# Playable Bodies

Part 2

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# Choose Your Mothership

*Designer Roundtable #2*

**FEATURING:**

**Sisi Jiang**, a game writer, narrative designer, and games journalist, known for *LIONKILLER* (2020), a queer post-colonial game that was nominated for the Independent Games Festival Excellence in Narrative award. They are a recipient of the Game Developers of Color x No More Robots grant, and they occasionally write about Asian games, race, and narrative for outlets such as *Kotaku*, *Vice Games*, and *Polygon*.

**Domini Gee**, a freelancer/game dev from Edmonton, Alberta, who has done ghostwriting, short stories,

articles, and quality assurance testing for both indie and AAA (*Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Transmogrify*). Her work has been featured on the Unraveled-Chat Stories app, in the *Journal of the Japanese Association for Digital Humanities*, and on Cracked, and she was selected for the IGDA Velocity Program in 2019. Currently Gee is doing narrative quality designer work for Keywords Studios and as narrative designer/colead for her Kickstarted point-and-click game *Camera Anima*.

**Toby Đỗ**, a game designer, film-maker, and graduate of the NYU

Game Center's MFA in game design. His games include *Grass Mud Horse* (2019), *Meteor-Strike!* (2018), and an upcoming unnamed title about a Vietnamese family living in Southern California. His work has been featured in *Rock Paper Shotgun*, *USgamer*, and *Giant Bomb*. He was an associate producer for the film *Hiếu*, which won the Deuxième Prix award at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, and in 2020 he was selected as a Game Devs of Color Expo GDC Scholar.

**Naomi Clark**, a game designer and faculty member at the NYU Game Center. She has been making games for over two decades and has worked at LEGO designing online games and creativity tools (*Junkbot*, *LEGO Digital Designer*), educational games (*Wonder City*, *Josefina's Market Day*) and games for mass-market audiences (*Miss Management*, *Dreamland*). Clark's recent works include *Consentacle* (2018), and contributions to tabletop role-playing games such as *Monsterhearts 2* (2021) and *Honey and Hot Wax* (2020). She's the coauthor of *A Game Design Vocabulary* with Anna Anthropy (2014), and a founding collective member of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

**Sisi Jiang:** I feel like we have to talk about parents in this conversation. Mine were very antigames, so I played games under the covers with a flashlight. It was an uphill climb to even be a gamer. My parents would never buy me video games. I would try to compromise and say, "Hey, instead of giving me this video game, can you get me the strategy guide?" I don't know if that had any effect on how I think about game design. So I've probably gamed the least despite being interested in games just because access was a constant problem. Sometimes I would manage to get bootleg versions from China, though I didn't know they were bootlegs. I just thought they were Chinese editions.

**Naomi Clark:** I was an early game pirate, too. My family had an Apple II around 1982, and I had a lot of games that we obtained illicitly, all American and European games, because back then the game industry hadn't really taken off in Japan yet. Then I spent several years in Japan with my mom's side of the family, and over there I wasn't allowed to have a Nintendo Famicom, as my parents were suspicious of a dedicated game machine. I got into game design in New York, when the internet content industry started getting big in the '90s. I convinced my boss that we should make a game, and we made one about adolescent girls bullying each other [*SiSSYFiGHT 2000* (2000)]. Everybody had to play as a girl, which we felt was a strong statement in the '90s game world.

**Domini Gee:** I fell in love with gaming once I started playing things like *Final Fantasy*. My sister got *Final Fantasy IX* [2000], and from then on I was down the RPG rabbit hole. I even wrote a 100,000-word fanfic for *Final Fantasy VIII* [1999]. So when I graduated with my MA, I really wanted to get into the game industry, but unfortunately, it's really hard. So, I went off and did a lot of freelancing, which gave me the opportunity to work on my own game prototype, *Camera Anima*.

**Toby Đỗ:** I spent a lot of my childhood playing FPS [first-person shooter] games. I originally wanted to be a game designer growing up, so I went into college studying computer science. But I was so bad at coding. Then I went to grad school at Cal Arts for film directing, and there I joined a Game Makers club they had started up the semester I came, and I got into making games. I eventually decided to drop out of the film directing program and apply to game design schools.

**Sisi Jiang:** Design started for me playing Bioware games and feeling like there were things I wanted to change about them. I tried applying there, but it didn't work out, so I gave up for a while. And then I started making *LIONKILLER*, telling people it was going to be my magnum opus, but I was just making it in-between random hourly jobs. And now that being a narrative designer is my job, around three-fourths of my paying clients end up being Asian American or Asian Canadian. Why is that? I mean, I don't mind it, because working with them is a good time. But I know something's going on. I'm just not exactly sure what it is.

**Toby Đỗ:** In my experiences with film editing, when I had a hard time getting jobs, most of my clients were Asian as well. So, coming into games, I felt like it would be similar, which is maybe why a lot of my games have Vietnamese characters in them. And when I post them on itch.io, I'm specifically tagging them with Vietnam and Vietnamese. I've gotten a couple people from the Vietnamese game industry messaging me, but I'm also thinking about the blog posts that Marina Kittaka posted a few months ago about divesting from the games industry.[1] I feel like that's where I am at this point.

**Sisi Jiang:** Yeah, especially when you hear stories about studios refusing to hire people with hard-to-pronounce names and stuff like that. It's especially a problem for narrative designers—I can always find one Asian dude in

programming. So it's just this ongoing feeling of "Maybe they just don't want me *here*." When I started out in games, I reached out to a guy, a white guy whose name is actually completely in the mud now. The entire industry hates him for being such an awful person to women. I tried to ask him for advice. And he told me something that is kind of still with me: "Oh, I think you might have pretty okay odds of getting into the industry because you don't look like all the other people in the industry. That's going to give you an advantage." And I just had that constant thought in my head: he thinks I'm a diversity hire. That's literally what he said to my face. And this was my first-ever encounter with a prominent designer in the industry. So sometimes I will just be like, *Hmm, I wonder if my stuff is really good. Or if it's not really that good*.

**Naomi Clark:** That's real, Sisi. I think there's a general prejudice against East Asian creative professionals. Probably especially Chinese people, but also Japanese and Korean, like, "Oh, you're probably good at programming." And if you're Korean, "You can definitely make artwork, you can do character designs, but we're gonna write the character ideas." As a writer, I think there's a bunch of racism just working against you, and then there are these diversity and inclusion efforts that sometimes make the assumption that Asians are already overrepresented in the game industry.

**Sisi Jiang:** If we're so well represented, then how come I still see Chinese people depicted with katanas? How come *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) happened? How did *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020) have exactly zero Asian writers on the team? But sure, we're so overrepresented. Then how come these creative decisions that never include any Asians in character creators just keep happening?

**Domini Gee:** As a player I always have the weirdest sensation when people say, "It's hard for me not to create myself when I have a game with character creation." I've barely ever had that experience of creating "myself" with character creators. I think the closest I ever got was when I played *Mass Effect Andromeda* (2017). They have this system where your parents are auto-generated based on how you design your main character, so it meant that I could take an East Asian head and modify it a little to what I would consider familiar to myself. Finally, I actually got that feeling for once.

Likewise, with my own game, what I really want to sneak in are these features that to me would read that this character is very likely interracial. I'm likely gonna be the only one who cares about it; it's not intended to be interesting, I just want it. Because I know that it's not likely to be there otherwise.

**Sisi Jiang:** Yeah, *Andromeda* has the best character creator ever. I had no idea that this is what [other] people experienced when they played cinematic games. Are you kidding me? I am just now experiencing this? It was mind-blowing. I'm a narrative designer, and I didn't even realize that people could have this kind of emotional connection to the character they see on the screen.

**Toby Đỗ:** The first time I played *Metal Gear Solid V* (2015), I spent like an hour and a half on the character creator. Basically, they give you a pretty detailed character creator, and you can spend a bunch of time in it, then they tell you that you can't be that character. And instead you have to play as a white guy, as Snake.

**Chris Patterson:** Thanks to one of our contributors [Keita Moore], I just learned that Snake is actually part Japanese, though he certainly reads as white.

**Naomi Clark:** Hideo Kojima [creator of the *Metal Gear* series] loves part-Japanese characters for some reason. It doesn't ever really seem to influence his art direction of what the characters look like, though. There was an interview where Jonathan Blow [creator of *Braid* (2008)] described the Japanese industry as a withered soulless husk, which for me was just such a crystallization of a weird inferiority complex and orientalist imagining of Japan as a sort of Ancient Empire—like they just keep repeating the same rituals over and over. And then a whole bunch of people asked me whether I was offended by it, as if I have anything to do with Japanese games!

So for the American game industry, there's long been this feeling that the Japanese game industry is somewhat inaccessible, or, one might say, inscrutable. Because Japanese designers and developers have a reputation for being somewhat tight-lipped and not wanting to say anything critical about their peers or colleagues, or do too much digging into their own process. I don't think it's an entirely fair characterization, but as a result, there's a

weird mystique around Japanese developers. I have gotten this feeling—and sometimes it's overt—from people that I meet in the game industry, especially when I go to California for events like the Game Developers Conference and they look at me with this double vision. They're like, "Oh, so you're not a Japanese developer, not part of the Japanese industry. But you're part Japanese? Do you know anybody in the Japanese industry?" They're like, "So what's your relationship to the mothership?" I've had to have all these conversations over the years to try to make the point that people in the Asian diaspora are not all exactly the same. You can't just treat everybody as this one giant ball of wax like, "Well, we're not going to include Asian Americans in our considerations when hiring because there are a whole bunch of Asians already in the global game industry."

**Sisi Jiang:** That's why I've just been hitting really hard about my entire feud with *Ghost of Tsushima*. I wrote this long-form article criticizing it like, "Y'all were literally making a game about Japan with American devs, and y'all had no Asian writers at all." I outline how they project the US-Japan relationship onto the story; for example, they can't represent any kind of Japanese sexuality at all, and the dialogue is so jarring—I was like, *Please stop saying honor or I will go cry in a corner*.

**Domini Gee:** There is a very weird discourse around the response to games like *Ghost of Tsushima* about white people writing outside their race. Which, yeah, valid, hire more diverse people. But then it starts to lead to the idea that you shouldn't write outside your race that much at all, because you can't depict the experience properly. So then, if you're a minority, you're only capable of writing the mothership analogy, which for me would be extremely flawed. I can guarantee my experiences are very different from other people's. Or you start pigeonholing people by going like, "Well, yes, Sisi, you can only work with Asian companies and games, because that represents your experiences, right?" So it's a kind of progressive exclusionary gesture.

**Chris Patterson:** I'm curious how you all think about genre now, especially these hybrid genres with blurred boundaries. Like, action or adventure games blurred with visual novels and then being associated with Japan and Japanese cultural norms. It seems most Western-made games can be blurred as Asian in some way.

**Sisi Jiang:** I have so many thoughts about this. Japan has done better at integrating visual novels into prestige games. *Pokémon* is a visual novel if you really think about it, and so is *Persona*. There are so many games with huge budgets that have portions of the visual novel form. And then meanwhile, in the United States, [visual novels are] seen as kitschy, and I really do think there's a racial component to that—because it's associated with "those weird Japanese games." There are games out there that have basically completely shifted how we think about video game storytelling, like *Zero Escape* (2009), and then in the United States, those are lumped in with "bad games."

**Domini Gee:** In terms of that stigmatization, there was a game I got asked if I wanted to contract for that was basically a visual novel. And they were saying that they originally had more anime-like sprites, but they were thinking about changing them to be 3D models instead because the game didn't do well initially. And I was like, "Are you sure the art is the problem?" I thought it was interesting that their thought process immediately went to the game's anime art style.

**Naomi Clark:** There's this malign theory of game design in the West that I blame on Chris Crawford [1980s American game designer and founder of the Game Developers Conference]. He introduced the idea that choice is the central most important aspect of any kind of game. So part of what distinguishes a visual novel in the West, what makes it exotic and different and this weird suspect category, is that there are a bunch of stories that are completely linear. One of the oldest and most boring arguments that game designers have, especially when they're novices, is "How can it be a game if there are no choices?" I'm like, "What are you talking about? You're still just running around inside of the limited set of choices that Chris Avellone [game writer for the *Fallout* series and other RPGs] or whoever gave you. You just turned it into this ideology of 'Western role playing games let you do anything.'"

**Toby Đỗ:** Yeah, people tell me my games aren't games all the time still. Mostly because they're linear.

**Domini Gee:** The only way you can really have like a completely customized character experience is if it's a tabletop game and people are customizing it to you. Which, unfortunately, game designers are not gonna be in your house.

**Sisi Jiang:** Personally, I'm just so exhausted about having to maintain the illusion. It's such a waste of time to keep pretending that a game is all founded in player choice. We're not giving you a custom experience every time; I mean, even Bioware is not giving you that custom experience. Every time it's what you, your brain, brings into it that is custom. That's why, personally, the more I make games, the less I think about audience. Appeal is such a nebulous concept—you can't anticipate appeal—you have to stick to your guns and understand why your game works. They don't even have to like it; they just have to understand what you were trying to do. With *LIONKILLER*, Asians got what I was doing. After that, I was like, I don't really care if white people get what I'm doing.

**Naomi Clark:** I think that there's something to the idea that players in the West—or, you know, the people who are drawing these distinctions between visual novel and game, between CRPGs [computer role-playing games] and JRPGs [Japanese role-playing games]—have this idea of agency and free will and being able to express themselves as individuals, to be able to make the game their own and feel important as the player, that they somehow sort of imagine that Asia is a place where people don't care about that.

**Domini Gee:** And this goes into how people get those assumptions in the first place. People say, "Oh, yeah, in Western games you own your choice. You have to respect choice." And then they get angry when a game shows that your choices ultimately go into a little branch.

**Sisi Jiang:** It's all fake. I still designed the other path. And if you backtrack, then it's still linear. It's a waste of resources and time to keep pretending that it's free will. When you start off making games, I think there's that insecurity about whether or not something is a game or not. I put puzzles into *LION-KILLER* because I thought having a puzzle is what makes a game a game. And I need to maintain the illusion that this is a game. But I'm not a puzzle designer. I don't even like puzzles.

**Toby Đỗ:** *Meteor Strike* [Đỗ's game about esports] and *Counter-Strike* (1999) came about because I wanted to make a game where you just press one button the whole time. So the mechanics sort of came first. But I also had recently read an interview with Minh Le [Vietnamese Canadian creator of *Counter-Strike* and a contributor to roundtable 1], and I'd never really known

about *Counter-Strike*'s origin, so I wanted to make a game that built on my thoughts on that.

In my game *Grass Mud Horse*, a lot of the Asian themes didn't come up until much later. It was originally an idea for a class I came up with where the player got to be a cinematographer loosely based on past experiences I've had on film sets. When I grouped up with other classmates, we combined all of our backgrounds to flesh out the idea. One of our teammates, Julia Wang, was from Chengdu, so we decided to make that the setting because she had never made a game set in China before and our other teammate, Emi Shaufeld, is lesbian and has also worked on film sets so that's how we came up with the characters.

**Tara Fickle:** Toby, there's an interesting Let's Play video on your itch.io page for *Grass Mud Horse* where the player didn't really seem to get the game's *wuxia* [Chinese martial arts literary and film genre] elements. He seemed startled by the game's callouts to Asian conventions.

**Toby Đỗ:** The genre of film you're making in the game [as the player] is a *wuxia* Roman Porno film. Roman Pornos were softcore pornographic Japanese films from the '70s produced by a company called Nikkatsu. Basically, they would give directors money, and let them make any movie they want, under the condition that there had to be four sex scenes for every hour of the film. So, we're riffing on that a little bit. Because of that, *Grass Mud Horse* feels more Japanese than Chinese in a lot of ways even though it looks like a *wuxia* game on the surface. Samurai films are oftentimes about heroic warriors, but usually within the system, working under leaders, whereas in *wuxia* films the main characters are usually outsiders, travelling across the countryside, who then encounter corrupt leaders terrorizing their own people. There are parallels in the game, with you playing as a cinematographer working for this annoying, egotistical director. And the director is Asian American, right? So there's that conflation of throwing all these Asian cultures into one monolith, which we were thinking about, too.

**Naomi Clark:** Back in the 2000s, I was working at a quite diverse studio with a lot of Asian artists. And we got this opportunity to pitch an idea for an East Asian fantasy game. We thought we could put in lots of different myths, some Miyazaki influence, anime stuff, mix it all together. But it was a deeply dissatisfying experience. Because we were just trying to package

whatever we liked about Asian mythology into some sort of box for an American audience. I think that made me feel like the actual authentic thing to do is to relate to how this stuff has affected you. And if your reaction is ironic, or subversive in some way, then that's the actual authenticity. When I made my tentacle porn card game [*Consentacle*], I was like, "I want this to make people uncomfortable who think that they can masturbate to it." Then I got a bunch of reviews that were like, "This stuff is terrible to masturbate to," and I was like, "Yes!" Aesthetically, it worked out. Because it's not trying to be authentic. It's a weird refraction of the anime art style. For me, that was more real than something "authentically Asian."

Note

1  Marina Kittaka, "Divest from the Video Games Industry!" *Medium*, June 25, 2020, https://even-kei.medium.com/divest-from-the-video-games-industry-814a1381092d. See designer roundtable #4 in this volume for more on Kittaka's discussion of game industry divestment.