illusion and still offered something worthy. Failure in a backwards system can be strength. Growing as an artist can be a gloriously paradoxical affair.

Fight for history

We miss out on so much when history is lost to us, and video games are extraordinarily susceptible due to their technical dependencies on ever-shifting hardware. The Industry's current incarnation goes beyond history-apathy to a downright historical hostility. Sustaining the narrative of linear technological progress inevitably involves shitting on the past (there are a chosen few old games that are kept accessible, but they feel like exceptions proving the rule). Emulation is a vital resource, ever on the verge of outlaw (See Nintendo's legal actions), Internet Archive is under attack, and Disney warps copyright laws to keep their stranglehold on media intact. Overviews and longplays of difficult-to-play older games are incredibly valuable and I'm truly grateful for people who do this vital work. Off the top of my head, I've enjoyed Nitro Rad's comprehensive work in 3D platformers, and Cannot Be Tamed's retro reviews. See also: the Video Game History Foundation.

Public libraries could be a vital ally in this cause. What if libraries had access to legacy tech or specialized emulation software that made playing, researching, or recording from old video games more feasible? What if small creators or defunct small studios could get grants or support in preserving their own old work? Would disappointing institutional responses to Gamergate have played out differently if knowledge of and respect for the ongoing historic contributions of BIPOC, female, and/or queer developers were built into the core fabric of video games spaces? Would it be so easy to accept the AAA model as the pinnacle of technology if we contextualized the astounding complexity of past games like Dwarf Fortress, or the Wizardry or Ultima series — technological complexity that would not have been possible had the games been beholden to modern AAA priorities? (Talking out of my ass here, as I have never played these games. See

also: modern work on Dwarf Fortress). See also: The Spriter's Resource and it's affiliate sites.

Expand government arts funding

I don't know a lot about this, but… there should be more of it! I see it happening more in other countries besides the US.

Labor organizing

We can look into studio structures like co-ops. We can join unions. Those unions must be intersectional to the core (see recent events regarding GWU international). How about dual power? Many small studios could combine in overlapping networks of varying formality. They could integrate their audiences, cross-promote, build collective power so as to not be totally beholden to the will of corporations. I'm not an expert on labor though, look to others who know more.

Collaborative / open source resources

E.g. The Open Source Afro Hair Library, Open Game Art, Rrrrrose Azerty's prolific CC0 music and the broader Free Music Archive community.

Give money

Normalize mutual aid. Normalize buying small games. Contribute to things like Galaxy Fund.

Just Play!

Play something totally random on itch.io (or another community-oriented site) with no outside recommendation. Compliment and/or pay the developer if you like something about it!

Conclusion

Thank you for engaging with these thoughts! I hope that they spark thoughts for you, and that we can all learn from each other. Feel free to reach out to me on twitter or via email: marinakittaka@gmail.com

[*Edit: at 11:20PM CDT, 6/25/20, I changed the audio games link from a wikipedia article to the more relevant-seeming: https://audiogames.net/*]

References

[1] I've been reflecting on trauma while reading various books including **The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma** by Bessel van der Kolk and **Sacred Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma** by Teresa B. Pasquale

[2] This is a quote that I found helpful from **The Self-Compassion Skills Workbook: A 14-Day Plan to Transform Your Relationship with Yourself** by Tim Desmond

[3] From the **Emergent Strategy** chapter on fractals (p. 53)

[4] **Body-to-Body Intimacy: Transformation Through Love, Sex, and Neurobiology** by Stella Resnick (p. 19)

Related Reading

- **Someone Else's Problem: How Game Publishers Buy Crunch Overseas**. This video by People Make Games includes interviews from Malaysian and Indonesian studios doing outsorced work for major game studios. Valuable context for discussions that often center on American and European workers and companies. https://youtu.be/bm7KUE1Kwts

- **Zonelets** is a blogging engine that I created in November of 2020, and it functions as a sort of practical companion to some of the ideas reflected on in this essay. Please check it out! http://zonelets.net/

- **"The Nostalgia Question" and Feminist 8-bit Game Hacking** by Rachel Simone Weil. http://peerproduction.net/issues/issue-8-feminism-and-unhacking-2/art-essays/issue-8-feminism-and-unhackingpeer-reviewed-papers-2/ [added 6/26/20]

- **How to Do Nothing** (2019) by Jenny Odell features a lot of interesting and related insights into how we cognitively process the modern world.

- **'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over.** by Leigh Alexander (2014)

- Reflections on Rachel Carson and the sense of wonder by psychologist Karin Arndt

- **Precarity and Why Indie Game Developers Can't Save Us from Racism** by Sam Srauy (2019)