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

Name/s of Applicants: Oma Keeling and Morgan Jennings

Project Working Title and Short Summary:

Wormwood: Power/Plant/Play

A fictional nuclear power plant in the North Pennines, portrayed as a playable digital space, archiving multimedia explorations of the ways that nuclear disaster has appeared in video games.

Fictionalising world historical events and locations is a key element of popular video games, part of the tapestry of how we remember the past, and in the case of nuclear disasters has a distinct vocabulary of play.

This project connects current Northern nuclear sites, dangerous toxic green slime, and the overlapping violences of cultural profit, via the tale of Wormwood, site of a meltdown, site of play.

Names, institutional positions, and contact details of two referees:

Referee 1 – Dr Simon Moreton,
Associate Professor of Creative Economies, University of the West of England –

Referee 2 – Martin O'Leary
Studio Community Lead, Pervasive Media Studio – email:

Biographical Summary of Applicants:

Oma Keeling (they/them) is an artist, game developer and editor based in Bristol. They studied Fine Art at Edinburgh College of Art, graduating in 2020 and worked between admin, writing for video game sites, and self-publishing games before becoming editor-in-chief of Container Magazine in 2022, where they met Morgan. They have created multiple interactive fiction and experimental games projects under the guise of AfterglowGames and keep a blog of personal games criticism entitled GlitchOut. Their interests and inspirations lie in collage, archives, the difficulty of communication across the history of art, and the violences of capitalist and imperial society and how that turns up in science fiction. They aim in their work for the creation of archival, exploratory spaces of discomfort and joy, across a range of mediums. Other interests include bad horror movies, good horror movies, and all horror movies in-between.

Morgan Jennings (she/her), aka S.T, is a writer, educator and full-time horror disaster based in the North-West. She has a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing, focusing on post-colonial, restoration to romanticism and post-war American literature. Her stories find horror and catharsis in the tension between identity and the body, blurring the lines between poetry and prose. She publishes her fiction, and essays on internet culture, video games and more on her website, Night Electricity. Morgan's work can also be seen in Container Magazine, where her and Oma met, and the anthologies VERY ONLINE and Mouthfeel Fiction. Her ongoing work on the entangled history of energy production in the UK began in Dungeness, continued at the recently demolished Fiddler's Ferry, and now looks toward exploring nuclear power across the North.

Project Proposal (maximum 1500 words):

Wormwood. Noun.

1. The name of a plant, an angel, a city, and nuclear power station all at once.
2. A video game.

This project lives in fictional futures and contemporary occlusions, alternate worlds considering the North's nuclear infrastructure as cosmically powerful sites of taboo imagination, the kind that very often instigate the events of a video game about the future of the world.

Wormwood is a planned exploration video game, containing text, video and audio work about how nuclear meltdowns and reactors have been imagined as play spaces in games, via a phantom site inspired by an overlapping network of historical research into nuclear power. This site, based in the North Pennines, imagines futures for local sites in the North like Sellafield and Hartlepool if they were to become spaces of disaster, and then, ultimately, play.

The game would exist online, and be navigated as a walkaround space that allows you to discover items, texts and videos, which will be created as responses to our research. This space will also be replicated in a plan for a physical exhibition of these materials, the exhibition space itself becoming a level in a video game.

Background

As an intended fix to the devastating pollution of fossil fuels, nuclear energy has remained contentious because of long term risks associated with heavy nuclear material and any accidents arising from its use. It is both clean and abject, silent and that which instantly makes geographies into names forever associated with its presence. Exclusion zones. Chernobyl. Fukushima.

Yet, infrastructurally and conversationally, these are things hidden, subsumed into being a solution. Nuclear power exists inside massive secret sites that call to mind levels in video games, unreal and yet because of their contents perhaps the most powerful sites to exist on earth.

Games in themselves often act as a staging area for genres to reach for their most fundamental aspects, hence their association with excess. Thus in games, movies

and science fiction the idea of a nuclear disaster as a space of play, of exploration and of transmission of the real into fiction is common.

Chernobyl, synonymous now with the 1986 reactor meltdown that led to deadly, inhospitable conditions and caused the creation of a long term exclusion zone, has become a space for the imaginary. From the S.T.A.L.K.E.R series to Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, to the game Chernobylite, horror and action blend together to turn the most famous incident of non-weapons based nuclear disaster into play and fantasy.

Elsewhere the nuclear imaginary appears via symbolic indications, the geiger counter in your suit, green goo on the ground, the ticker on screen in the Fallout series that tells you how much radiation you've accumulated. An environmental tragedy, a puzzle to solve, a lingering threat, a weapon to be used.

These games create uneasy fictions out of history, ones in which resorting to violence is necessary to survive geographies with altered, mutated DNA. The link to zombies, created by any means, is not a weak one, and as they are recognised as a late 20th century fear, so too are the exclusion zones full of violent mutation and radioactive fallout.

They also undoubtedly fixate the historical nuclear conversation in games on a small number of theatrical and fictional events, and can occlude. Black Mesa is a name synonymous with the Half-Life game series, about a reality altering scientific test under the New Mexico desert. It is also the real site of a long running exploitation of the Navajo and Hopi people by energy companies mining uranium and coal. Search online for "Black Mesa" however, you'd be hard pressed to see past the results associated with the game.

These taboo incidents, and how they alter our relationships to ecology, to geography, and to the cosmic power of nuclear energy, thus have accumulated a kind of cultural capital fixated on fantastical translations of real threats into whatever fear is most thrilling.

Creating Wormwood

Wormwood is a way of exploring this layering of cultural product and history in a site drawing on regional infrastructure. The North of England has its own dense

imaginary space of nuclear fiction and disaster already, touchpoints in the 1984 BBC drama Threads, and the 1957 Windscale nuclear fire, alongside a storied history of employment in energy, power and powerhouses, contrasted against governmental negligence.

This project then emerges from material research into nuclear power in the north and nuclear disaster in video games, to address both at a crossroads, and ask the questions – What is the difference between a fictional Northern Nuclear disaster, and the imagined video game that follows it?

What are the overlapping national, global and historic violences?

The project has three sites of interest in mind:

Sellafield, on the west coast, is an area that has hosted multiple different nuclear installations back to the disastrous Windscale, and over which there have been multiple actions by nations outside the UK to sanction. It is also a place that most in the country will have no knowledge of. A looming background feature.

Growing on the sandy shores near Hartlepool's own reactor on the east coast is Cumbria’s preserve of the rare Sea Wormwood, an ecological thread added to the tapestry of connections at work.

Wormwood is a proposed site of alternate history that sits between the two. Taking its name from many sources, including as the plant after which, in Ukranian, the city of Chornobyl was named, its sits on the Pennine way, the connecting line of two coasts, and in the middle, at the reservoirs of the North Pennines. It's a site that itself holds histories of connection back to the bronze age, to the 60s industrial need on the Tees for water, and to an Area of Natural Beauty.

In exploring these sites via an iconic virtual space, an archive, we aim to bring to the fore this imaginary space in which stories about these taboo spaces can be told. These are places that are also integral to the future planning of energy production, and simultaneously, nuclear decommission, in the UK. They exist in flux.

Project Planning and Outcomes

Wormwood will take place in three phases, firstly in research trips to the three focus sites and collection of material for use in archiving, secondly the creation of the game, and thirdly in its digital installation, and exhibition online and in person as a physical collection.

The research trips will happen across the summer of 2024, and with a preliminary trip to Sellafield already in the works.

The design and creation of Wormwood will occupy time across the second half of 2024, with the aim to be finished and able to plan exhibition in 2025.

We plan to split the pay between travel, equipment costs and our own labour costs, with a day trip to each site, and then nine days of work each in creating the game and presenting it. We will also use some money to commission for work from local artists as part of the Wormwood Archive and for the recording of any interviews conducted during research.

With our knowledge of games and interests in archives we would hope, by investigating how the imaginary of disaster becomes playful, and has been a long term factor in shaping us as people, that there is a possibility for some reparative work in talking about something we might rather avoid.

Outline Budget:

£8000 broken down into -

12 days work for two contributors: £6140.40 (calculated as 2 x 12 days at Artist's Union of England rate of £255.85/day)

Artist hire and interviews conducted: £1000

Travel, accommodation and kit: £859.60

Please find links to our work below, and images created in the initial stages of producing this project:

Oma Keeling:

The Most Desperate Angel (online game, 2022)

Who Plays Unspeakable Games? (documentary, 2021)

I've Gone To The Lighthouse (game criticism, 2021)

Morgan Jennings:

A DEATH IN DUNGENESS (non-fiction, 2023)

PARASITE EARTH (short fiction, 2023)

a haunting at the cloud factory (non-fiction/poetry, 2023)

Images: Wormwood Collages by Oma Keeling and Morgan Jennings

