

Enjoy! Façade Time Moonlit Dreamscapes, or how we learned to use a boathook.

Adventures in Hidden Objects Games, Chapter 1.

**Presented to you by Nia Wormella Wearn, and Esther LadyGreyBoobs
MacCallum-Stewart**

In this brief introduction we will present some of the recent work that we have carried out on the Hidden Object genre. In 2017, a project that was initially intended to demonstrate to students the differing research methods available when collecting evidence has morphed into a far larger series of investigations into a genre which appears to be under-represented within Game Studies, both in the industry and as a genre in its own right.

Hidden Object Games (HOGs) are a genre – or, as we discovered, a title which is used to describe a number of different genres – which is largely ignored by the rest of gaming culture. Its players do not identify as gamers, and the companies that produce HOGs are rarely seen at conventions or conferences such as GDC, unless it is to discuss their viability as monetized products. These games are released on platforms that are isolated from others, as well as through avenues such as the Kindle. Academics consider Hidden Object games a ‘dying’ genre, despite the vast amount of titles released every month, or simply regard them as not a useful avenue to explore. And yet when we started to discuss our work, we found that others did not pay it attention. Other academics, our students, and gameplaying friends were simply were not interested in learning about the genre, or engaging critically with it. ‘Games your mum plays and your Missus enjoys’ was a frequent sentiment. There is even a company called GrandMA Games – complete with a website front page of a kitten rolling in balls of pink, fluffy yarn.

This short talk will present some of our preliminary observations about a genre that we have discovered to be fascinating, diverse and above all, hidden. It can be in turn ridiculous and tendentious, conformist and pioneering; expressing ideas of representation, Adorno-esque production and conformist femininity. Yet at the same time they challenge these precepts through depictions of the bizarre and comedic; both intended and otherwise. This genre is hydra-like once examined fully. We will also talk about the marginalisation of the player; a figure both encapsulated in the games through the frequent use of older heroines or elderly NPC helpers, and who hits the ESA definition of the average female gamer as a 43 year old woman. Despite research by Pearce and Enevold, ‘mama ludens’ is a player who is practically invisible to both scholars and the industry.

Hidden Object games are clearly a lucrative genre, and their narratives often present the player with wish fulfilment fantasies that echo that of contemporary romances. Yet we also discovered subversive elements here; forthright explorations of femininity which place women front and centre in the genre and are virtually unheard of in other gaming genres. And in the real world, this becomes more

surreal, with a hidden city in Siberia serving as the base for one of the most profitable companies, titles so ludicrous that we created a Twitter bot to satirise them, and screenshots of buttery cats, exploding purple towers, and devastating clones of Christian Kane.

Assoc. Prof Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Nia Wearn work at the Department of Games and Visual Effects at Staffordshire University, where the fun never ends and their conversations about Hidden Object games consistently baffle other members of staff.