The BxNU Citizens' Jury Commission: A Public-Interest Arts Project on Video/Computer Gaming

Name/s of Applicants: Ducky (Rob) Elford

Project Working Title and Short Summary (maximum 100 words):

Project Proposal: Echoes of Humanity: Deconstructing Power & Perception in Videogames

*Echoes of Humanity*is a narrative-based video game where player agency deconstructs established binaries of identity and morality. Inhabiting a methodicallycrafted environment populated by digitized Individuals– real Gateshead and Newcastle residents captured in 3D scans – players forge a path intertwined with these complex, AI-driven characters. Players will navigate a nuanced web of ethical ambiguities, their decisions reshaping the characters' destinies and the world itself. Each interaction becomes a ripple, rewriting the narrative in real time and challenging pre-conceived notions about agency,selfhood, and power. Playersbecome unassuming architects in this world, leaving an indelible echo of their choices.

Referee 1:

Rosemarie McGoldrick

Course Leader in Master of Fine Arts at London Metropolitan University

Referee 2:

Simon Miller

Former CEO and Founder of Ma-Wah Gallery

Biographical Summary of Applicant/s (approximately 500 words per applicant):

Building Captivating Worlds Through Interactive Storytelling

I'm a disabled and queer digital artist and educator creating impactful interactive experiences. My specialisation is in video game design that explore notions of identity, myth, and reality. Awarded the prestigious Preziosa Young Prize in 2013 for a 3D modelled wearable art collection, I bring over 15 years of expertise in both crafting and teaching digital arts, with a special focus on the powerful potential of game design.

I use animation, 3Dmodeling, special effects, game design, and rapid prototyping to build immersive digital worlds that explore the metaphysical, the historical, as well as potential futures. These creations co-exist between the virtual and the physical. They blur the lines between reality and imagination.

Challenging the Narrative: Games with a Deeper Meaning

I'm passionate about the power of interactive storytelling to examine and challenge the narratives we build in virtual spaces. My participation in the BxNU Institute, Northumbria University, and Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art's project will reflect this commitment. I plan to examine how power, domination, and violence are depicted and usedin game worlds. These themes are core to my work as a digital artist and are woven through recent pieces including*A Mallard's Song* and *A Passive Voice*.

Beyond the Technical: Art with a Purpose

My educational background includes an MFA in Fine Arts. Thishas equipped me with the theoretical and practical tools to explore the impact of art applied to game design. Last year I received an honourable mention at The Independent Games Festival 2023, and I haverecently published another game, *A Luxurious Walk*, with Void Space. Additionally, I am currently establishing a video game publishing company dedicated to promoting inclusivity within the industry, particularly for neurodivergent and disabled developers.

Bringing Ideas to Life, Seamlessly

My vision for this project synthesizes my background and experienceperfectly. I am expert in industry-standard software such as ZBrush, Maya, Blender, After Effects, Unreal Engine, Substance Painter, Photoshop, and Illustrator. As such, I possess the technical skills to translate creative concepts into tangible digital projects, a process that results in captivating immersive experiences.

My commitment to exploring complex themes through impactful narratives will ensure that the final game will be not only aesthetically captivating but also a catalyst for meaningful conversations and a force for positive change within the gaming landscape.

Through *Echoes of Humanity*I aim to build a truly transformative interactive experience that pushes the boundaries of storytelling and challenges perception. My experience and background both as an artist and educator equip me with the necessary skills. My award-winning artistic practice, proven teaching experience, and dedication to fostering inclusivity mirror the project's core values. I am confident that my expertise in 3D design, AI implementation, animation, and interactive storytelling will not only enhance the project's visual appeal but also infuse it with theoretical rigor.I am eager and ready to lend my voice and vision to this exciting project.

Project Proposal (maximum 1500 words):

Project Proposal: Echoes of Humanity: Deconstructing Power & Perception in Videogames

Concept:

*Echoes of Humanity*will be a first-person walking simulator video game that challenges traditional genre tropes and explores the subjective nature of power, identity, and morality in video games.

The game's ludic,playable spaces will juxtapose over-utilised tropes from colonialist-era representations frequently depicted in video games with high-fidelity 3D scans of objects and buildings sourced from the immediate urban environment of Gateshead and Newcastle, with game characters created from 3d scans of local people. This spatial intermingling aims to evoke a sense of uncanny familiarity, where players experience a simultaneous recognition and alienation towards their digital surroundings. Additionally, the aesthetics of thesespaces will mutate and shift in response to player choices, unsettling the boundaries between the known and the unfamiliar.

Drawing inspiration from Soraya Murray's call for mindful and inclusive landscape design and Bonnie Ruberg's exploration of queer experience through disruptive play, *Echoes of Humanity*will push the boundaries of player agency and narrative by:

- Empowering "disruptive play": Taking the notion of "counter-hegemonic play" as inspiration (Ruberg),*Echoes* will provide players with multiple different options for interacting with the game world and its inhabitants. Choices will have genuine consequences, impacting the narrativeand, ultimately, the player's perception of the "enemy." Players can forge unexpected alliances, uncover hidden factions, and rewrite the narrative through unconventional choices and gameplay styles.
- Digital Twins: Populating the world with dynamic, AI-driven NPCs (non-player characters): Instead of invented characters, *Echoes* will feature NPCs scanned from real-life people from across Gateshead, Newcastle and the Tynes and Wear area. Together these will create a diverse spectrum of appearances, identities and

backgrounds. These NPCs will react dynamically to player interactions and evolve into allies or adversaries based on player choices, blurring the lines between charactersand living, breathing individuals.These interactions and choices that follow allow for explorations of the discourse on power and perceptions of it.

- AI-driven personalities:Utilising a mixed-method approach, the personality profiles for each character will be constructed by combining 3D facial scans with text data extracted from semi-structured interviews conducted during the scanning sessions. This data will then be processed and analysed by advanced deep-learning LLMs, resulting in personalized and dynamic behavioural models for each in-game persona that link the game with the wider community.
- Deconstructing "evil" stereotypes: Traditional video games often rely on simplistic classifications of good versus evil, perpetuating harmful stereotypes based on race, gender, ability, or sexual orientation. *Echoes*will subvert these dichotomies by encouraging players to question their own biases and consider the nuances of human behaviour through complex interactions with the AI-driven NPCs. Choices will influence NPC opinions and allegiances, challenging players to see beyond superficial labels and recognise the humanity in each character.
- Challenging tropes:Instead of offering safe haven within familiar, potentially harmful gaming tropes like the romanticized frontier or desolate desert planets, *Echoes of Humanity* will deliberately subvert these clichés. Forget the dusty towns and heroic gunfights of *Red Dead Redemption* or the fantastical landscapes of *The Legend of Zelda*; *Echoes* will present a distorted echo of these settings, reflecting their inherent biases and power dynamics. This deliberate distortion challenges players' preconceptions and invites them to critically engage with the story and gameplay.
- Ever-changing gamescape:Interactions with NPCs are not mere scripted exchanges; they will dynamically shift and warp the game world, reflecting the player's evolving fears, ideas, and choices. This constant reshaping of the level forces players to confront the constructed nature of these tropes and question their own role within them. Instead of perpetuating "othering" and conflict, *Echoes* will invite introspection and empathy, urging players to deconstruct harmful narratives, and online echo chambers and forge meaningful connections with the characters they encounter.
- Interrogating agency and control: Players control their avatar within the game, but do they truly control the narrative? By manipulating and influencing the AI-driven NPCs, and shaping their personalities and destinies, *Echoes* will blur the lines between player and puppet master, prompting reflection on the impact of our choices on others. The "Echo" mechanic, inspired by Murray's ideas, will allow players to influence the world through NPC actions and dialogues.

Gameplay Mechanics:

- Moral dilemmas: The game will present choices with no clear-cut answers. Helping one NPC might endanger another, and aligning with one faction might alienate another. Players must navigate these moral quandaries, understanding that their actions have ripple effects throughout the diverse landscape.

- Shape personalities:*Echoes of Humanity's* dynamic NPC interactions will go beyond the typical scripted exchanges, inviting players to weave a complex tapestry of influence through dialogue, resource exchange, and the innovative "Echo" mechanic. This goes beyond simply agreeing or disagreeing; it delves into the realm of shaping NPC personalities and witnessing the impact of player choices.

- The “Echo” mechanic:The "Echo" mechanic will serve as a catalyst for narrative exploration. This deliberate design choice underscores the transformative power of language and opinion, forcing players to grapple with the ethical weight of their echoed words.By mimicking an NPC's sentiments, players do not merely validate their existing views but inadvertently push them toward an amplified version of those same ideals. This can forge unexpected alliances based on shared, potentially dangerous, extremes, or ignite unforeseen conflicts as dormant tensions escalate.

- Consequence System: Choices will shape the narrative and the fate of the NPCs. Alliances forged or broken, promises kept or betrayed – all have lasting consequences, influencing the game's ending, and leaving players to consider the weight of their decisions.

Display and Exhibition:

This interactive artwork will showcase its narrative across a high-resolution projected canvas, engrossingviewers with both scale and detail. To navigate this immersive world, players will use a custom-designed joypad to interact with the piece. Familiar faces from Gateshead and Newcastle will populate the virtual landscape, alongside recognizable landmarks that stand as both backdrop and interactive elements, creating multiple links between the game, it staging, the exhibition space and the community beyond.

The immersive experience expands beyond the player's screen, drawing in observers as well as players to the unfolding drama within the iconic surroundings of the Baltic. Generated conversations laced with local vernacular and geographic references further deepen the connection between digital and physical space, inviting a multi-layered engagement that redefines the boundaries of player, environment, and observer.

Design Methodology:

This project utilises Unreal Engine for both game programming and level design, while character animation and creation will be created within Blender and After Effects. To achieve a hyper-realistic aesthetic, I plan to capture 3D scans of real people from the local area using my own portable scanning equipment.

Extensive playtesting involving both professional QA testers and open beta sessions with the public will ensure the game is polished and engaging before it is displayed.

References:

- Murray, Soraya., 2020. Horizons Already Here: Video Games and Landscape. Art Journal. 79. 42-49.
- Ruberg, B., 2019. Video games have always been queer. New York: New York University Press.
- McGovney, J. and McGovney, J., 2022. How The "Walking Simulator" Is A Cruel Manipulation. [online] Gameskinny.com. Available at: <https://www.gameskinny.com/80pfk/how-the-walking-simulator-is-a-cruel-manipulation> [Accessed 02 January 2024].
- Magnet, S., 2006. Playing at Colonization. Journal of Communication Inquiry, 30(2), pp.142-162.
- Nintendo [1986] The Legend of Zelda. [Cartridge] Nintendo Entertainment System. Kyoto.
- Rockstar Games, Inc. [2010] Red Dead Redemption [DVD] PlayStation 3. New York City.

Outline Budget:

(Please note that this is a sample budget and may need to be adjusted based on your specific requirements)

Total Budget: £8,000 GBP

Phase	Cost Breakdown	Estimated

		Costs
Pre-Production (1 Month)	Research, concept development, storyboarding, character design, world design.	£1,000
Design (3 Months)	Level design (using Unreal Engine), 3Dmodelling, travel expenses (NPC scans in Gateshead), UI/UX design	£2,000
Development (6 Months)	Programming (Unreal Engine), AI implementation, animation (Blender & After Effects), sound design, music composition	£2,000
Polishing and Testing (2 Months)	Bug fixing, optimization, quality assurance, marketing materials, staging, and exhibition design and display.	£3,000

Software Costs (Included within the Estimated Costs):

- Unreal Engine: Free for individuals and small teams; royalty fees may apply depending on revenue generated.
- Blender: Free open-source software.
- Adobe Photoshop & After Effects: Subscription required (estimated monthly cost: £20).
- Adobe Illustrator: Subscription required (estimated monthly cost: £10).

Exhibition costs (Included within the Estimated Costs): To be discussed with Northumbria University and Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art – I can use house equipment or hire a 4K project and screen additionally.

A custom joypad can be created by Custom Controllers for circa £200.

Please note, that the artist fee is included in the budget lines set out above.

Links To Previous Work:

https://www.duckyelford.com

Images To Support My Proposal:



Figure 1: Concept Art - Title Screen



Figure 2: Concept Art - Game Dialogue



Figure 3: Concept Art–Level Design



Figure 4: Concept Art –NPC Stats



Figure 5: Game Over Screen

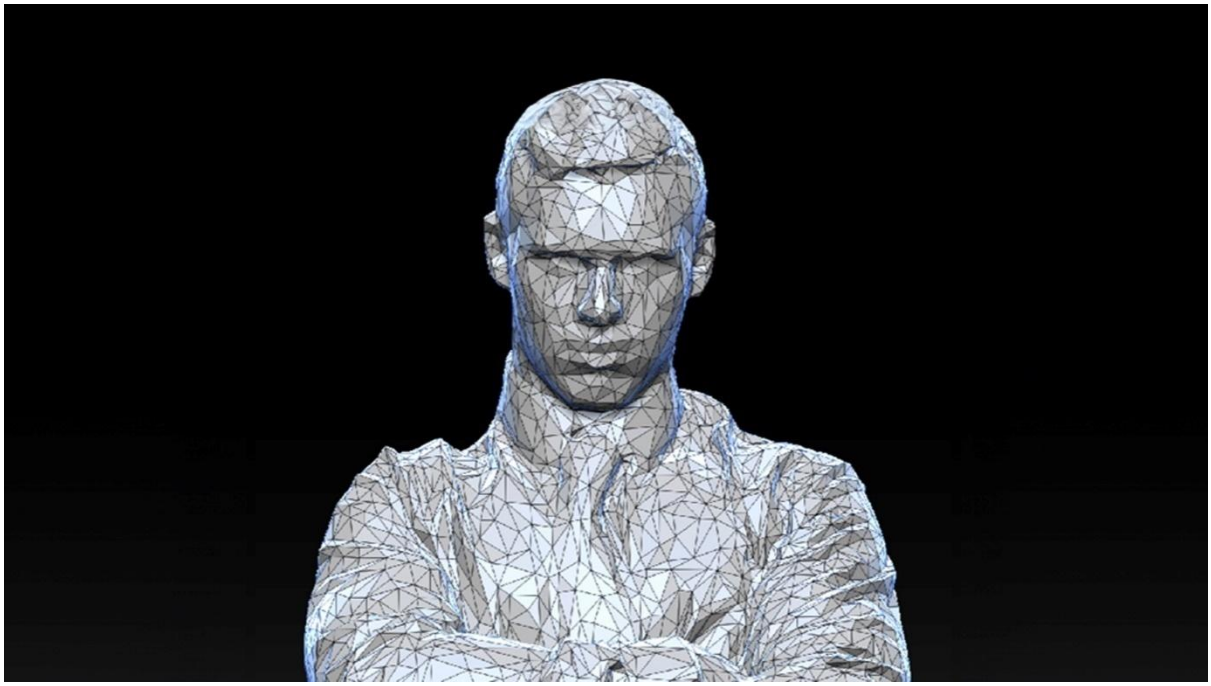


Figure 6: Concept Art - 3D Scan Data

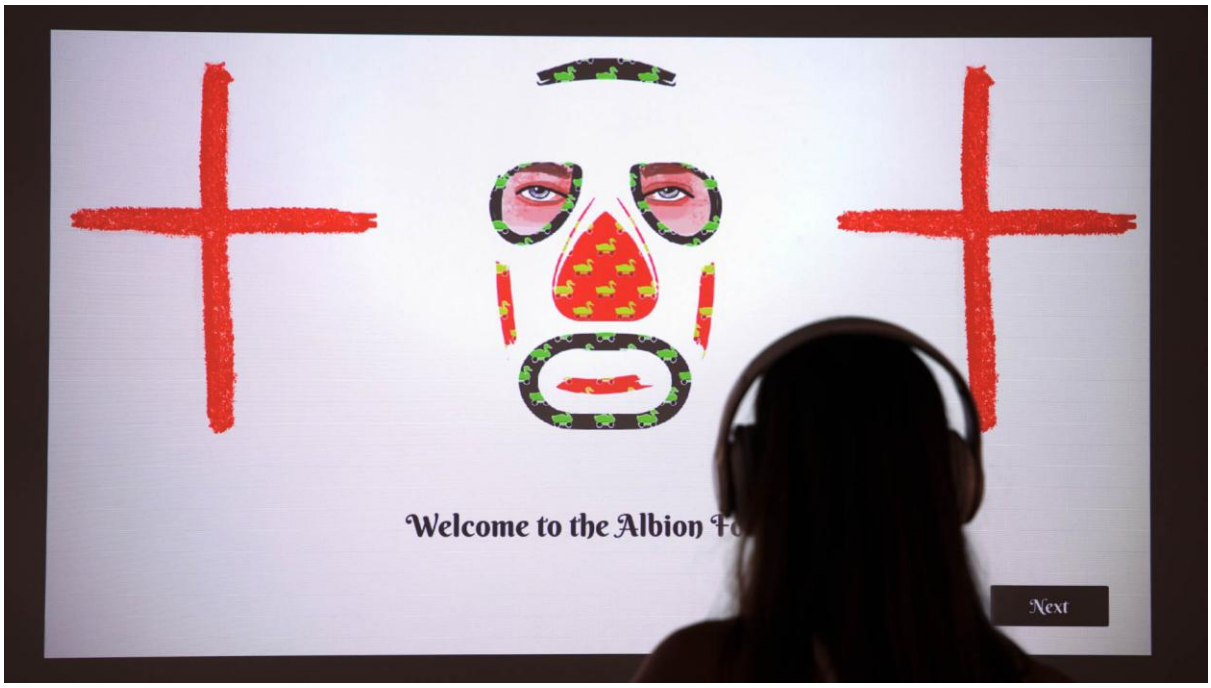


Figure 7: Previous Work - A Mallard's Song



Figure 8: Previous Work - A Mallard's Song



Figure 9: The Vacanti Man – 3DScanned, and 3D printed Wearable Sculpture



Figure 10: Previous Work - Character Designs