

A CONVERSATION ON SEX
AND INTIMACY IN GAMES
Nina Freeman and Robert Yang

ROBERT: Hey Nina! It's good to talk to you. My game design students are always citing your games like *how do you Do It?* (pls 90 and 91), *Cibele* and *Lost Memories Dot Net* as their inspirations. I think your work really speaks powerfully to how our generation incorporates games and play as part of our identities, and increasingly, that's through sex and intimacy. What interests you about sex and games, Nina?

NINA: Whenever I get asked about sex in games, I instantly think about your work. I've thought a lot about how your games are up-front/not shy about the bodies of the player-character and everyone else involved. I think that this attention to physicality stands out to me because it's a pretty different approach to sex as a topic/mechanic from my own work.

ROBERT: I think *how do you Do It?* resonates deeply with a lot of people's experiences with trying to figure out

sex, especially at a young age. Thirty years ago, we would've mashed together naked plastic dolls, but now we experiment in videogames and mash together naked virtual dolls, whether it's in this game or in *The Sims* (2000). The dollhouse framing gives us permission to sort of talk to ourselves about how sex and relationships work.

NINA: I'm definitely interested in making games about things that are hard to talk about. I like what you said about how we often feel like we need permission to talk about certain things – that's definitely something I was thinking about when working on *how do you Do It?* ... and many of my games, honestly. I am interested in thinking about how we work through complex emotional acts like sex, especially when it feels like a forbidden topic. I think I tend to focus on like ... more talk than body because of this – the girl is thinking about sex in *how do you Do It?* and projecting these thoughts onto her dolls, but there's not any physical sex or flirtation happening. I also designed and wrote another game about sex called *Cibele*, which is two young people meeting up for sex after only knowing each other through the internet. This game also focuses on communication – the two



90, 91 *how do you Do It?*, game screenshots

characters spend most of the game talking about sex, and the actual physical part where the foreplay happens is brief, and then the sex itself is implied and talked about afterwards. I think all of the stuff that happens around sex (for example, how we imagine it, how we negotiate it) is just as important as the act itself.

ROBERT: I liked that structure in *Cibele*, I think it fits with this whole idea of how we idealize sex and romance, especially with a first love. When it feels lopsided, it's hard to move past it, or even realize that's what's happening! Depicting the sex might've felt redundant there, because we all know it's not going to end well anyway.



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It reminds me of that common critique of sex in games, the 'kindness coins' metaphor – the idea that players say/do nice things in the game and then expect AI game characters to dispense sex and intimacy, like putting coins into vending machines. In *Cibele*, I felt like the main characters Nina and Blake both treat each other like game AI – and then when they meet in real-life, they both realize: 'wait, both of us are people, not bots.' A relationship is more than just saying nice things to each other.

But maybe the worst thing about 'kindness coins' is the underlying logic, that intimacy is a series of distinct momentary transactions. I think both of our design approaches emphasize how sex and relationships take

much more time, and intimacy is often ambiguous/negotiated/messy in its own way. There's so many kinds of intimacy, right? Emotional, mundane, physical....

NINA: Yes! I completely agree about Nina and Blake treating each other like bots – I feel like that 'kindness coins' logic is very much the way teens talk about and negotiate sex, in my experience as a teen at least ... and I was definitely trying to express that. I feel like that is actually a common thing in Western games specifically because many of us (myself included) grew up in spaces where sex wasn't talked about ... so now my whole thing is like 'wow I can talk about sex now?! Let's do a lot of talking about it!' But I think the physical aspect I see in your work has helped me build on that and has opened up my way of thinking about sex as a part of games. After all ... like I said earlier, talking about how people think about sex and how they engage with language around it is good, but there's so much more to explore than that.

ROBERT: I'm one of the few game developers who puts out (rather lengthy) artist statements or grandiose declarations of intent, so I'd say I'm pretty talk-focused too. Do you feel like this is frowned upon in video-games? There's this idea that the art should speak for itself, and you can only truly know a game by playing it first-hand. However, I think that attitude is dishonest about how games culture works: we don't play most games, instead we talk about games and watch other players perform these movements and gestures. Games are about watching other people dance.

NINA: I think you're exactly right in your description of how games culture works right now. Games and game developers do not exist in a vacuum – they are deeply embedded in an internet culture of conversation and sharing. I'm specifically reminded of stuff like streaming and YouTube, and how much anxiety there is in the videogame industry around those players/creators. Part of this anxiety may come from how suddenly video became the primary way through which many people consumed games. The game streaming community has a lot of power when it comes to shaping how people discover and perceive our games. I know from experience, because *how do you Do It?* is widely known due to the massive amount of YouTubers and streamers who played it. Games about sex are very popular with this community, because of the viral potential of covering something 'weird' or taboo. So, I agree with you that talking about games

and watching others play them is a natural and core part of the medium in the present day, and I feel like there's something specifically interesting about how this impacts games about sex, because of how widely our games are shared in this sphere.

ROBERT: Oh yeah. Sex definitely changes things, especially if we're talking about sex and video. Pornography and sex work is still taboo, and society punishes those who try to make it safer and more equitable. I support people like Cindy Gallop who want to confront the politics of pornography, but I also can't claim the mantle of pornography myself because if I'm 'too pornographic' then the game industry will cut me off from my audience on a whim, and ban me from game culture platforms like Twitch, YouTube and Steam.



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Even when I internalize their intimidation and keep my games fairly tame, Twitch bans me anyway, with no explanation or dialogue. Games are supposed to be art, and no one cares that Twitch's secret police bans my games by secret instantaneous trial? The Corcoran sent Robert Mapplethorpe a letter¹ when they cancelled his art exhibition for 'obscenity' ... meanwhile, Twitch doesn't even drop me an email. I'm not saying I'm as great as Mapplethorpe, but a bit of worried hand-

wringing, or even a text message, would've been nice. I guess that's what we deserve for trying to reverse-engineer art out of capitalism. It's often very frustrating to work in games in this cultural moment, to have to work so hard to show how games can do new things. In this way, I feel like conservative consumerist gamer culture has permanently poisoned this artistic discourse. Commercial games can depict as much sex, nudity and violence as they want, without worrying about upsetting industry censors. Games like *Grand Theft Auto* don't even care about exploring the meaning and politics of these subjects, they just use the imagery for titillation and marketing.

Meanwhile, my games actually try to earn their sex! The art can't function without it! And I'm the one being punished for my attitude and treatment of sex? Like so many people working in games, sometimes I just want to leave. Fuck these entitled nerds! But recently I had to defend my work to an art professor. She basically asked me: 'Why are you wasting your life, making baby-art for man-children?' She wasn't wrong, so I was forced to admit that I had this terrible need to try to stay here anyway, perhaps mostly out of spite for man-children, but also to help everyone else fix this toxic waste dump of a culture, even just a little, for future generations.

NINA: I'm also enraged by how the major platforms you mentioned are so quick to ban your work. One of the many things I find frustrating about it is that those platforms are the only way through which a large portion of players might discover your work – players who may have their expectations about videogames challenged by your work. Reaching those people and showing them first-hand that sex in games can be more than the 'kindness coins' mechanic is key to improving our games culture at large. I think a lot about how viewing/streaming/commentary culture has disseminated our sex games to this wider audience than most developers could reach on their own, simply because viewing is the preferred way of engaging with them for this massive streamer/YouTube audience. I wonder if this audience prefers to engage with our games this way because it's too 'scary' to play a game about sex? It maybe feels less intimate and intimidating to just watch someone else play it?

ROBERT: That makes sense. Sometimes I get panicked emails about how to delete my games and how to wipe all trace from the computer. There's a gamer anxiety about what your game collection says about you. Keeping my game on your computer implicitly

suggests 'I approve of gay sex' which in turn might imply other things about you ... unless you go out of your way to denounce the game loudly and publicly and declare: 'I'm only playing this game ironically, I'm not gay, actually I think gay sex is disgusting.' They feel compelled to escalate their homophobia and disgust so that no one catches them genuinely enjoying gay culture. It's gotten to the point where I almost never watch videos of my games anymore.

NINA: I know I've run into a lot of homophobia in videos about your games. I'm sure a lot of anxiety in the development community comes from encountering those kinds of videos as well.

ROBERT: It's pretty terrible. A lot of young male YouTubers use my games to promote their homophobia. I thought I was making something fun, queer and positive ... but when we make games, players provide the other 50 per cent of the performance and meaning. And in their hands, my game becomes a Two Minutes Hate,² where they can grimace and spit at the idea of gay sex. It's actually one reason why my games usually feature masculine white dudes. I'm afraid of seeing what a YouTuber would do to a transwoman or a queer person of colour. I don't want to be complicit in more violent images of vulnerable people. If I make games about trust and vulnerability, I have to assume many players will abuse it.... Maybe that's why I put out artist statements too? I want to connect with my audience, but I've also grown not to trust them, because angry videogame nerd culture often pushes them to violate that trust.

I wanted to ask you about this, actually – do you ever feel a conflict or tension with your audience? *Cibele* is so personal. The word 'brave' comes to mind, but that seems patronizing.... I guess I'm asking, how do you set boundaries with your audience, as an artist?

NINA: This is definitely an issue for me too. I set boundaries by actively balancing the player's power with the character's power in the design. *how do you Do It?* was one of my earlier experiments with this. I wanted to put the player in the child's shoes so that they could better understand her perspective. My approach was to let them perform her actions via her hands, which she uses to experiment. However, that control is limited by tuning the movement controls to make them feel more awkward to the player. These limitations help put the player in her shoes via enabling a performance (mashing the dolls) using input methods (her hands) – that express the awkwardness

of the situation. When I began work on my next sex game, *Cibele*, I used what I learned from *how do you Do It?* Specifically what I learned about balancing the players control with the characters control though limitations in the mechanics. In *Cibele*, I made a choice early on to not include any dialogue system, the story is based on a true one and it happened in a specific way.

Representing those specific conversations to the player is more important to me than giving the player control over them. It wouldn't be truly personal to my story if I gave the player control over those moments, and so I opted to focus in on other verbs. My focus was really on how to give the player the mechanics to help them perform a role with verbs that help them understand the character, rather than enabling an expression of whatever they want as and/or about the character. Building on that mentality, I ended up filming real-world video sequences in part because I felt more comfortable showing the physical/body-oriented parts of the story than letting the player have control over them. I think part of me was like ... why should I give the player control over Nina's physical experience of intimacy? The game was never about letting the player control her or her body – it's about me, the designer, trying to help them understand her as a person through the game's mechanics. *Cibele* is a game about putting the player in the shoes of another distinct person so that they can better understand her lived experience.

ROBERT: I think that nuance helps. I remember some *Cibele* players arguing it felt 'invasive' for them to go through Nina's desktop and photos like that (pl. 97) – even though that reaction elides your own agency (if you didn't want them to see it, you wouldn't have put it there). I think that 'distance' is helpful. Because in the end, it's true, you don't really control her.

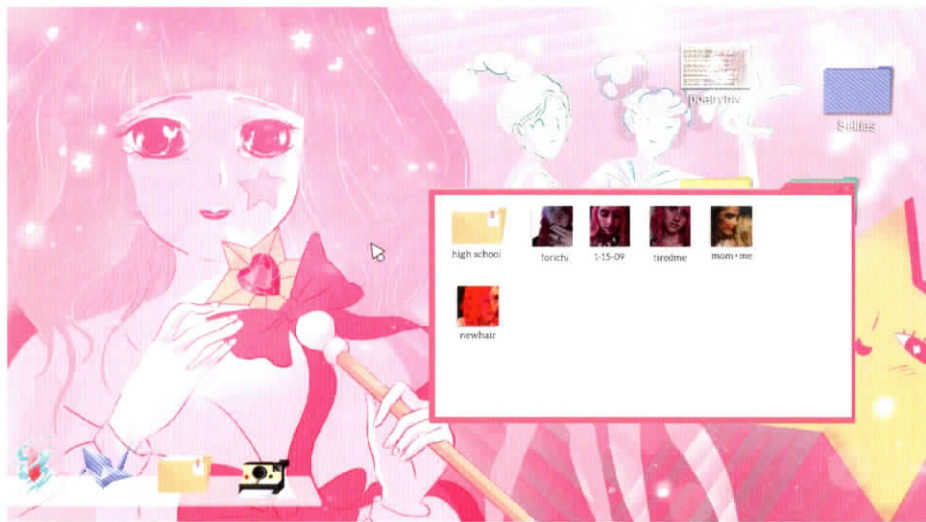
NINA: Distancing the player from aspects of the character is definitely an important tool for me. As you mentioned, players have often said that *Cibele* feels voyeuristic, and I think that's in part because of the distance between them and her that I reinforce. However, I think that a sense of voyeurism is also caused by the fact that the player views 'private' images of her body (underwear selfies) and watches the FMV foreplay. Similarly, people have referred to *how do you Do It?* as voyeuristic, likely because they're being asked to be intimately involved in another person's private moment of discovery. It can make people feel uncomfortable



94, 95 *Rinse and Repeat*, game screenshots



96 *Cobra Club*, game screenshot



97 *Cibele*, game screenshot

to be confronted with any of these taboo, 'private sphere' moments. I think Americans are especially prone to thinking games about these topics are voyeuristic, because there's a culture of silence around discussing intimacy publicly in any form.

ROBERT: Totally. I'm wondering if this is the same for you – but for me, it's often difficult to show sexual games in US games festivals. There's always a conversation as to how many legal disclaimers they should post, or where they should hide my game, etc. But then at the German indie games festival A MAZE Berlin, they just put my dick pic game next to the main entrance!

NINA: The festivals themselves haven't given me really any trouble, but I do find American attendees are way more likely to (physically) jump away from my games upon realisation that there's sex involved. When I showed *how do you Do It?* at the game festival Indiecade in Los Angeles, it was in a space that was open to the public ... so many people not accustomed to experimental games were browsing and tried it out. I can't even tell you how many people walked away looking disgusted or horrified...

ROBERT: But the game is so cute and funny!

NINA: It was sort of funny because it seemed dramatic to me, but does make sense given American culture's aversion to publicly discussing sexuality, especially when it comes to children. Do you find that certain people or groups react in a similar way to your games, when nudity or 'private' images are involved? Do they call your work voyeuristic at times? I can imagine people having that reaction to something like your dick pic game *Cobra Club* (pl. 96). I also think of *Rinse and Repeat* (pls 94 and 95), since it takes place in a semi-private space.

ROBERT: I don't think people say my games are voyeuristic, but they're definitely concerned with public/private sexuality. It also depends on the audience. When gay people play my games, I don't have to explain why I blur faces in *Cobra Club*, or how locker room shower fantasies in *Rinse and Repeat* relate to public anxiety. We have both private body images as well as public body images, and many people live this every day. Do you think *how do you Do It?* is kind of about this too? It's about a young girl's private moments, puzzling through different body images.

NINA: *how do you Do It?* is definitely touching on the tension between a public and private

sexuality. I think for children, that tension comes from parental supervision. For example, it's common for parents to use parental controls on web browsers to moderate what websites their kids have access to, most often to filter out things like porn. American culture is very intense about ensuring that children learn as little about sexuality as possible. We are subjected to this tension from such a young age – sex is a private topic, not to be spoken of. Navigating sexuality is a fraught path for young people because of this. I think it's interesting and important to think about how culture shapes private/public sexuality from such a young age.

ROBERT: Oh totally! I remember the first time I saw porn. I was seven. I was at my friend's house and he wanted to show me something – he had the password to unlock the TV's parental locks on the porn channels. I had no idea what I was seeing, but I knew I wasn't supposed to be seeing it. I panicked and ran out of the room! Haha. I also distinctly remember this weird sensation in my body, like I had to pee, but backwards, or upwards? It was weird to have such a visceral physical response to an image – but, uh, maybe we should go back to talking about games!

NINA: It's probably pretty obvious given the subject matter of *how do you Do It?*, but I think small stories like that anecdote you just shared are amazing, especially as subject matter for games. Personal games about sex almost always hit close to home for me. I'm pretty curious about what you think of physicality in your games. For me, in both *how do you Do It?* and *Cibele*, sex is primarily explored through language. Like you mentioned, the kid in *how do you Do It?* is contemplating the idea of sex and the physicality of it through her dolls. Likewise, the physicality of sex is addressed in *Cibele*, but the focus is more on how the sex came to happen and the language around that. There are certainly images of physicality in my games, but yours really link the character's bodies with your main verbs. In *Rinse and Repeat*, for example, the rubbing and touching is so core to the game. It feels like the body is an important aspect in your work.

ROBERT: Sometimes this 'direct' physical approach feels limiting. It's difficult and/or impossible to convey this stuff through a keyboard or a gamepad. Maybe it does have to be experienced first-hand? Like, kissing in real-life is so much better than playing any video-game! Why compete with that? Loren Schmidt and

Jimmy Andrews' excellent game *Realistic Kissing Simulator* (2014) works because it doesn't try to capture real-life kissing exactly.

The Australian game critic Brendan Keogh argued that my games dive to the bottom of the uncanny valley.³ So, maybe if my bodies can't compete with real bodies, I should let them be weird videogame bodies? Hopefully the same emotional logic is still there though – like when you rub and touch the hunk in *Rinse and Repeat*, hopefully you still feel like you have to be careful and listen to his needs, just as if you were to scrub a real body in real-life. I think that's what *how do you Do It?* captures beautifully, how even something as 'uncanny' as a doll can still be very 'real'. It's about how dolls function as bodies in society. I'm definitely not the only one who's made two Ken dolls relentlessly honk-off each other. And now we're making games about repeating that, forever.

NINA: Now I'm thinking about *Cobra Club* because I'm seeing a parallel with *how do you Do It?* I think *Cobra Club* has this uncanny valley element you're talking about, when it comes to how you can shape your body ... and I think that's what really grounded the selfie and surveillance elements for me. The body and selfies I made felt like my own – we basically are always authoring selfies in the same way in real life using angles and lighting. So, when I discovered that they were being shared publicly ... it felt super-invasive, which felt to me like a key moment in helping me understand *Cobra Club's* story. This movement from uncanny valley body editing to a very real moment of discovering surveillance was super-affecting.

Now that I think about it, I think there's an important element of humour in *Cobra Club*. The selfie editor, as a concept, seemed very funny to me at first. Dragging the sliders back and forth very quickly was like ... one of my favourite things.

ROBERT: Yeah, it was very intentional not to label any of the body modification sliders. To find out what each slider does, you have to *use* it. A body is something we perform. When I obfuscate that interface, I hope people understand that it's not about achieving a perfect result or perfect body. It helps players relax and be a bit silly.

NINA: I think humour often goes hand in hand with uncanny valley imagery. The contrast between this and the very serious themes that come later also

felt really important to me. I know I try to embrace humour as a part of my work: *how do you Do It?* definitely started out as 'just a funny idea', and then evolved into my first attempt at exploring something serious using humour. Do you think that humour is a part of your design process?

ROBERT: Yeah, humour is an important part of any relationship or intimacy, right? Sex is often funny and weird. All these expectations, all this build-up, all this significance – I think everyone has at least one 'bad sex' story, when the stars don't align, and when that happens you have to be able to laugh about it. Dark edgy 'mature' AAA games only had 'serious' sex for a long time, and finally they're relaxing – like I was playing *The Witcher 3* (2015), and it had this bizarre scene about having sex while riding a unicorn! I didn't really understand what was going on, but I appreciated that moment of surreal intimacy within this gruesome game. It shows how sex is more than just one thing, and I think that aesthetic informs my design process. I want each of my sex games to be a bit silly, but also be a bit serious. It means the sex has a little depth to it. Yes, the humour in *how do you Do It?* is clear, but there's also a subtle sadness – she's so scared of being discovered by her mom, and she feels she has so little time for herself. As you mentioned before, that contrast is important. It feels ... honest?

NINA: Yeah, honesty is something I like to focus on, and is often a great way to find the humour in everyday situations like flirting or sex. In *how do you Do It?*, the framing device is more serious because, like you said, she's hiding from her mom because she knows what she's doing is 'wrong'. Then, hopefully once you see the image of her confused face and thought bubbles while awkwardly trying to manoeuvre these dolls, you reconsider your own expectations of her actions and motivation. This kid is experimenting in a silly way while also subverting a culture that doesn't want her to understand sex, or even how her own body works. This is what real children are driven to in order to learn about sexuality. I wanted to make sure the game conveyed to the player the ridiculousness of the situation.

I also agree with your comment about more mainstream games – a lot of videogame sex is way too melodramatic. I also feel like many adult relationships depicted in videogames feel incomplete because sex isn't addressed. Emotional connection

seems to outweigh the physical in almost all cases I can think of, in larger scale games. When I think about real relationships and attraction ... sex is not a side-story, haha. I think there's a lot of depth that could be added by just ... acknowledging that aspect of a relationship.

I do understand that this is a tough ask because a lot of people feel uncomfortable writing about sex. I suspect that many folks feel like whatever they say will be projected back onto them personally. There's definitely a lot of cultural anxiety around being honest about sex. However, it feels great to see more and more people embracing and talking about this topic. Games like *Ladykiller in a Bind* (Christine Love, 2016), *Well This Is Awkward* (Emma Kidwell, 2016) and *Consentacle* (Naomi Clark, 2015) are recent games about sex that players are excited about. People do want to play games about sex, because sex is a part of all of our lives. It's important to explore ordinary life through art, and there are game developers out there like the ones I mentioned before who are creating amazing work about it. That's definitely a part of my motivation to keep making these games. ... I want to contribute to this body of work, and to help people feel more comfortable telling stories about intimacy. I think if game makers see other people creating honest games about sex, it can inspire them to jump in too.

1
In 1989, The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., USA, cancelled the exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* due to the homoerotic nature of Mapplethorpe's photographs.

2
In George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), people are made to watch a two minute film every day that depicts the government's supposed enemies, and to react viscerally and violently: 'a hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge hammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic.'

3
Robotics theory suggests that near-realistic human characters are creepy because they are almost human but not quite human, while cartoon characters are safely pleasant because they are not pretending to pass as human at all.