

Paste Goes to Different Games 2015

By Todd Harper | April 14, 2015

Shortly after stepping into NYU MAGNET center, I turned to Katherine Cross and said, with a big smile, “Right over there is where I [made out with a girl last year!](#)” To her credit and without missing a beat, Katherine turned to big gay me and asked, with only the gentlest of raised eyebrows: “Is that so?”

I feel like this was an appropriate way to set the tone for my second year at the [Different Games conference](#), which was held for the third consecutive year in Brooklyn on April 3-4.

Writing up summaries about conference experiences is always a challenge; there’s the urge to talk about all the fantastic talks you attended and all the amazing work you saw, especially at gaming events where designers are showing off their craft. And indeed, Different Games didn’t disappoint me in this regard, as I’ll get to later. I heard plenty of great speakers sharing ideas, and I played a number of intriguing games. But when I left, these weren’t the things on my mind.

A conference is a gathering of people coming together over some sort of shared bond, be it interests, experiences or professions. They’re often a chance for people who see one other far too infrequently in meatspace to (re-)connect after a long time apart. When a conference is done right, there’s a feeling of energy, safety, celebration and connection. This was certainly my experience with the similarly-aimed Gaymer X2 from last July; what didn’t make it into my [story about that conference](#) is how when I got on the BART to head back to where I was staying in Oakland after the last day, I suddenly burst into tears and spent most of the night (and my trip home) intermittently weeping.

While Different Games didn’t reduce me to tears, it still accomplished a very

similar goal: while I was there, I felt... well, good. Safe. Among friends. Draw a ~~comparison between this and~~, say, Maddy Myers [discussing her experiences](#) at GDC in 2014. As someone who has attended GDC a number of times, I can echo her sentiments in many regards. GDC is often a thrilling experience, full of powerful talks and moments and meetings with friends I barely ever seen in person, but I don't think of it in the same way I think of spaces like Different Games. Which is fine! GDC has a different aim: to be a gigantic, business-oriented juggernaut. And while I'm sure the organizers of GDC want it to *be* a safe space for its attendees, that sentiment is not baked into the *purpose* of the event.

Comparatively, the central aim of Different Games is to focus on supporting people who love games and who are “different” in some way. It's a conference where the safe space policy rotates regularly on big screens across the venue. It's a conference where the first day's opening remarks included the organizers sharing a conference-wide policy for politely but firmly calling out problematic language. You haven't lived until you've heard con organizer Mariam Asad demonstrate the signal – which had its origin in the planning committee's meetings – by gleefully imitating a game show buzzer into a mic for a crowd of grinning attendees.

Different Games felt even more needed, more relevant and more jubilant this year. The entire event opened with Katherine Cross delivering an expanded version of her part of this year's [#1reason to be GDC talk](#), an exhortation to find a “third way” between abandonment and anger, and a call for those who feel they can to keep going through what she called “the lost levels of the new games journalism.” Having been present at both talks, hearing the difference in audience reaction was fascinating. The GDC crowd was exuberant and cheering; the Different Games crowd, by comparison, felt rapt.

Different Games is largely organized by graduate students from NYU's Game Center and program in Integrated Digital Media and Georgia Tech, with logistics and planning support from faculty at both institutions. The students'

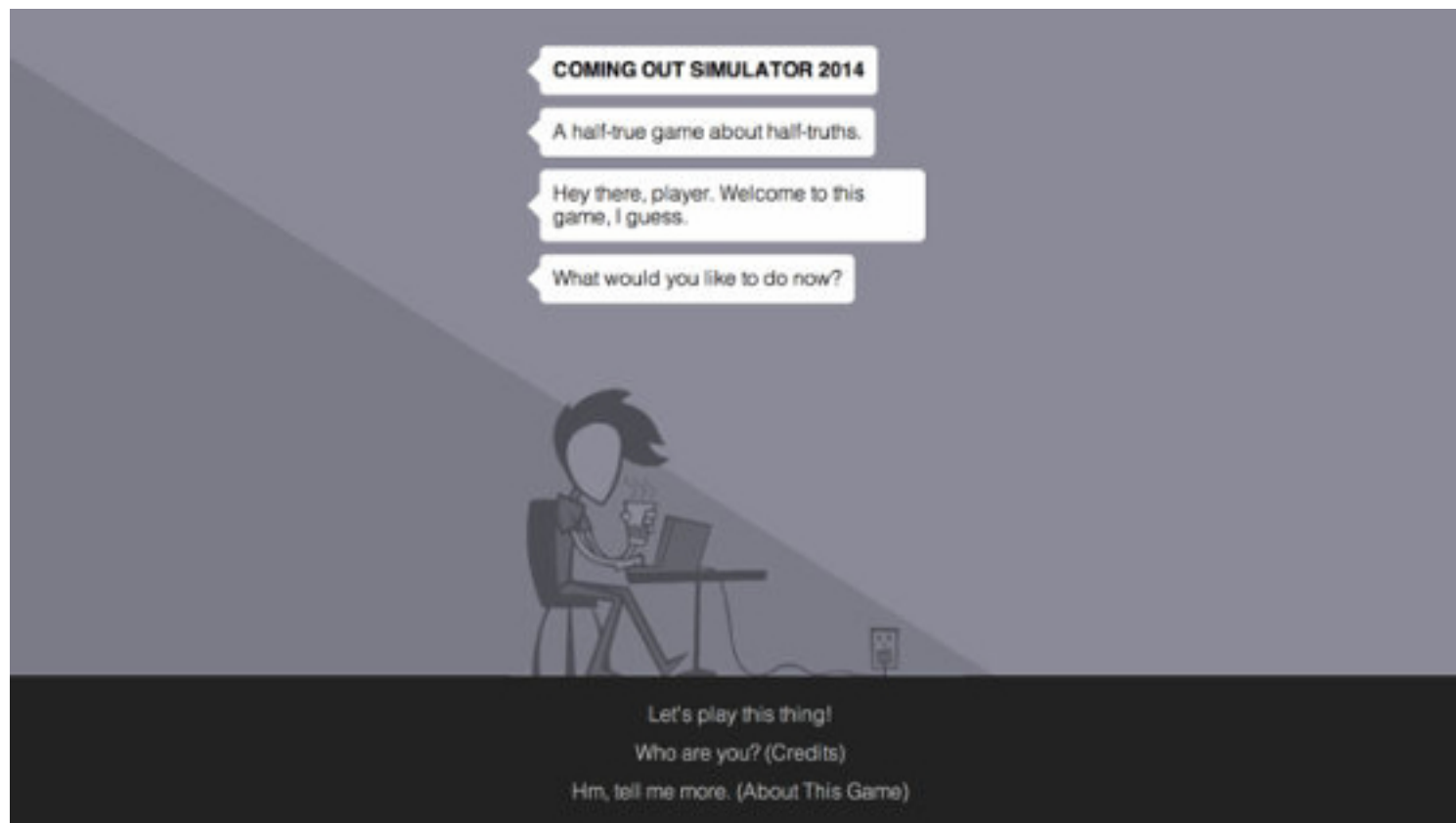
efforts with Different Games are a labor of love and passion, and it shows. In my estimation, grad students putting together a smaller, more intimate conference have a much greater ability to take chances and push boundaries. It's the sort of freedom that bigger professional conferences don't (or sometimes can't) always exercise.

I found it notable, for example, that DG specifically sought out a voice from outside the US to give a keynote. Game curator [Zuraida Buter](#)'s look at various gaming events and installations across Europe was an eye-opening journey through different play experiences that we frequently don't hear about here. She showcased things ranging from [playing *Doom* with an upright piano keyboard](#) to a games retreat off the coast of Ireland on Inishbofin Island to a small-scale Nordic LARP about surviving together in a small space.

While the compressed schedule of Different Games – only two days, one of which consists mainly of a keynote speech and a meet-and-greet – doesn't allow for many talks, I was glad to see a wide range of topics covered across the event's four tracks. Attendees could learn about the use of audio as a game design tool one minute, then do yoga as part of a talk on self-care for game developers the next. In the spirit of disclosure, I led a workshop at the event on dealing with what we mean by "difference" in terms of diverse characters, while at the same time in another space, others were discussing the subversive political potential of algorithms and procedural generation. All the official event spaces were livestreamed for the benefit of those who couldn't attend in person, and these videos will eventually become available on YouTube as well.

Unfortunately, what is in many ways the strength of a conference like Different Games is also its major weakness. With a compressed schedule and so many interesting talks, unfortunate counterprogramming is inevitable, despite the organizers' best attempts. While Different Games has a few corporate or business sponsors – for this year in particular, analytics

company Keen IO and Atlanta-based email servicers MailChimp – the lion’s share of their funding and support appears to come from NYU and Georgia Tech. Combined with the organizers’ deliberate choice to keep the event accessible with a low entry cost, this means Different Games might not have all the financial support it deserves... or, for that matter, *needs*. Ideally, with more support (looking at you, games industry), Different Games could expand to include a third day.

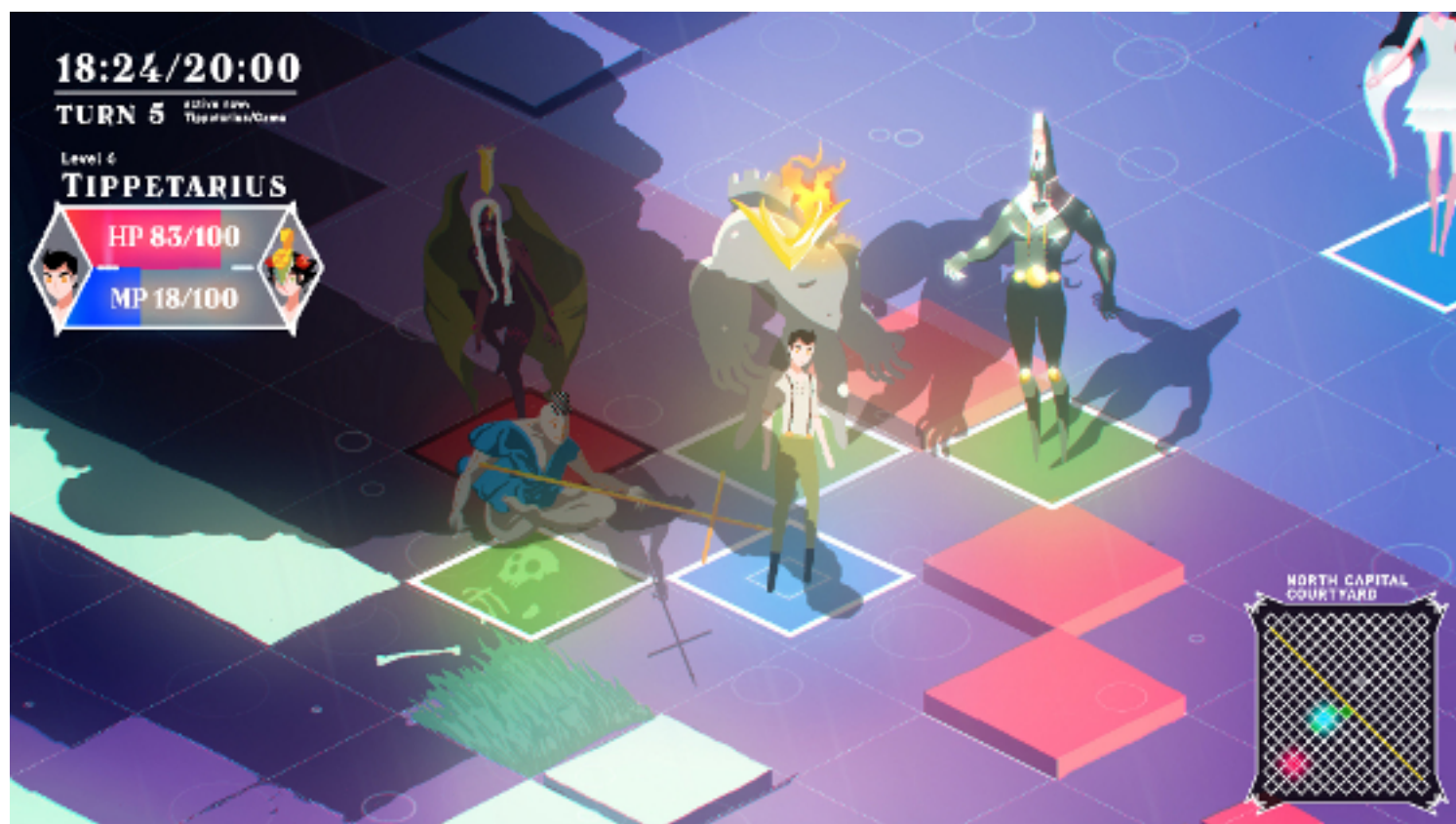


The array of interesting talks is also supplemented by an exhibition area of...well, “different” games. When I attended last year I didn’t have time to play many, but this year I made time (sadly, by skipping a talk session) to walk through and play a few of the offerings. There were some familiar faces, such as the most recent demo of MidBoss’s [Read Only Memories](#). In particular, I was happy to see Nicky Case’s [Coming Out Simulator 2014](#), as well as [Parable of the Polygons](#), an adorable simulation of societal difference they co-created with Vi Hart. To me, Case’s work embodies the spirit of “different games.”

I also played a number of games I hadn’t heard of, many of which were amazing. Perhaps my favorite was *Team of Jams MMXV* by Team JARRRM, a group of designers from Georgia Tech. The game is a short but clever RPGMaker confection about the experience of forming a game jam team that

must be played to be believed. Another game I spent time with was the surprisingly affecting *Trolls vs. Woman* by Kristen Myers, in which the player is forced to verbatim type out abusive comments sent to a woman (in this version, Anita Sarkeesian) while video of their work plays in the background. The comments obscure the video and dominate the screen, literally overpowering the message. This description doesn't do the game's combination of gameplay and visuals enough credit for their impact. I had to quit midway through, get up and move away from the machine for a bit after trying it because of how hard it hit. The act of having to literally reproduce the abusive words is more powerful than you might think.

And that was just in one of two rooms. In the other, I experienced [*Curtain*](#)'s fascinating (if unsettling) pixelated first-person story of an abusive relationship. I had some darkly comic fun watching a cyberpunk society implode via a future-science Twitter/Facebook hybrid in [*Killing Time at Lightspeed*](#). I watched music and prose turn a simple puzzle platformer into a gripping aesthetic experience in *Bottle Rockets*. The display that captured my attention the most was *Ozma*, a re-telling of one of the *Oz* books in puzzle/RPG form that reframed the story as a trans person's narrative of self-discovery and actualization. Creator Sergei Acuña's mockup was so beautiful and transfixing that I felt like I could have stared at it for hours.



There's hardly enough space here to discuss all the various creative and interesting games that were at the conference, of which I've mentioned only a few. Perhaps the most effective measure of the arcade's success wasn't any one gameplay experience, but the way I felt after leaving it. I am not, by and large, a "game designer," though I have game creation credits to my name; I'm much more engaged in critique and research. However, when I walked out of that arcade, I had a really powerful urge to sit down and do some development work, to make something.

That's the power of an event like Different Games. While great talks and fascinating games are its method, the *outcome* is a feeling of wanting to do something, or more accurately the feeling that you can do something. That there are people around you who not only would appreciate it, but sincerely support you trying. It's a safe space with an eye to expansion. I hope someday I will point to a spot at the venue and go, "That's where my game about kissing a girl was last year."