

UC Irvine

Analog Game Studies

Title

liches, lampreys, and the moon: an incantation for trans life & lyrical play

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7g13z87t>

Journal

Analog Game Studies, 12(2)

Authors

Berge, PB

Hornak, Percival

Publication Date

2025-07-04

DOI

10.5070/V7.64535

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



liches, lampreys, and the moon: an incantation for trans life & lyrical play

PB Berge & Percival Hornak

Abstract

In this essay, we seek to intercept the formation of queer analog game studies (QAGS) at the moment of its emergence with a lyrical and trans-informed critique of academic field-building. We ask how we might move from frameworks of analysis that attempt to identify inherent qualities of games and their mechanics and toward those that center play as fundamentally mutable and shifting? Drawing on trans studies, critical game studies, and the experimental poetics of lyric game design, we propose a reimagining of queer analog play that resists disciplinary ossification. Rather than endorsing QAGS as a formal subfield, the paper advocates for an unruly, lyrical approach to queer game scholarship—one that privileges creative play, illegibility, and transformation over coherence or institutional legitimacy. We weave personal narrative, theoretical analysis, and experimental form to argue that trans and queer analog play has always existed beyond the bounds of legible academic structures, and that the push toward subfield status risks narrowing the radical potential of this work. Ultimately, this piece is a spell, a rant, and a poetic invitation: not to name and contain QAGS, but to scatter seeds in the open field beyond the playground, where new queer and trans futures might take root. It offers not a framework, but a mode of inhabiting scholarship—one in which play itself becomes a method of critique, community, and worldmaking.

Keywords

TTRPG, lyric games, disciplinarity, analog game studies, queer analog game studies, queer game studies, trans studies, trans games

the witches gather

A candle's flame winks out as the last of the wax burns down, leaving Percy alone on his bedroom floor surrounded by chalk smudges and crushed peppercorns. It's November 2020; Percy has administered his first shot of testosterone earlier today, marking the beginning of a new stage in his

transition. In this moment, however, he is a teenage girl and a witch. The spell he's finished casting is called Secret Beauty, meant to help witches let go of the hate they feel for themselves. For Percy, this hate takes the form of inarticulable feelings about masculinity, being trans in a sometimes hostile world, and saying goodbye to the teenage girl he once was and, for this fleeting moment, embodies once more. Engaging in the act of play at this pivotal moment loosens the boundaries of what is fictional and what is real in ways that make space for transformation and catharsis. Crucially, this act of lyrical play blends dream and reality without prescribing a particular shape for that transformation to take—in starting HRT *and* in becoming a teen witch, Percy accepts an invitation to step into something unknown.

Percy is playing Avery Alder's *Teen Witch*, which is rooted in a simple truth: "That something is a fiction doesn't make it any less real."¹ In order to play, you must convince yourself that you are a teenage girl who is also a witch, at least for the duration of a session of the game. Alder instructs the player to start with fiction, then explore and embody it until it becomes real, until at least some part of themselves really believes they're a teen witch. Our player, Percy, moves toward becoming something new: he takes solace in a-lack-of-definition, of certainty, of wholly stable objects on which to build his sense of who he is and what he will become. He proceeds on the strength of the fact that it feels right to him, even if he couldn't exactly articulate why.

This paper is not a paper: it is a riposte, a game, a spell, a manifesto, an opening of a ritual circle: one we invite you into. We are gathering to cast Secret Beauty, so that we might let go of queer analog game studies and, in so doing, make it real.



Figure 1: Figure 1: The remnants of a full moon ritual conducted by Percy while playing *Teen Witch*. Photo by the authors.

beyond the playground

In "A Dozen Fragments on Playground Theory," Jay Dragon tells a parable about designing a playground for children. Dragon describes how the slide and swings of the playground, even as they shape the children's play, have no true bearing on them: the children instead make games with the bolts on the side of the slide. Dragon further reflects: "to the left [of the playground] is a wide-open field, where all manner of nonsense can occur and my structure is unneeded."² This is where we imagine we might find our emerging (sub)field: in the open space just beyond the fences of the playground.

This article is a response to this special issue's call for a "queer/er analog game

¹ Avery Alder, *Variations on Your Body* (Buried Without Ceremony, 2019), 2.

² Jay Dragon, "A Dozen Fragments On Playground Theory," *Medium*, 2021, <https://possumcreek.medium.com/a-dozen-fragments-on-playground-theory-684104bcb4ab>.

studies.”³ We wish to intercept the formation of a QAGS subfield at the moment of its emergence, and take the opportunity presented by this special issue to imagine, together, what the future of this work might look like. Although the call excites us as authors who have been discussing the intersections of gender radicality and queer play in the context of roleplaying and analog games for several years now, we have authored this in loving-yet-wary caution and hopeful petition to our community of queer scholars and dice-rollers. To these dear colleagues, friends, and tablemates, we offer our key intervention: *we don't need a (sub)field for queer analog play. We need to continue tearing down the fences of this playground.* We must imagine queer analog game studies not as a movement towards disciplinary legitimization, but as a playful, lyrical exploration-and-explosion of queer/analog/game.

We recognize that academic field-building is a fraught, often violent practice. Amanda Phillips points out in *Gamer Trouble* that field-building in game and media studies has always been characterized by gendered violence and exclusion: from turf wars between so-called narratologists and ludologists to the events of GamerGate. Field-building is not merely about advancing institutional legitimacy and building canons—it is about the narratives we use to describe our ongoing work and communities. We echo Teddy Max Pozo's argument that “as queer games scholars, we must be attentive to the stories we tell about our own movements, and how these stories limit our understanding of the past and of our future possibilities.”⁴ One might recall the disciplinary history of the subfield now known as “queer game studies” which, over several years in the mid 2010s, became a well-recognized subdiscipline within the broader landscape of contemporary media studies. Landmark volumes, including Bo Ruberg's *Videogames Have Always Been Queer*, Ruberg & Adrienne Shaw's *Queer Game Studies*, and dozens of key edited collections, special issues, and conferences catapulted queer (largely digital) game studies into the limelight, earning legibility and security for many at the forefront of that movement. It is easy to view this history and imagine such a glimmering future for queer analog game studies (QAGS).

Yet we are wary of rallying towards the legitimization of QAGS as a subfield. We are writing this as witnesses to lingering tensions created by the narrative recasting of the queer games movement (QGM) of the 2010s. Media historian Whit Pow, in their recent review of the field, “Critical Game Studies and Its Afterlives,” argues that the “canonization of critical game studies” has arguably erased the inter/transdisciplinary work of Black women, people of color, and trans and queer folks. Pow urges scholars to “acknowledge that [game studies] is not a unified field with one set of disciplinary methods and concerns...” and instead recognize the importance of “a decentralized game studies.”⁵ Analog game studies can also learn from this intervention. The QGM serves not only as a source of inspiration, but as a reminder that the project of critical game research must always be more radical and more transformative than the inauguration of an academic or creative subfield—an act which often demands stasis rather than continuous transformation. This project involves loosening our attachments to the structures on our playground: *queer/analog/game*. Such a practice follows the aspirations of trans theory to detach from legibility defined and enforced by oppressive institutions and embrace the uncertainty that comes with questioning objects we have significant attachments to—that is, “believing genuinely that an experiment extended can be a form of life.”⁶

³ *Analog Game Studies*, “CFP: Queer Analog Game Studies,” 2025, <https://analoggamestudies.org/cfp/cfp-queer-analog-game-studies/>.

⁴ Teddy Pozo, “Queer Games After Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft,” *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/pozo>.

⁵ Whit Pow, “Critical Game Studies and Its Afterlives: Why Game Studies Needs Software Studies and Computer History,” *Just Tech* (June 2024), <https://doi.org/10.35650/JT.3071.d.2024>.

⁶ Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Duke University Press, 2022), 30.

We are not suggesting that we should pause our critical and queer interventions into analog play cultures—quite the opposite. We attend these histories not to call out scholars or venues, but to clarify the gravity and urgency of our trepidation. Think of this as a “Session 0” conversation—a setting of the tone, an outlining of the ways we do and don’t want to play while we’re here at the table together. If anything, we share the eagerness this call invokes: we deeply want to learn and uncover queer playfulness of/through LARPing, tabletopping, and otherwise mucking about with meeples, dice, PDFs, playgrounds, ink, and wood pulp. We are uncertain, however, about the potential impact of formalized disciplinarity on the joyful and messy work of studying trans and queer analog play.

We are writing this because we, perhaps like you, deeply want for the future of queer analog play and for the security of emerging and aspiring queer analog players, scholars, and makers. We want this work to be recognized—by academy and industry alike—as both vital and valuable. It’s only natural to grasp for legitimizing objects out of desire that one’s field, subjects, and self be legible, respected, and (most importantly) materially secure.⁷ We share many of these desires. We want our colleagues, friends, mentors, students, coauthors, and ourselves to have our work upheld and advanced by the institutions we navigate. We want our people to get their grants and PhD funding, their games produced, their jobs elevated. We know also that the stakes could not be higher. We are living in times made incredibly precarious for both analog game makers—who find their livelihoods upheaved by isolationist politicians’ nationalist policies—and trans and queer people, who remain a primary target of ascendant neofascist groups across the globe. It’s no coincidence that playgrounds—youth sports in particular—remain the favored target of anti-trans legislation across North America. Games, as Tara Fickle and Aaron Trammell remind us, are used to transform exclusionary “fiction[s] into a social reality” and justify “arbitrary typologies of human difference.”⁸ Amid this political violence, catalyzed through the ludological membranes of the playground, we require with great urgency critical, queer interventions into analog play cultures! We need scholar-makers to be willing and able to “break the table” in the face of exclusion, and (to quote the AGS editors) “#stayanalog” in the face of escalating technofetishism.

In this article, we draw from an entangling of lyrical play and trans theory to advocate for a lyrical unspooling of QAGS. This will require “breaking up” with the objects of *queer/analog/game*—a “loosening” (to quote Lauren Berlant) of our attachments to these foundational objects.⁹ The “breaking up” we describe is not a prerequisite for the work of QAGS; rather, it *is* the work of QAGS. We contend that making and writing about analog play with concern for queer possibility necessarily requires that we exceed the boundaries of any disciplinary container. We explore how trans and queer lyric play artists rely on analog play to remain unfixed by disciplinary ossification, and call upon QAGS scholars to embrace the lyricism of our work. Ultimately, we argue that to work lyrically is to be in playful relation to the objects of our study, without the kind of reverence that leads to stagnation and with openness to finding something new.

writhing in the open field

Laughter erupts in the room among the students as PB scrolls down to the second page of the PDF. When she had announced that the class would be playing the notorious “One-Word RPG” by

⁷ Cameron Awkward-Rich, “Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 4 (June 2017): 819–41, <https://doi.org/10.1086/690914>.

⁸ Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 8; Aaron Trammell, *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* (MIT Press, 2023).

⁹ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience*; Shuli Branson, *Practical Anarchism: A Guide for Daily Life* (Pluto Press, 2022), 2.

Riverhouse Games—titled *We Are But Worms*—in class today, the students had maintained skeptical looks and bemused smiles. But now that they see the full text of the “game” which consists (spoilers!) of a single word—“*Writhe*.”—and nothing else, they giggle at the punchline (and one or two roll their eyes). But after the laughter subsides, there’s a moment of uncertainty. “Well,” PB says expectantly. “I did tell you we’d be playing this in class. Turn to your group-mates, and give it a go!” The students look at each other, chuckling nervously. But with almost no hesitation, a student in the front row pushes their desk forward, dives onto the floor, and begins flopping about. Others, while hesitant, begin dancing in their seats. One student calls from the back of the room, “Am I doing it right??”

Under normal circumstances, we would have opened this section with a definition of lyric game and a description of the broader genre and its evolution. This would be a fraught endeavor. *We Are But Worms*, perhaps the best known “lyric game,” illustrates precisely how the work of lyrical play artists eschew legibility and stable ontological categories. *Worms*, which consists of a singular command, has evoked long debates about whether or not the project (or any single word for that matter) can truly be considered a game at all. From a single word, how could one possibly anticipate the ways that would-be-players might find playful possibilities in writhing?

The ongoing “lyric game movement” represents the most experimental and radical site of exploration for queer analog play: it encompasses games that eat other games; games that are one word long; anti-games and games-that-are-not-games. These works are rather poems and manifestos and found photos and performances and all matter of mixed-media art.¹⁰ Attempting to define lyric games is not only Sisyphean, but violates the very ethos of lyric game design. Jay Dragon, in an interview with game designer Logan Timmins, argues that lyric game design is best understood as a community movement and joint investment in experimental methodology:

this is what a lot of people outside of lyric games get wrong, is that it’s not a genre. It’s a movement... Every definition I’ve seen is unsatisfactory, instead I’m interested in like, this [as] a shared creative movement. Or like it’s an elaborate conversation happening between many people over the course of multiple years.¹¹

Evan Torner similarly argues that the lyric game movement, which he notes has emerged out of prior creative movements within TTRPG design and even literature, has been widely led by trans and queer designers.¹² Jordan Magnuson likewise notes that the “lyricality” of a lyric game is not something endemic to the game itself, but rather instantiated in the way that the player finds themselves engaging the work through a poetic lens.¹³ This is to say, *lyric* is a mode of engagement—of playing and making.

The term “lyric game” is neither a critical taxonomy nor a legible marketing genre: it is a wink and a nudge and a salute to a specific community, ethos, and political movement. It is a disavowal of “game” as a viable heuristic category, even as the phrase “lyric game” persists as a sign beneath which to gather with those who share these artistic commitments. Beyond creating obfuscated and illegible artifacts in their experimental practice, lyrical play artists resist what Magnuson describes as the “natural” tendency to, in their critiques, allow “lyric reading to turn into a kind of lyric

¹⁰ PB Berge, “Anti-Games, Fantasy Consoles, and the Rise of Speculative Game Development on Itch.io,” *Proceedings of the Foundations of Digital Games ’25 Conference* (FDG ’25., ACM, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1145/3723498.3723739>.

¹¹ Logan Timmins, “Jay Dragon – Lyric Games Are Not a Genre, They’re a Movement,” *Lyrical Ludology*, <https://www.redcircle.com/shows/4dfc3671-a3d8-4018-89ff-dac8786292ca>.

¹² Evan Torner, “Lyric Games: Genealogy of an Online ‘Physical Games’ Scene,” *DiGRA ’20 – Proceedings of the 2020 DiGRA International Conference: Play Everywhere*, 2020, 4.

¹³ Jordan Magnuson, *Game Poems: Videogame Design as Lyric Practice* (Amherst College Press, 2023).

categorization: such and such poems are lyric poems; such and such games are lyric games.”¹⁴ These works occupy a confounding cultural position: lyric games are increasingly popular among players, designers, and scholars, and yet there are no lyric games—this non-definition carries many contradictions. On the one hand, Magnuson and Dragon claim that there is no governed genre of what is and isn’t a “lyric game.” On the other hand, Magnuson’s volume *Game Poems* is an academic rumination on lyric games as a genre and similarly Dragon, in the description for *Altar Boys and Heretics*—despite disavowing “lyric games” as a genre—describes the project as a collection of “lyric games,” and even includes a definition of lyric games as “an emerging genre of games on Itch.io that... interrogate what it means for a game to be playable, and in turn proposes its own answers.”¹⁵ We point out this shifting rhetoric not to challenge these accounts—quite the opposite. Lyrical play artists claim openly that the genre of lyric game does not exist, while still selling, bundling, and distributing their work under the genre of lyric game. The fact is, this is no contradiction: the *lyrical* here is not a label, not a genre, not an ontology, but a refusal of such things. It embodies a playful relation to the need to be legible at all.

We feel an impetus to contend with the aims and ends of QAGS magnified by our positionalities as trans junior scholars and game designers whose personal practices and creative/scholarly communities have complicated, messy relationships with the queer games movement. *Queer* as a field-building term has a deeply conflicted history—regularly excluding (or forcibly assimilating) the works of trans and global majority scholars who do not position themselves or their work in proximity to “queer”. Indeed, it is often an insufficient descriptor for the multitudinal works that game scholars and makers are doing to explore gender radicality, personal expression, sex, subversion, and anti-hegemonic ideas. Within the QGM’s history as well as the broader history of queer theory, locating trans research beneath the umbrella of “queer” is an oversimplification—if not outright erasure—of the specificity of trans analysis and critique.¹⁶ Pow discusses this at length, urging scholars to “acknowledge that queer game studies is inextricable from the politics of trans life, as early strides in queer game studies were founded by trans women.”¹⁷ Such reductionism also further reinscribes white and colonial hegemonies, especially when the work of majority world media scholars and makers are repositioned to fit Western understandings of queerness. TRPG designer wendi yu has, for example, written about their choice to translate the word *queer* to *transviade* in her research to recenter the political vernaculars of the Brazilian travesti artists whose work they explore. This, she argues, is crucial for avoiding such work being assimilated into the white, academic legibilities of *queer*.¹⁸

We raise these points not to distinguish a separate *trans* analog game studies—we’ve no interest in harbinging a TAGS distinct from and emerging alongside a QAGS. Rather we question whether the legibility offered by a named subfield is essential to doing the queer and trans making, playing, and

¹⁴ Magnuson, 71.

¹⁵ Jay Dragon and Possum Creek Games, “Altar Boys & Heretics” (itch.io, 2020), <https://possumcreekgames.itch.io/abah>; Magnuson, *Game Poems*.

¹⁶ Cael M. Keegan, “Getting Disciplined: What’s Trans* About Queer Studies Now?,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 3 (2020): 384–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1530885>; Awkward-Rich, “Trans, Feminism”; Hil Malatino, “The Promise of Repair,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 46, no. 4 (2021): 827–51, <https://doi.org/10.1086/713292>; Susan Stryker, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 2 (2004): 212–15, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-10-2-212>; Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, “After Trans Studies,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2019): 103–16, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7253524>; Pow, “Critical Game Studies and Its Afterlives.”

¹⁷ Pow, “Critical Game Studies and Its Afterlives.”

¹⁸ wendi yu, “CONTINUE A TRAVECAR: uma contextualização radical por vidas trans nas obras de artistas travestis brasileiras” (Dissertação (mestrado), Salvador, Brazil, Universidade Federal da Bahia, 2023), http://tracc-ufba.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Dissertacao-continue_a_travecar.pdf.

writing *already happening* within analog game studies. After all, the work of gender diverse, trans, and nonbinary analog game designers has been foundational to the development of queer analytical lenses for studying analog play. Indeed, there can be no *newly inaugurated* QAGS because making, playing, and studying analog games has *always* been a project maintained by queer and trans people.

Disciplinary field-building renders trans artists, developers, and scholars both hypervisible and invisible, and it is to these ends that we are calling for a lyrical reckoning for QAGS. We don't want to foreclose the delightful possibility that lies in a commitment to *unmaking* in the same breath as making—even though the project of un-disciplining our work can feel terrifying. This is our first provocation: what if we think about the work of our field in terms of movement-building rather than a bounded playground? How can we play, think, write, and *writhe* together, lyrically?

the ground forgets its firmness

As PB scans the page, the many ochre eyes of an eel-like fish stare back at her. The painting has been carefully positioned so that the creature, bent into playful, cartilaginous squiggles, is only seen from above. Its external gill slits almost seem to imitate the phases of the moon. Yet PB knows that underneath its rubbery mouth are orbital rows of teeth. PB realizes that, as rendered, the creature has seemingly latched onto the page itself: if the page were a fish, it would be having its flesh torn by the hooked tongue of this adorable, horrible, all-devouring parasite.



Figure 2: Left: The cover for *Game Lamprey*, featuring a top-down lamprey illustration. Right: An image of lampreys, depicting their terrifying parasitic maws (source: Wikimedia Commons).

PB holds two games in their hands: the first is the core rulebook of a well-known fantasy roleplaying game. The second, which features the aforementioned creature on the cover, is Richard Kelly's

“universal parasitic RPG supplement” *Game Lamprey*.¹⁹ *Lamprey* “latches” onto the core rulebook of another RPG. From there, players are instructed to tear pages from the “host” text; the lamprey slowly feeds until the host wastes away entirely. The quiet in the room is suddenly punctuated by the sound of a page torn from its binding.

PB has, for some time now, been obsessed with the growing number of experimental self-destructing, and “unplayable” games.²⁰ *Game Lamprey* is exemplary in this capacity: *the undoing is the point*. Players are encouraged to create possibilities for play by unraveling their sourcebooks—with all text on the torn-out pages henceforth rendered unplayable. Players are encouraged to fill the void left by the lamprey with rules of their own design. Within *Lamprey*, Kelly clarifies why on earth anyone would make *Game Lamprey*, by stating that the lamprey is “driven not by what a designer should make, but what they could make.”²¹ *Lamprey* refuses the idea of a game as a static and readily definable form, both in its relation to other games and in its ambivalent framing by the designer.

We might see lyrical play as an investment in creative unmaking; it is not contained by any game, but rather represents a hemorrhaging of the grammatology of games. In this way, *lyric* is a prepositional troubling that operates much like *trans* does—neither are nouns, but unraveling verbs. The double-speak of lyric game designers, who simultaneously disavow the existence of lyric games even as they sell their projects as lyric game bundles—is a lesson in this prepositional troubling. Marquis Bey argues that *trans* occupies a similar contradiction—heralded ostensibly as an identity one “becomes” when the reality is that, as Jasbir Puar writes, “There is no trans.”²² Bey further contends, through a linkage they theorize between ontological Blackness and transness, that:

to ‘be’ trans* is an impossibility since trans* is a radically unstable non/site... Trans* is “force” and “intensity” rather than identity, fixed or otherwise... Trans* is not linear, permanent, or an end—it is in fact the impossibility of these things... Thus ‘becoming trans’ references this perpetual disruptive movement, this messy shit.²³

For the aspiring lyrical play scholar, we must learn to likewise revel in “this messy shit”: unstable, unwieldy, imploding ontologies. Our second provocation is to envision a lyrical scholarship that commits to de-ontologizing the central objects of QAGS: queer/analog/game. We might look back to *Teen Witch*, which encourages its player to break the container of the real world by embodying and believing in a fiction and, at the same time, to break the container of the game by letting it pervade real life.

We might conclude that to play lyrically is to be open to breaking concepts and mechanics apart and to revel in impermanent instability. Lyrical play opens a horizon for playful relations with the objects that give our lives infrastructure; one cannot take anything for granted in a lyric game. It asks us to believe that things don’t need to last forever, even if they are important to us in this moment. Such a lyrical approach is opposed to what is often the clarifying work of institutional field-building: to collectively define and scrutinize a central object and to eliminate perplexity. When *queer* and *game* and *analog* are allowed to ossify, they become exclusionary instruments wielded against marginalized scholars. Yet we can lean into the “perpetual disrupt[ion]” through our creative and

¹⁹ kumada1, *Game Lamprey* (itch.io, 2021), <https://kumada1.itch.io/game-lamprey>.

²⁰ PB Berge, “The Ludoarsonist’s Playground,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6O0vPsXRWQ>; Berge, “Anti-Games.”

²¹ kumada1, “Game Lamprey,” 3.

²² Jasbir K. Puar, “Bodies with New Organs,” *Social Text* 33, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 45–73, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-3125698>; Marquis Bey, “The Trans*-Ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-Ness,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (May 2017): 275–95, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3815069>.

²³ Bey, “The Trans*-Ness of Blackness.”

academic practice by embracing the lyrical and maintaining a shared commitment to the slippery and uncontainable valences of play. In the face of the calcifying ontological powers of our institutions, we invite aspiring QAGS scholars to be lampreys themselves: feeding on static forms that tie us to normative structures.

their bodies blur to verse

Nestled in the corner of a board game café in Brooklyn, Percy narrates the descent of a friend's character, Emil, into the depths of an abandoned metro station. Percy is facilitating Laurie O'Connel's *Lichcraft*,²⁴ in which Emil must gather the spell and ritual components necessary to become a lich so that he can survive the 300-year-long waitlist for an appointment at the gender clinic. As a group of ghosts materializes around their hidden fortune—the coins and bills that will grant Emil immortality—the player stops the session and says, "Can I be honest with you? If I got this money I wouldn't do the ritual or become a lich at all. I'd just open my own gender clinic." After a pause, he continues, "But we can still do the session you prepped."

To play *Lichcraft* is to blur lived and imagined rulesets. Becoming a lich is often presented as a metaphor for gender transition within the game's fiction, but accessing hormones and surgery is also the central objective that lichdom helps the player achieve. O'Connel's framing of *Lichcraft* presents the players with an opportunity to bend life, death, and humanity by becoming a lich, yet the game stops short of presenting players any opportunity to challenge the sociomedical system. Playing *Lichcraft* as a trans person reveals the limits of its imaginaries fairly quickly; in every session Percy has facilitated, the question of where the player's friends are and why they don't have help finding the ritual components comes up almost immediately.

In this moment, *Lichcraft*'s rules and premise can no longer hold: after encouraging them to prod at restrictive structures of mortality and morality, Percy and his player are brought—inevitably—to question the game's rigidity itself. This playful moment welcomes such an undoing: we might conclude that *Lichcraft*'s central invitation is not to indulge in a power fantasy of malicious compliance with the state—it's to question our own attachments to institutions like healthcare. In making his request to Percy, his friend has stopped playing by the rules of *Lichcraft* and instead expresses his desire for something beyond what the game's fiction has imagined: a world where trans people have money to open their own clinics (and therefore don't need to become undead wizards). He has started to play *lyrically*, with a spirit of exceeding this game that cannot contain all of the impulses and desires that its fiction elicits. *Lichcraft* makes living and waiting playful, and the lyrical play it inspires in turn makes the vessel of the game itself unbearable.

Lyrical play is a trans mode of play in its commitment to unraveling and mutability—unstable, flickering, resistant to fixed interpretation. . To trans something is to be in playful relation to it—to adopt a new stance toward the objects that mediate our interaction with the world, one that makes those objects something to play with rather than revere. Play recontextualizes objects:²⁵ Spells become game rules, game rules become fish food, gender transition becomes an arcane ritual. This recontextualization makes space for transformation and discovery that would be impossible if we were not open to destruction in the same breath as creation, to letting go of things even as we reach for others. We name this embodiment a trans, playful, lyrical mode.

²⁴ laurieoconnel, *Lichcraft* (itch.io, 2021), <https://laurieoconnel.itch.io/lichcraft>.

²⁵ Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qf90d>.

What would happen if we embodied the creative and destructive aspects of play in our approach to scholarship? When playing lyrically, nothing stays still: meanings shift, identities slip, objects speak in new tongues. At the moment of QAGS' emergence, when the work of the field is actively being determined, we are calling for the cultivation of a playful, lyrical relation to the objects of our study. Such a relation invites transformation without foreclosing possibilities for what we could turn into for fear of losing our legitimacy, of stepping outside what the mechanics of our field allow. The very act of playing and engaging with our theories, objects of study, disciplines, colleagues, and tools transforms them, and us, in return.

and the moon is devoured

The rules begin: "Step 1. Look up (at night). For best results, also go outside."

PB is standing under the moon with their phone pointed up at the sky. The moon is only just beginning to peek over the top of the haunted hospital PB lives across from, an aluminum shine in a sky smogged with wildfire smoke. Yet the moon is visible enough to count, so PB snaps the shutter and captures the moon. PB is playing Edda Mendes' *Collectible Trading Moon Game* (version 3, specifically), following the "Standard Rules" diligently. The rules tell PB that they will now perform a ritual to turn this photo of the moon into a trading card, which they will use to fight other players in moon fights. "Step 3. Reflect. Observe your moon for a moment. Take one deep breath. Now, set it aside and carry on with your night." PB inhales the acrid air, stashes their phone, and waits for the day she might have a moon fight with another collector.



Figure 3: Two photos of the moon, taken by the authors prior to a moon fight.

As we noted in the previous section, to play lyrically is to be in playful relation. In the moonlight, we find a third provocation: anything can be transformed by play; therefore everything—even the moon—is playable. This is where our work as maker-scholar-players begins. Play theorists have long argued that playing queerly allows us to transform games through playful practices. Edmond Y. Chang describes this process as *queergaming*, wherein players take “existing game titles, characters, stories, and worlds and queer them, remediate them to refashion and reimagine not only content and play but their very own relationship to ostensibly non-queer games and communities.”²⁶ Yet *Collectible Trading Moon Game* offers us an additional reminder: queer play, trans play, lyrical play—these are things we do, not things games afford us. They are ways of moving and playing, lenses we hold against the sky. Games are not a prerequisite for the queer valences of play. The texts of *Collectible Trading Moon Game*, like *Worms*, like *Teen Witch*, are not labelled or marketed as “queer” or “trans” games. They are, rather, invitations to take wriggling, candles, and the moon and play with them.

We engage in queer analog play throughout the process of daily life, outside the boundaries of what we call a “game.” Lyrical play demonstrates how we don’t need the ontology of *game* or *queer* to play queerly; we don’t need anything but our capacity to play these ontologies apart. Lyrical play allows us to take mundane acts and objects and transform them—it is for this reason that many of the most popular “lyric games” require that one plays with objects, practices, feelings:

- In *Anamnesis* (Blinking Birch Games) one plays with tarot cards.
- In *Diedream* (Alfred Valley) one plays with dreams.
- In *I Love You, Alive Girl* (Anna Anthropy), one plays with Amazon reviews.
- In *Altar Boys & Heretics* (Jay Dragon), one plays with *The Mountain Goats*
- In & *WITH MY ANGER I WILL GROW* (Kay Marlowe), one plays with rage.

These lyric games are not *games*, but “incitements” for play—invitations to explore how these subjects, worlds, cards, feelings, and moons might be transformed along with us.²⁷ Lyrical play is necessarily entangled with the analog and with embodiment—it draws us into tactile engagements wherein affect and embodiment are not the afterthoughts of play, but the shifting terrain on which it unfolds. Moons become cards. Cards become stories. In *Repairing Play*, Trammell notes that a critical reframing of play requires that we “[make] space for understanding the often violent and ‘emotional’ affects produced by play.”²⁸ Lyrical play invites engagement of negative affect: Kay Marlowe’s & *WITH MY ANGER, I WILL GROW* invites would-be players to make anger and outbursts playful. These works provide arbitrary materials—printed pages, shuffled decks, dreams, journals, photos of the moon, and the player’s own feelings—to be explored, felt, and reshaped. A moon is never just a moon; a dream becomes a labyrinth; a card drawn in one moment becomes something else in the next. This is crucial to our imagining of a lyrical QAGS. This volatility is not a failure of a lapsed genre—it is what makes lyrical play queer, trans, and alive.

²⁶ Edmond Y. Chang, “Queergaming,” *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 20.

²⁷ Torner, “Lyric Games.”

²⁸ Trammell, *Repairing Play*, 34.

until only lichens and lampreys remain

What might it look like to approach queer analog game studies playfully: to build relations to our objects of study and to the field (with all its institutional solemnity) that themselves embody an entangled spirit of disavowal and deviant creative-destruction?²⁹ In other words, what would it mean to center the things we *do*—playing and making—over the things we play with or the modes we play them in (queer/analog/game)? One of the founding assumptions of queer theory and its entangled fields is that things don't have to last forever, and, in fact, many systems and attachments *ought* to come to an end. What we propose, then, is turning this imperative onto the coherence of such fields themselves: a loosening of our attachments to *queer* (and *analog* and even *game*) that reveals the way we reproduce the logics that marginalize us. Most crucially, we offer a reminder that we *already* think playfully and expansively about queer analog play in analog game studies. We must continue, however, to maintain this exploration with wariness towards the field-building traps that will necessarily bind it and dispel its playful nature. Instead, we might embrace the lyrical—a space of illegible making-that-is-also-breaking—as a tool for exceeding the disciplinary container. Let's welcome QAGS as something dynamic, messy, and lyrical—allowing it to be persistently transformed by play and queer possibility. Queer/analog/game are not the fences of our playground; they are the transforming rituals of our play.

This is our final incantation: not to define, but to—at once—conjure and banish queer analog game studies. If QAGS must emerge, let it do so in moonlight, writhing, messy, and misbehaving—refusing the calcification of genre or the seduction of institutional legibility. Let us, together, turn our teeth on the rules we've inherited and the games we've been given. Let us privilege the acts of writhing, yearning, making, and unmaking over the fantasy of a discipline that would name and contain us. What we need now is not coherence, but an unruly, lyrical chorus; not permanence, but a politics of play that embraces flux, contradiction, and affective resonance. Lyrical play is not a method or a model. It is a practice of unbecoming. A spell. A breath. A tear in the page. A moon fight. A wish made aloud to the candles and the dark, knowing it may never be answered and making it anyway.

We depart from this ritual not with a framework, but with a field of possibility. To play lyrically is to linger with the unfinished, to trace the outlines of games that don't exist (yet), to sit with the ache of what trans and queer life makes necessary: transformation. It is a crooked, joyful invitation to play with our scholarship as we play with games—messily and together. And so we do not build a field. We scatter seeds in the open field beyond the playground, unsure of what might grow. We name nothing. We begin again:

*the witches gather
beyond the playground
writhing in the open field
the ground forgets its firmness
their bodies blur to verse
and the moon is devoured
until only lichens and lampreys remain*



²⁹ Sicart, *Play Matters*, 3.

Dr. PB Berge (they/her) is a media scholar, game maker breaker, self-described ludoarsonist, and an Assistant Professor of Experimental Game Design at the University of Alberta. She is the Director of the Discord Academic Research Community, The CRYPT Lab, and a co-founder of Tabletop Research in Practice. Their research falls at the intersection of trans game studies and feminist platform studies and can be found in or is forthcoming at *Game Studies*, *JCMS*, *New Media & Society*, *Games & Culture*, and elsewhere.

Percival Hornak (he/him) is a dramaturg, playwright, and podcast producer based in Brooklyn, NY. He holds an MFA in Dramaturgy from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; his research studies trans play, experiential performance, collaborative authorship, and impossibility. His writing has appeared on HowlRound Theatre Commons, in *Dramaturgy and History: Staging the Archive*, and in the Methuen Drama *Book of Trans Plays Vol 2*. He serves as Literary Manager of Stroller Scene, a new play development and advocacy organization, and co-produces the podcast *Dungeons + Drama Nerds*, which examines the intersection of theatre and tabletop role-playing games. You can see more of his work at percivalhornak.com.