Information:

Name of Applicants: Uma Breakdown

Working title: “Miserable Forms”

Summary: This project takes the processes of making, and playing video games as a context within which to critique depictions of violence, as well as popular assumptions around the deployment of violence within video games such as those reflected in the project brief. “Miserable forms” is itself a video game, but one that bleeds out into the real world, asking its players to utilise other resources such as sculptural materials in an increasingly open ended and personal journey that connects them to future and past players. It asks the audience to reflect on play as a creative process, and the antithesis of fascism.

Referees:

Referee 1:
John Eng Kiet Bloomfield,
Director of Peer, London.

Referee 2:
Lesley Taker,
Studio/Lab Manager,
FACT, Liverpool.

Biographical Summary of Applicant

I'm Uma, a disabled working class artist, writer, and award winning game designer interested in animals, horror, and queer feminist literature. Everything I make is about some combination of love, grief, hallucination, and an excess of joy. My art is made through images and writing, and things which are combinations and/or extensions of these; like games, performances, publications, and installations. With Belladonna Paloma I make video games about the divine and occult providence of transfemme existence. I live in Gateshead, UK.

Recent publishing and exhibition projects include "The Speculative Dismemberment of Agent Leon Kennedy" for Market Gallery (Glasgow, 2022), "Hinterlands" at Baltic (Gateshead 2022), "The Joy of Destruction" for Backlit (Nottingham, 2023), "Take Care" for Travelling Gallery (touring rural Scotland), "Trans Death Magic" for SlugTown (Newcastle, 2023), and my first solo exhibition "Earth A.D." co-commissioned by and touring across Wysing Arts Centre (Cambridge, 2022), FACT (Liverpool, 2023), and Quad (Derby, 2024). I am currently the 2024 International Digital Fellow at Quad, and a trustee for Broken Grey Wires, the Liverpool based art organisation concerned with the depiction of mental health illness. In addition to the above I have also made eight video games for organisations including Akademie Schloss Solitude, Arebyte, and Container, and two with my collaboration partner Bella. I was shortlisted for the 2020 Adam Reynolds Award, the 2022 Art Foundation award in the category Digital artist, and won second prize at Athens Digital Art Festival in 2021.

Upon graduating from the Royal College of Art on a full bursary in 2008 I abandoned art practice for eight years while learning to manage a lifelong illness. Until 2016 I worked exclusively in care and inclusive education, with seven years spent developing and running an award winning pupil-led art programme at primary school for children with disabilities based on the principles of the adventure play movement and pupil centred learning. This experience and my own background underpins my approach and philosophy to art; that it should be an inclusive, welcoming and exciting invitation for speculation and collaboration.

As a researcher and educator my focus is on the overlaps between the philosophies of play, horror, and art, completing an AHRC funded PhD on this at Northumbria-Sunderland CDT in 2020. I regularly teach and give talks for audiences from young children to post-docs and in 2023 my hosts included Yale, Oxford University, Saxion University, Newcastle University, Wysing Art Centre's Creative Youth festival, and California Institute of The Arts.

As someone with a class background that could have easily foreclosed access to art, I am passionate about supporting access to art education outside of the formal channels. As such I have taught at a number of free alternative art schools including School of The Damned, Open School East, University of The Underground, as well as gallery based artist development programmes such FACT Together, Chisenhale's Into The Wild, and Ad Minoliti's Feminist School of Painting hosted by Baltic in 2020. Additionally I provide a pay-what-you-can mentoring service for working class artists outside of education, and am the Artist Lead for Syllabus VII, a year long free alternative art school run through seven UK art centres across 2024-2025.

Miserable Forms

Description:

“Miserable Forms” (MF) is an accessible artwork that utilises and extends the conventions of video games to critique notions of power and violence, while demonstrating the alternatives the medium offers and encouraging creativity in its audience. It takes the form of an audience playable game that utilises both a videogame setup of screen and control pad, as well as a unique system where physical objects are arranged and interpreted in the gallery space, connecting each player’s experience with those before and after.
Three elements make up MF:

- The video game file.
- The station comprising the computer and peripherals through which the game is played.
- The table where physical objects are examined and rearranged by each player.

The Video Game:

The digital component of MF is an adventure game, produced in Adventure Game Studio, and modern game engine that is designed to build “point and click” games comparable to the LucasArts games of the 90s such as “The Secret of Monkey Island”, “Broken Sword”, and “Grim Fandango".

In the game, the player takes control of a character tasked with exploring a richly inhabited landscape that recalls a Northumbria of both the far past and the far future. Importantly, each short playthrough begins with the player being asked to examine a physical arrangement of objects arranged on a station next to the one where they are controlling the video game. The player looks at this arrangement of simple forms, perhaps stacked up like a stone cairn, or spread like the remnants of a beach fire, and answers some questions about how they make them feel. The answers they choose shapes part of the short adventure that follows which might see them exploring the wreck of a spaceship on the edge of the north sea, or waiting out a storm while swapping tales with a farmer in their cottage. The end of each adventure is the same, with our player being told that they are too exhausted to make the choice that is in front of them. They must put down the controller and rearrange the physical objects as either a map of where they travelled or a monument to what they experienced in order to help the next traveller that passes this way. A playthrough will take approximately 10 minutes, with approximately five different “paths” depending on player decisions and a large number of random variables to make repeat playthroughs feel unique. If the game is left unattended an automatic reset system means each new player begins at the beginning of the story.

The Game Station:

The video game described above is run from a pc hidden within an unpainted wooden plinth, which also supports the monitor, headphones, and control pad for playing the game. Following my commitment to minimising the environmental impact of my art practice, the electronic parts of the station will be sourced from the AV store or either Baltic or my own studio. While carefully made to a high standard, the wood for the plinth should be reclaimed from Baltic waste, or bought from Newcastle Wood Recycling or similar. The game station is made so that it can be free standing, comfortably accessible to children and adults with or without mobility aids, and that the objects on the table are in easy view without having to leave the game.

The Table:

Made to a high standard from reclaimed wood as above, a table with a top approximately one metre by one metre is next to the game station. The top of the table is bordered with a lip of around 7 cm to stop objects easily being knocked off and it should bring to mind both a board game table and something from a potting shed. The table is 80cm high to allow access for people with a range of heights and mobility aids.

On the table is a collection of around a dozen robust simple forms, easily and safely handleable, and capable of being stacked and assembled in a large number of ways. The exact forms and materials will be developed in response to play testing and in parallel to the development of the video game but I am currently looking at 3d printing them in recycled PLA or casting them from a strong polymer like Jesmonite. The key design requirement is that the objects be interesting enough to solicit looking closely, and recall natural or manmade forms without looking like any in particular. Looking at them should feel a little like you dug a hole in the garden and found a set of very deliberately shaped objects that might be from a collapsed shrine, an ancient game, or from some kind of machine.

Background:

The game Miserable Forms is informed by two key texts which address overlapping concerns at comparable moments of history. The first of these is George Bataille's "Abjection and Miserable Forms", a short text from 1934 which theorises how the rise of violent Fascism is predicated on another kind of violence in which people become alienated from themselves, losing not only the sense of belonging to society but a sense of self.
The second text is the 2013 video game "Depression Quest" by Zoey Quinn. "Depression Quest" was the catalyst for (or at least symbolic subject of) GamerGate, the international cultural event that was initially a backlash against the perceived invasion of women and minorities into the world of video games, and which evolved into the broader movements such as the Alt-Right, the ongoing culture wars, and Donand Trump's presidency.

"Depression Quest" is neither a power fantasy of dominance nor a particularly fun game to play. It is an adventure game about living with mental illness, its key mechanic being that frequently the right choice to proceed is shown but unavailable, as a reflection of the protagonist's depression. This mechanism and the games subsequent history, creates a powerful resonance with Bataille's from 80 years earlier, and together with the theme of GameCall: The interrelation of agency, control, violence, and difference.

Miserable Forms is a game that reflects on this context, and attempts to show a way out by emphasising the capacity for games to support creativity. Drawing from the work of game theorist Mary Flanagan, I'm interested in how games can be played in a manner akin to the performance or "rendition" of a musical score. As Flanagan notes, many games provide a context in which a player plots a unique path through the context of the game, different from other players and different from what they themselves will perform with the subsequent attempt. Further to this, there are many parts of the videogame ecosystem that are focused on how to play a game in a unique way, whether this is the speedrunning community that looks for unintended gaps in the game to exploit, or players that practise beating two copies of game simultaneously, or play blindfolded, or with ludicrously inappropriate control methods. This creativity, along with my experience of the very specific context of presenting a video game in a gallery where many people will not only encounter the game, but encounter others playing it before and after them, is central to this project.

Miserable Forms is a game where the power, domination, and glorification of violence in many games is replaced by different context: a game that emphasises its state as a score to be performed, that encourages creativity, improvisation, presenting not a self contained experience but a provocation and springboard to continue to play and create.

Development Process:

I have significant experience in project management, art production, and game design at a range of scales and have planned for this project based on that experience to maximise the resources available. One of the key resources offered by GameCall is the two year timeline, which will allow me to work on this project for a series of sustained bursts interspersed with time where reflection, parallel research from other projects, and peer feedback can enrich the project. I have been full time freelance since 2021 and would be able to flexibly respond to the needs of this project while fielding my other commitments. From the ten game projects I have brought to completion so far including eight as a solo dev, this is a rhythm of working that allows me to be the most effective, make creative and considered decisions, manage my disability and meet all deadlines.

Pre Production (3 days admin, 1 day production July 2024):

- Consult with stakeholders on plans for exhibition including deadlines for press.
- Timeline is revised
- Research including; reference photographs from locations, object examples, mood boards.
- Game Design Document written (this outline scope of project, mechanics etc).
- Graphics and audio workflow decided based on research.
- Prototype produced in Adventure Game Studio including single examples of key game mechanics, mockup physical objects, placeholder graphics and sound. This is shared with 2-3 members of my close peer group for feedback, while planning and research continues beyond these 4 days.

Production 1 (18 days production across November 2024 - March 2025):

- Blocks of 3 days every fortnight with a break for the holidays.
- Game mechanics for full game are completed first, followed by narrative text and finally graphics, music and sound effects.
- Prototype 3 variants of the “simple forms”
- At the end of this period a fully functional ‘beta’ build of the game will be complete which can be shared with my peers for playtesting.

Closed Beta Testing (1 day admin June 2025):

- Complete artwork including beta build and various prototypes of the simple forms are tested in the bookable space at my Newcastle studio with 2-3 peers working with games and art.
- This results in notes for revisions to game, final design for simple forms, and specs for the wooden station and table elements.
- Midway timeline review.

Production 2 (2 days admin 1 day production July 2025)

- Design for table and game station are drawn in Blender and sent to local fabricator. Baltic and Newcastle Wood Recycling contacted for materials. Deadline for completion is September 2025.
- Simple forms design finalised and materials ordered.

Production 3 (2 days production 2 admin days September 2025)

- Two full sets of simple forms produced.
- Table and game station received and tested at Newcastle studio.

Production 4 (3 days production October 2025)

- Final edits and refinement of game, including testing complete setup.

Launch (2 days admin 2026)

- Exhibition admin, logistics for packing and delivery of work to Baltic.

Budget:

Due to my commitment to working with low impact, open source software, and accessible materials as a means of supporting an audience to themselves become artists, the majority of the budget is used for labour costs. Informed by rates from A.N. I have split my labour costs between "production" at £230 per day, and "admin and research" at £100 per day. There are overlaps in these, but I find it helps to manage time to split them. As noted above, the days on project are deliberately set in blocks and spaced out. This allows discoveries made on other projects and through my day to day studio practice to add to and enrich this project while "off the clock".

For the past 5 years I have maintained a semi-formal studio support group with a number of my peers, where we help one another with our projects. Therefore there are no labour costs from this group for the testing and feedback on the project as it is a reciprocal system.

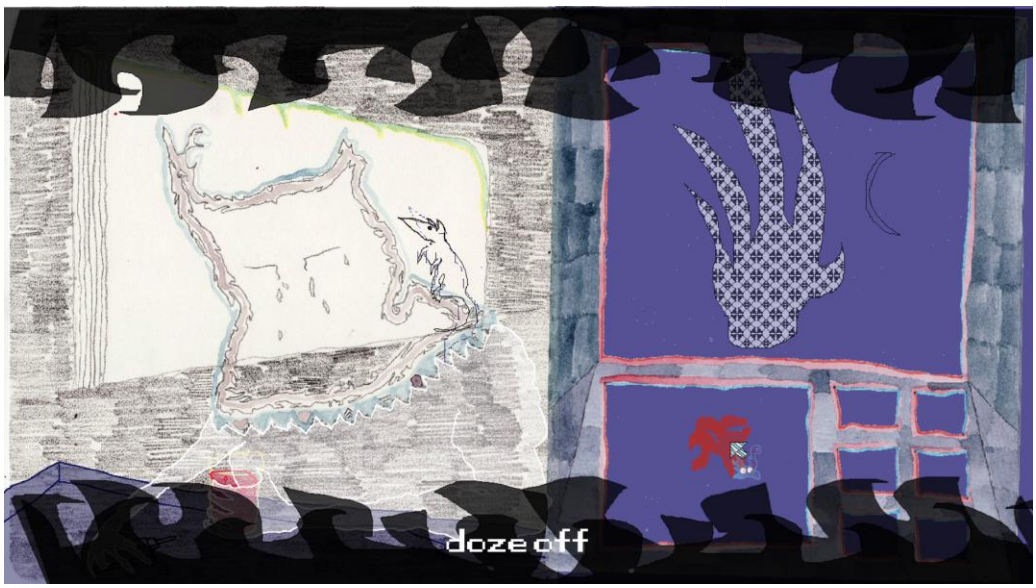
- Uma labour costs:
    - 10 days Admin: £1000
    - 25 days Production: £5750
- Materials: £400
- Fabrication of table and game station: £600
- Contingency: £250

Supporting Images:

Animal Agency (2020).

Game made in Adventure Game Studio as FACT Together fellow 2020. Subsequently shown at Athens Digital Art Festival 2021 where it won an award, and then shown again by Travelling Gallery Edinburgh as part “Take Care” (2023)





Earth AD 2 (2023)

Second version of changing solo exhibition touring across Wysing Art Centre, FACT, and Quad between 2022-2025. Includes audience playable games.

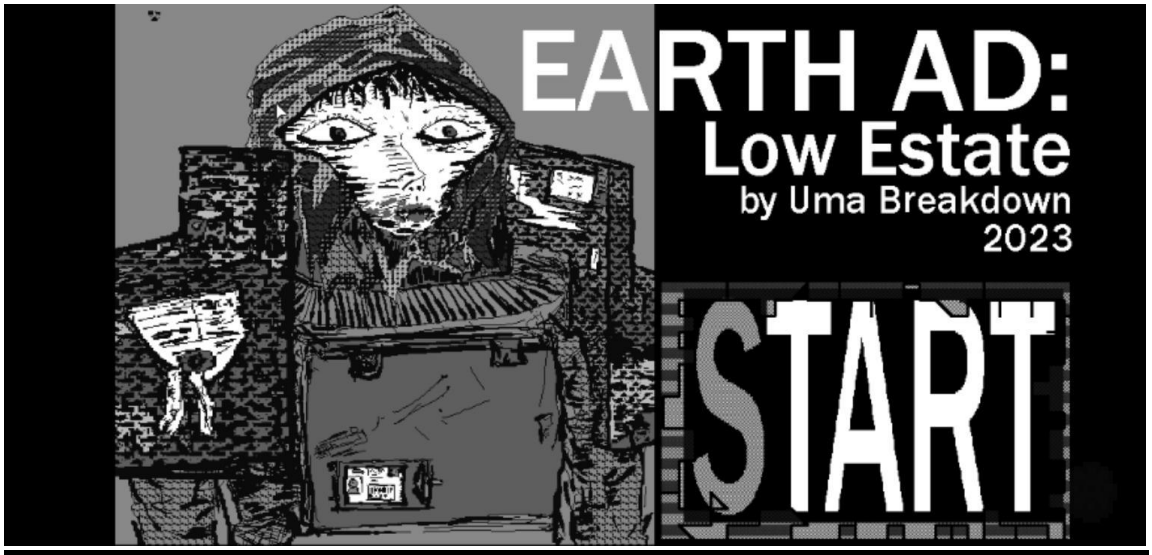


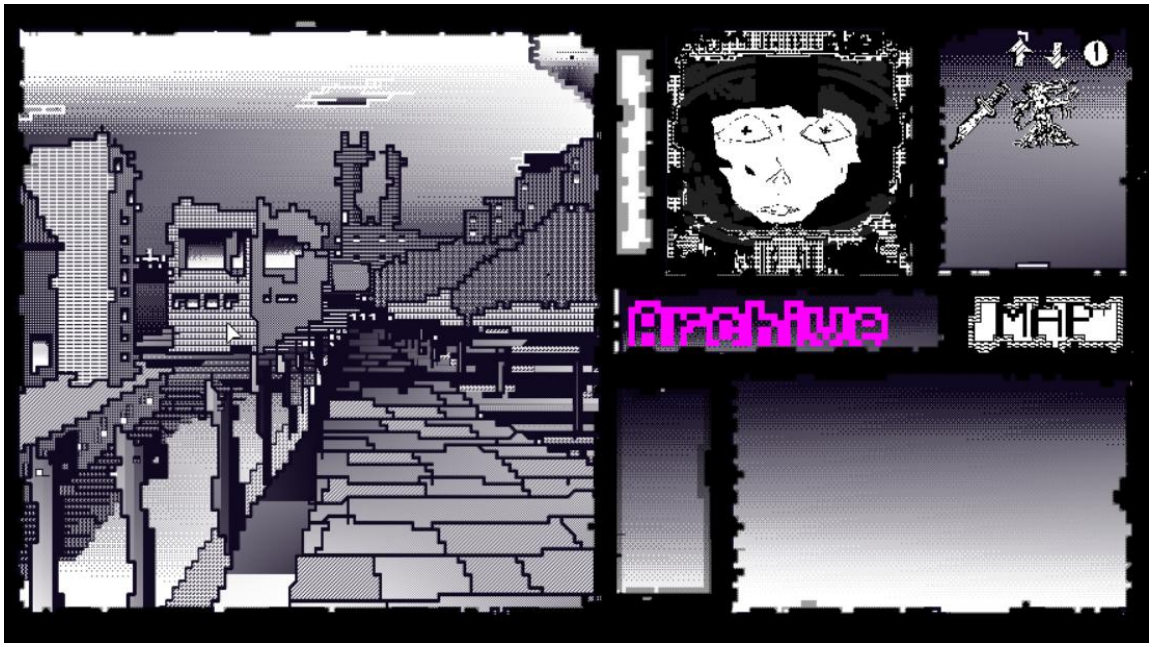




Earth AD: Low Estate (2023)

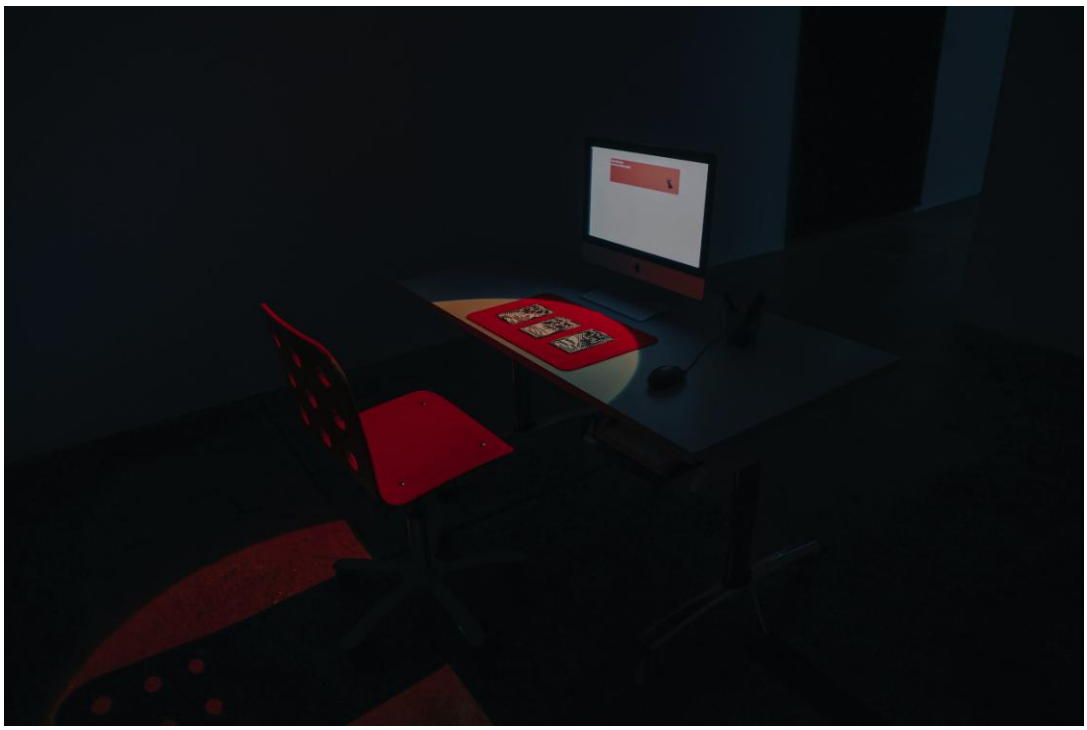
Game created in Adventure Game Studio to accompany the second iteration of Earth AD touring Exhibition at FACT.

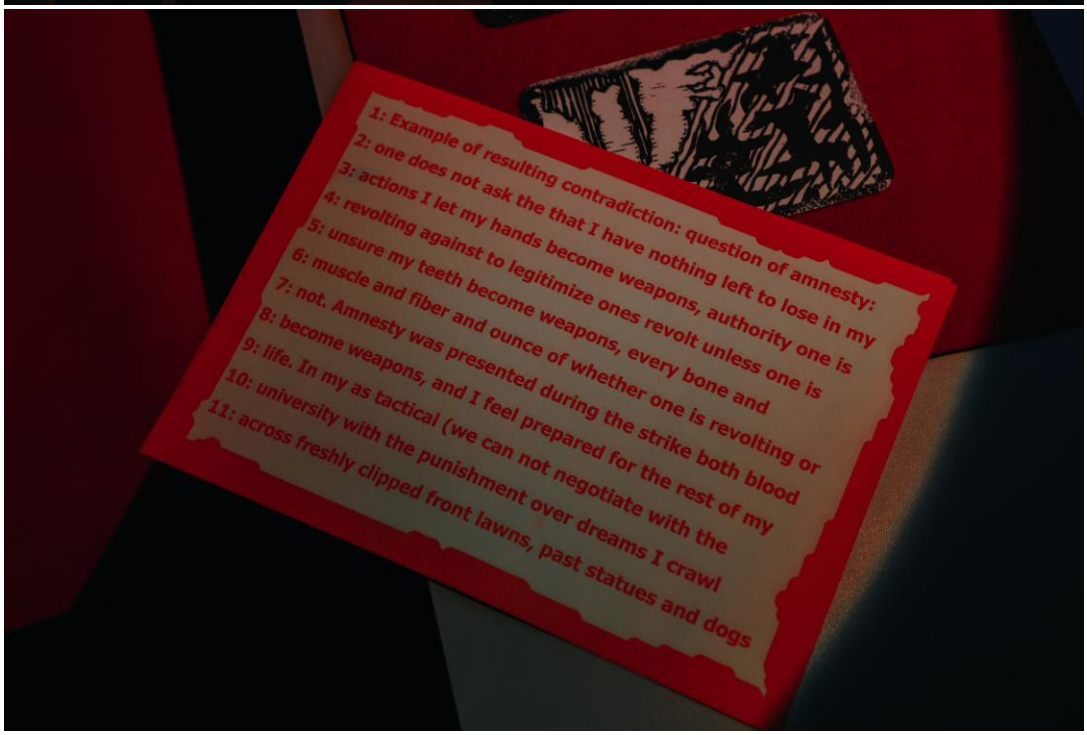




The Fall Labs (2023)

Video Game made for the group exhibition "Joy of Destruction" at Backlit, Nottingham. Game play involves exploring a world while interpreting cards drawn from a physical deck, and leaving messages for the next player by redacting words from a document and leaving it under the mat.





Take The Moonlight by The Tale (2021)

Videogame about love and grief set around the Tyne across thousands of years. Commissioned by Arebyte Gallery and subsequently shown at Etc. Galerie, Prague, and Baltic, Gateshead.

