Names of Applicants:

Dr Hadi Mehrpouya

Duncan Nicoll

Title and summary

Barzakh: journey through the hybrid life of gaming

There are over 3 billion players worldwide and video game industry profits alone generate$175b of annual revenue globally. Large online multiplayer gaming platforms are often populated by 30-100 million players, yet they have very little rights over their data and the numerous advertising and market strategies they are subjected to as they play and socialise in these games. In Barzakh we take a deeper look at violence, coercion, and control in large multi-playeronline games through a digital art immersive installation *"Barzakh: Re-presentation of the self*" and a video essay "*Barzakh: Violence beyond aesthetics*".

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

Referee 1 Joseph De Lappe Professor of tactical media Abertay University	Referee 2 Professor Gregor White FRSA Dean of School of Design & Informatics Abertay University

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

Hadi Mehrpouya:

I am a critical designer and lecturer in Computer Games Technology. My practice is focused on the ways we interact with modern technology. I am currently interested in our relationship with data-aware/smart video games and I am interested in developing ways to better understand and see these highly adaptive environments through the lens of its users and their avatars.
Last year I received funding for a one-year fellowship with Royal society of Edinburgh where I investigated the effects of game mechanics and smart algorithms on players lives within and around gaming spaces. This work is a continuation of that ethnographic research presented and developed in a public facing format. During this year, Duncan and I

collaborated on a range of prototyping and experiments and this proposal is the result of our engagement with the themes described in the proposal.
I teach data driven game design and programming to undergraduate and postgraduate students at Abertay University and I am currently working with 5rightsfoundation to engage the findings of my research with public policy and policy makers.

Duncan Nicoll

After leaving school, Duncan worked in special effects in London before returning to Dundee to do a degree in Sculpture at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art.

Since graduating, he has written and directed numerous short films, both animated and live action, including the award-winning ‘Block’ and ‘Horsehair’, which was selected to launch BT’s getoutthere.com new talent platform.

Between his own projects Duncan has worked extensively in moving image education, lecturing in moving image practice and theory at university level and delivering and facilitating workshops in animation and filmmaking to people of all ages for various organisations including BBC, the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, Dundee Contemporary Arts and Barnardo’s in Aberdeen.

Duncan’s 2016 short ‘Crowman’ premiered at EIFF, where he also attended the Talent Lab, and subsequently screened at Screamfest LA and Fantasia IFF, Montreal - two of the most highly regarded genre film festivals in the world. His 2018 micro short ‘TVOD’ was a finalist in FrightFest’s 90 Second Horror Film Challenge, and was screened at both the Glasgow and London events.

While continuing to develop projects across various digital media, Duncan primarily works freelance as a self-shooter/editor and director, making documentary and promotional films for arts and community organisations, educational institutions and local authorities. He is committed to working as a filmmaker to use the medium’s potential to document, inform, educate and to entertain.

Project Proposal (1529 words):

This work is based on Hadi's yearlong in-depth ethnographic study of the highly successful game Player Unknown Battle Grounds Mobile (PUBGM) (Krafton, 2018). PUBGM is a large multiplayer battle royal shooter with over 30m players worldwide available free of charge. Since early 2000s, free to play games emerged as a new publishing and economic model where games gradually transformed into digital services. Game companies' revenue is generated through players purchases of in-game virtual goods as well as commodification of players personal data. Sale of Virtual goods is responsible for 75% of the $175b revenue generated by the global game industry. In other words, game industry is addicted to free to play economy. The industry benefits from deregulation and its juxtapositioning across a range of global and national industries from entertainment to fashion, military, and porn to name a few. Ambiguity of policies and legislation allows game developers to incorporate a range of gambling like processes into their games. Loot boxes for example are processes that allow players to acquire rare and luxurious virtual items through a betting like process mainly using real money through purchasing of in-game currencies.

Large populations of players in multiplayer online gaming platforms are managed and controlled through deep surveillance and powerful machine learning algorithms constantly nudging and incentivising players towards advertising campaigns to increase their spending. Players are subjected to a wide range of social and status categorisations and high levels of pressure towards further competition and spending of their time, money, and social capital. At the same time, these social gaming platforms provide an important space for many distanced friendships and relationships to flourish and develop. They are a home to many forced migrants and marginalised individuals from across the globe and corners of our societies. The majority of players we engaged with were from a diverse range of marginalised backgrounds, using the game as a place to connect to their culture and geographically distanced relatives and friends. They also built new strong networks of friendships where they spent on average 3-5 hours together every day in the war zones of video game PUBGM.

Society's obsession with celebrity and status is reflected in multiplayer online games and mechanics of these games reinforce and retarget our behaviours towards platforms objectives be it spending or behaving in a certain way. In free to play games players work hard to collect numerous avatar titles, clothing, possessions, and weapons. Here play becomes an infinite act of collecting and hoarding emotionally charged through gambling like processes.

Gaming platforms are now populated by over 3 billion players worldwide yet in general we don't look at them as public spaces. Market logic and microtransactions penetrated gaming spaces to a level where a game such as Sky: children of light (thatgamecompany,2019) which is designed primarily around ideas of companionship and kindness. The game reappropriates friendship and acts of kindness in the game behind a paywall or a grinding process requiring players to spend many hours of gameplay to gain points to have long term friendships in the game. What players experience is violence at far deeper levels than from the eyes of an observer which is limited to primarily aesthetics of video games. Free to play games such as Sky in a sense locks our emotions, expressions and ability to form long-term friendships within the gaming platform. PUBGM locks our avatar expressions and

possessions behind loot boxes. In this work we argue that, in order to improve our online gaming spaces, we need to see them as public spaces such as parks and playgrounds. Spaces that belong to communities. Before rushing for change and further dysfunctional regulation we need to get more intimate with these highly influential and complex social spaces.

Another issue at hand is the increasing gap between different generations and their relationships with modern technology and digital social and gaming spaces. In-depth marketisation of multiplayer online games has now broken the boundaries between different genres of games and is pushing the game industry towards the development of metaverses or online entertainment prisons where players can spend most of their lives. Large multiplayer free to play games such as PUBGM and battle royale genre in general now transgress all genres of games linking their products with many industries such as sports, military, entertainment, fashion and music. The game industry has also gradually hybridised and virtualised these industries into Esports, drone and automated warfare, game play streaming/publishing and pornographic video games. Products, celebrities, and values flow freely between our virtual and real worlds influencing and manipulating almost every aspect of our lives. The fast paced and deregulated development of the game industry made it difficult to discuss and understand its effects on our lives and our children's lives. The gap of understanding and self-alienation of many adults in online social gaming spaces created many loopholes in our policies and distanced them from younger generations and their communities. Whilst adults want to sanitise gaming spaces such as Roblox and Grand Theft Auto (Rockstar North, 1997-present) from misogyny, sexism, transphobia and different forms of abuses and risks, children increasingly seek these playgrounds to find a private and personal space to take risks, experiment, and bond with one another be it digitally or in supermarket carparks. Where we live in Scotland, many young people socialise in supermarket carparks due to the lack of social spaces available to them in cold autumn and winter nights. They are pushed and marginalised towards freely available mobile spaces of video games. Video games allow players to experiment with their bodies, status, and identities. They have many benefits and are now a key part of individuals in society. Our lack of understanding of how important these spaces are to young people and their deeply subversive marketised nature hidden and normalised through abstract game mechanics and data driven design processes resulted in many unsuccessful attempts to censor or ban violence and gambling like processes from these gaming spaces. Whilst not clearly realising the deeper implications of how these gaming spaces are mobilising variety of psychological retargeting and behavioural nudging techniques to change players habits, behaviours, and social relations altogether.

Barzakh brings to the fore the above concerns through an immersive journey. Barzakh is a multimedia installation investigating how play spaces are privatised and governed by harsh market oriented algorithmic processes. Our aim is to show the deeper layers of violence that exists in most large multiplayer online free to play games and open a space for discussion and dialogue on why we need to have a stronger voice on how these spaces should be regulated through a diverse range of communities and voices including public interest bodies. As well as having a say in how play is maintained and governed within these gaming platforms or the algorithmic governance of these platforms. Barzakh consists of two artefacts. **Barzakh** is an Arabic word meaning 'a place separating the living from the hereafter'.

A) ***Barzakh: Re-presentation of the self*** is a digital 3D video installation projected within a room or on an individual wall. Here, we take the audience through an audio-visual abstract journey of gaming in between avatar and the self. The installation is enriched with voices of players documented over the past year that will be weaved into audience immersive experience at different intervals based on their physical movements within the installation space. Manipulated game footage and soundscapes are also incorporated to create an experience inspired by the liminal space of gaming and gambling, the magical but also sexualised experience of modern gaming. We take the audience into the liminal space of play reflecting on fetishisation of virtual objects, status and titles in large multiplayer online games. This work will be projected in a dark room on three walls, as the audience move around the room, they hear abstract recorded voices of players that we documented over the past year. In addition, treated and manipulated gameplay footage and short video clips and 3D visualisations will accompany the work taking the audience in an embodied experience of gaming. In the way that players immerse themselves in the game world, this installation uses manipulated game footage and soundscapes to take the audience into a dreamlike space between avatar and self, between game world and real life (See link& Figure 1).

Barzakh: "Violence beyond aesthetics" (10 minutes video essay) shedding light on algorithmic violence, the coercive power of large multiplayer video gaming platforms and their highly marketised governing regimes. In this video essay, we focus on the unintended consequences of coercive game design on players and their communities. We trace the presence of "algorithmic violence" within these gaming spaces and show some of the ways they nudge and manipulate our behaviours and social relations in multiplayer online gaming platforms. A new form of violence and control that threatens our privacy, relationships, and wellbeing (See Link).

In addition to Barzakh, we would like to include our recent work: three 70cm sculptures (Figures 3-5) as well as avatar manifesto with limited prints (figure 6&7).

Budget outline

Activity	Details	Rate	Total
Media development	Developing a media library of game footage and audio visual experimentations	Duncan: 10 days at rate £250 Hadi: 3 days in kind supported by Abertay University	2500
Editing and polishing of video Essay	Compiling, manipulating and editing footage and sound.	Duncan 10 days £250 Hadi 10 days: In-kind supported by Abertay University	2500
Audio engineering	Professionally editing and polishing our audio file and the overall sound design of the installation	5 days, professional sound engineer. £250	£1000
Workshop development	1 day workshop to better discuss some of the deeper challenges of players in relation to violence and coercion in online gaming spaces	5 days. Katie Power who Hadi collaborated to make the sculptures	£1000
Travel and accommodation	Hadi Mehrpouya, Katie Powell and Duncan Nicoll travel and accommodation to run workshop and be present at opening		£1000
Total			£8000

Examples of prototyping

1) Example of manipulating real life footage of one of the players

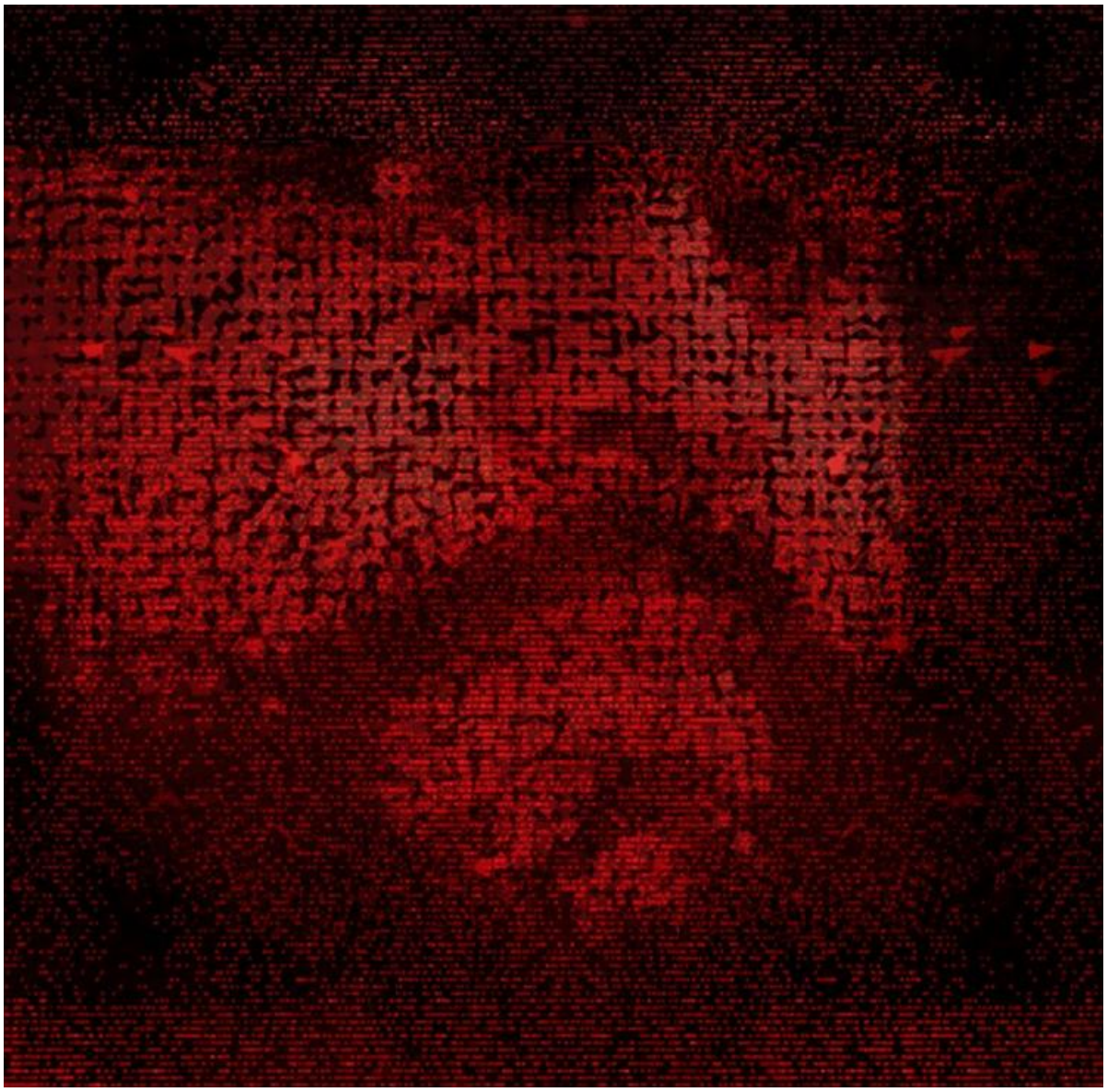


Figure 1: 3D visualisation of one of the players.

2. Link to our prototype recording for Barzakh: Re-presentation of the self (immersive installation) here: https://vimeo.com/user183352371/installation?share=copy
3. Link: Please see video of our video essay introduction here: https://vimeo.com/user183352371/video-essay?share=copy

Additional art works:

Three sculptures arecommissioned by Hadi made by Katie Powel based on Hadi's ethnographic work from our upcoming exhibition



Figure 2: Javid, 24, male from Afghanistan. Father of 4 children. Hospital security guard in Kabul, addicted to PUBGM.



Figure 3: Shuaib, male, 27. forced migrant from Afghanistan, experimenting with his identity and body through his avatar. Currently unemployed and in debt due to in-game spendings.



Figure 4: Nadia, 21, female. Unemployed and addicted to PUBGM. Traumatised twice by verbal abuse.

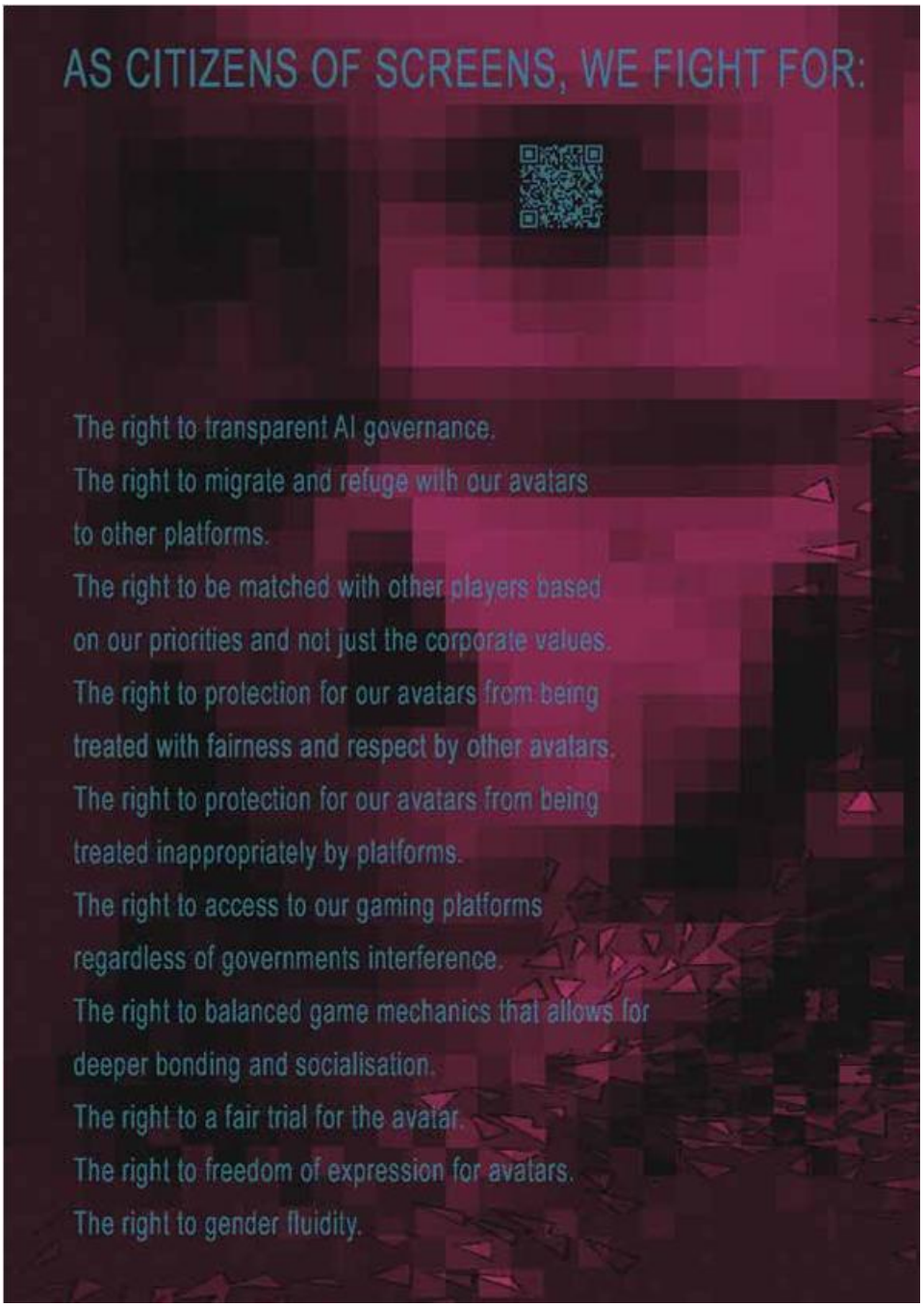


Figure 5: Avatar Manifesto (Limited prints available as part of this exhibition). Collaborative work by Nicoll and Mehrpouya:

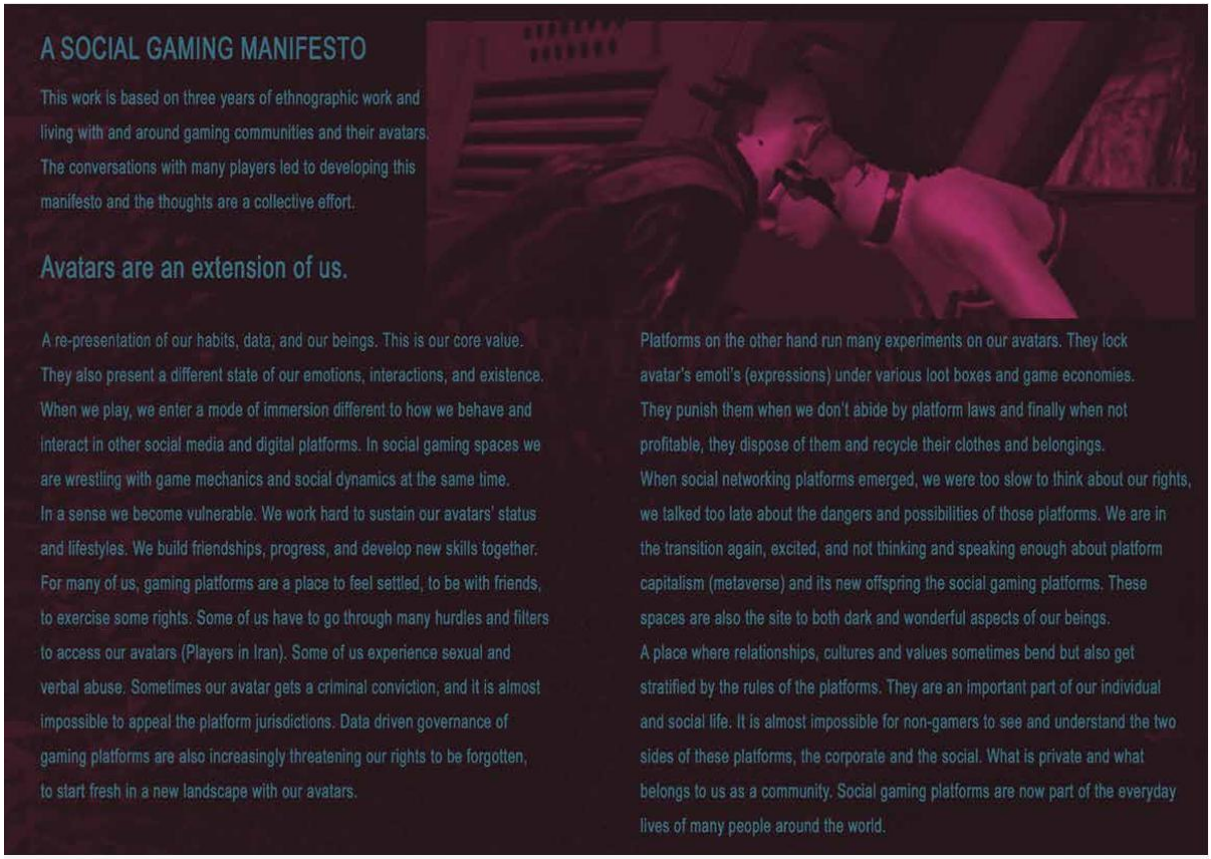


Figure 6: Avatar Manifesto (Limited prints available as part of this exhibition). Collaborative work by Nicoll and Mehrpouya: