CONTAINER

TRANSCRIPT OF RECORDED INTERVIEW

Queering VR

Persons Present

Harry (H)

Freya (F)

Tessa (T)

_____

(music fades in)

H: How do we start this

T: Starting, starting okay I'm recording

F: And I'm live……Hello and welcome to Queering VR a podcast for the inaugural issue of the online magazine Container. This podcast will be a round table discussion about queer VR, what the both the terms queer and VR mean, as well as the state of the art content currently and opportunities and imaginations for its future. We are three of us, Tessa, Freya and Harry, before we get into all the rest, we should probably introduce ourselves. So, Tessa, do you want to go first? I'm going to pass the buck to you.

(music fades out)

T: Sure, okay. Hello, I'm Tessa. Right now, I'm a PhD student at the University of the West of Scotland and doing a practice-based PhD making VR, VR documentary, and… and I'm particularly looking at gender and masculinity kind of through a queer lens, in my previous incarnations I've also been a VR producer, for other artists, and a festival producer for like VR events, so I've basically watched and shown a lot of VR to the public as well.

H: And I am Harry. I am a creative producer, I'm currently working with volumetric capture and dance, alongside Tessa as part of the Bristol and Bath Expanded Performance Fellowship. I am the producer of Bristol's Queer Film Festival and the LGBT VR documentary Gimme One .

F: And I'm Freya, I am an independent video game developer usually, and have also in the past been the manager of a VR theatre in Bristol called Limina as well as doing kind of freelance VR producing and hosting of various events in person or online.

T: Cool. So, I guess we'll just kick off with a kind of discussion about what queer is, and what we're saying when we say something's queer because that's kind of like something that's in constant flux and debate. Perhaps one way of thinking about

queerness is just as… as an identity that… that you're not living kind of along the set lines, the boundaries of heterosexuality or hetero patriarchy, so you maybe don't have the same goals of monogamy or marriage, or maybe even traditional ideas about family, but then it can also lead to a kind of perspective, and so you kind of from an academic perspective you might say you can use queerness as a critical perspective or as a methodology, so that's kind of borne out of that if you're maybe living outside of these traditional boundaries of heteropatriarchy and maybe you have a different perspective on those kind of controlling elements of society, you can maybe see them more clearly, and then you can kind of turn that towards looking at a media or looking at a technology, and perceiving the ways in which that technology enforces things in its audience, or assumes things about its audience, so, for example, their heterosexuality, but also maybe normative assumptions about their bodies, especially if we're talking about virtuality technology, which is so about the body, making assumptions about how people's bodies move, or the abilities of people's bodies is… is where kind of queer critique and disability studies or crip critique comes in.

F: Sure. I mean, I guess kind of that's the… the really nice like academic description of what does queer mean; we're going to examine it in full thing there. It also, you know, obviously means people who are lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, asexual, all the other… all the other terms under the acronyms that are constantly growing, which makes, I guess, queer a nice handy shorthand for it…And I guess that is what they have in common is not existing alongside the mainstream of things like kind of like straight, like heterosexual, consumerist, capitalist, colonialist kind of narratives, and lifestyles, which makes kind of VR being queer a bit of a kind of weird tension because it is currently so like big, expensive tech-driven; there's lots of kind of like very embedded big consumerist companies in it. You know, Facebook obviously is this like big looming presence in the VR world, and like Occulus is founded by a Trump supporter who now makes military drones, you know, so it's… to say queer VR I guess means a almost like unintentional resistance against the state of the VR industry in general, and you're like, well, you know, this is how it exists, and it's very kind of like conservative, so what else can we do with it?

T: Hmm-mm. I mean, even actually the idea of like queer and academic definition of queer is kind of an oxymoron because part the thing of queer is I can't really be constrained to like, yeah, like well-established heteronymic structures. It's… it's against those things, so even the word academically queer is probably a little bit of a question mark, but, yeah, it's definitely interesting as well that… well, lots of immersive technologies are kind of borne out of actually military technology and, yeah, as you're saying Facebook being the… the main producer of the most kind of accessible VR hardware, and Facebook being possibly interested in that because of the hardware's ability to take data from the audiences, which is obviously what… what Facebook kind of deal in and you could end the argument there. VR can't be queer because of how you have to access it.

H: I would probably say as well, you know, in terms of Occulus, and I'd say that, you know, like the hardware, yeah, it is created by white straight men in Silicon Valley and the hardware is kind of made for a certain face structure, and I think that does feed into sort of why the technology is very inaccessible to different communities, and I think, yeah, there is like this idea that technology is also inherently racist as well, and

I think that also feeds into queer discourse. But I'd also say, in terms of like what queer means, in a nutshell, in the kind of context of this conversation, I'd say that it means self-identity, which is a conversation amongst queer theorists that we believe that there is no self, and we exist not just as subjects, but as objects of the social world, and we're often sort of hacking our way into this world, and blurring our identities in a way that works for us, and I think, you know, that is an identity that exists in the heteronormative world, and the second idea is that would bring to this conversation, which is also a very queer thing if you ask me, and it often ends up creating rules about how we operate, particularly in spaces or work processes, which fits certain mediums more than others.

T: Yeah. So, there's a way also like, even though you're working with this technology, which perhaps kind of is inherently biased, that by making queer content inside it, you're also critiquing it, you're pushing the boundaries of it, and you're trying to work out how it can like be turned towards a queer agenda, I suppose.

H: Yeah.

T: VR could actually… or the way that audiences experience VR, can be kind of inherently queer because unlike, you know, a kind of film where the director has the… the full capacity to… to hone a shot, and put shots in order, and make meaning for the audience really directly, once you put someone into a VR world, whether that's a just a 360 video where they can look in any direction they want, or whether it's you're creating a full kind of games engine experience that the audience can move through, you… you automatically have to release a lot of your control of how the audience take in your work, if you wanted to make that experience more queer, or… or like that was the point of the experience that part of relinquishing that control to have the audience make their own meaning inside the work, that is like a queer method in and of itself.

F: Hmm-mm… sure. I mean, I'd argue that creating a space and a lack of control instead of like kind of directed experience isn't unique to VR. I mean, that's… features and things like installation art, or interactive theatre, or video games, you know, and disciplines like that, they've got new conventions for directing and influencing the audience, and giving them the freedom to explore the experience, instead of kind of like getting it pushed into their eyeballs, you know, in kind of one linear way, I think it… it's interesting to think about what mediums are inherently queer, if this is the kind of topic we're going to get into, because I would pick up on something like zines instead of print media where, you know, they're… the inherent queerness of it is due to things like the low budget, the community creation, the kind of like slightly anarchist, amateur distribution, and the making of things, you know, so I guess I'd find it fascinating to imagine well, if VR as it stands is print media, what is the zine VR version?

T: Hmm yeah.

F: I think Harry, you also had some ideas on VR, or, you know, broader XR kind of media as intrinsically queer.

H: Yeah. I… so I kind of agree that, you know, the DIY nature of zine culture is sort of queer in its self organisation, but in terms of VR being inherently queer, and…

and XR, yeah, I'm deliberating because I think this idea of DIY-ness and being open source is kind of queer, but, you know, it's very inaccessible to make VR… or is it? You know, you can make VR actually very easily, but it might not be very developed VR, or it might be too complicated, and, I mean, good VR in a way is going to be quite inaccessible, but I was kind of thinking of VR as a queer medium, so drawing on what Tess was saying about agency, and agency is often a word that comes up in XR, because it's a way of sort of having control over your… your own narrative, and, as I say, there is this idea of the queer gaze being focused on connection, and intimacy and I found that, in my experience of… of absorbing straight VR, I'm… I'm sometimes finding myself creating my own queer narrative, you know, it could be me sort of spending more time in a certain space, or… or engaging with an object in a certain way that is not really intended by the creators, or so I think…

F: Hmm-mm.

H: And… and often you can kind of create your own queer… queer narrative through your agency, which is why I'd sort of say that VR could be interpreted as inherently queer.

T: Hmm-mm.

F: Yeah, there's… there's a long tradition in media of queer people having their head cannons or their interpretations of things in a way that, you know, I guess they have to kind of cherry-pick things out of an otherwise not queer medium, and think, like, 'oh, you know, this'… 'this one little scene where two'… 'two people glare at each other, that's a really queer scene', you know, it's…I guess having agency in the medium gives you a bit more control in deciding what it is for you, and what the experience is.

T: Hmm-mm. Also, like you were saying, Freya, about VR taking influence from other medias, and… and taking it from games, and… and obviously there's like this massive kind of queer games community, but there's obviously a lot of the games industry which is not that

F: Not queer games yeah (laughs)

T: But when we're talking about maybe performance art, or installation art, especially, you know, one of the things that VR has as an affordance, which is like something that that media does a bit better than other media, or feels like a real asset of the medium, the kind of intimacy that you feel with people or like characters that you encounter in VR, how real they feel to you, and how much that has a relationship with something like performance art or one-to-one performance art, and the fact that, you know, one-to-one performance art, it's not only made by queer creatives, but it's got this massive history of like queer performance, the fact that so many VR makers are having to look to those histories, which are so full of queer exploration already, is something could be explored in VR anyway. And I also like what you were talking about about looking towards zines, another place that we could look, I guess, for examples of queerness if you think of VR as maybe a space or having like spatial qualities, you can also… there's obviously this large queer club scene, and queer

event scene, and you can look at those spaces to see what are the qualities of these spaces that they're kind of describing when they say that they're queer, and I think something about not policing people's bodies, or people's presentation, and similarly the opposite of what we were saying about kind of heteronormative spaces kind of assuming things about the audience, that something that's kind of like inherent in queer spaces is they don't assume abilities of their audiences, they don't assume financial capabilities of their audiences, so those spaces are kind of typified by having maybe flexible pricing, like scales for entry, or making sure that they don't make any assumptions about audiences sitting or standing, or what kind of, ways that they might move around in a space, in order to make them more inclusive basically, so a way that you might describe a queer space is a space that's really responsive to its audience, like it's made for people, the… the queer community rather than being about queer people.

F: Hmm-mm. I think that's a good point to segue into, (music fades in)
well, if VR has these intrinsic queer qualities, and queer scenes in the past have made these affordances for queer people to make stuff about them and for them, you know, what is there at the moment that is… could be described as queer VR? You know, what exists and what is famous for it?

T: Okay, yeah, okay, I've got another recording going

F: So, you know, if we think about the state of queer VR as it stands now, there is stuff out there, which is good and nice to hear. A lot of the high profile queer VR pieces I think I generally find they're quite normal or moderate maybe, like kind of conservative instead of being particularly, you know, like kind of like rebellious cutting edge queer stuff, whatever (music fades out). A lot of it is aimed at non-queer people as a kind of like, you know, "please give us rights" film, and there can be a sense of it being like poverty tourism, the same way a lot of VR stuff does like, you know, this is about people's lives being miserable in some other place that you can watch from the comfort of your nice, well-off, western society position…Not to put a downer on the whole thing, but, you know, it's like many different forms of media that have questions about queer media inside them, the big name ones are not the ones that perhaps we would call ideal, but I mean…you know, Tessa, you… you do more academic stuff on this area than I do, so what's your thoughts to start?

T: Well, perhaps it might be helpful to kind of look maybe at the history of VR, and also maybe narrow down on what it is we're talking about when we say VR, because…

F: Hmm-mm.

T: Like, it's… it's a media made up of lots of different technologies. You might say they're all kind of pulled together by having to be viewed inside a headset, a VR headset, for which, you know, like, if we just go at level 1, VR is something you have to put on, this headset, and the headset measures the movement of your body, and it's also showing you kind of two videos via the eyeholes of the headset, and the illusion of those two videos and your movements being equally and oppositely simulated inside the experience gives you the illusion that you're inside of a three-

dimensional space, that can be recorded by cameras, so 360 cameras, which is basically two or more kind of fish-eye lenses that are taking a 180 video, or it can be like lots of cameras doing that, and that's stitched together to form a kind of spherical video that, when you're viewing that inside a headset, it feels like you are in the position of the camera, and you can look around, up and down, and all around you, and kind of get this sense of space. So, there's definitely in all VR like you're really getting a sense of being in a space. You also, when you encounter people, even in 360 video, you have this kind of real sense of being there, and also being there with them, like you… you feel a real proximity to people. But… but there's other methods of making VR, so using games engines..

F: Like an interactive narrative as well…

T: Exactly.

F: The ones where you can play with your hands and grab things, and, you know, explore the world as if you were really there…actively, not passively.

T: And you can do that with either controllers, like you'd imagine how you play a game, but also some VR headsets have sensors so that it can be your actual hands that are inside the space, touching things, and then there's also kind of like, you know, more hybrid scenarios, so there's VRs that are made of a little bit of footage, a little bit of games engine VR, and then there's also kind of new technologies, which I know, Harry, you're making work inside like photogrammetry, which is three-dimensional scanning. Maybe you can describe that a bit.

H: Sure. So, the technique is essentially using depth cameras that detect a point cloud, sort of like how deep an object is, rather than light sensors, through this technique you create a 3D model, like a picture almost, but then you can sort of do a volumetric capture, which is sort of an extension from photogrammetry to create a video and a film of a 3D model, and using game engine software, you can essentially put yourself inside a space of this 3D model, and create a kind of a moving image that goes around you that you can't necessarily interact with, but you can sort of walk around it, and it has spatial alignment, and this is called 6 degrees of freedom, a 6DOF experience, rather than a 3 degrees of freedom experience.

T: Hmm-mm. So, 360 degree, yeah, being 3 degrees of freedom, and stuff that use a games engine, giving people that bit more freedom where they can move into spaces and through spaces, rather than just looking around them.

F: It's probably worth also clarifying that, for the scope of this podcast, and what we talk about when we say VR, we mean creative VR, you know, arts, media VR, as opposed to say operating a drone in VR, or learning how to do nuclear reactor safety videos in VR. Which, you know, are probably the bigger uses of VR as it stands at the moment, and probably that's where a lot of the tech gets its money from. But, you know, it's… how can you queer drone operators in the Middle East? You know, it's not quite the same thing. So, yeah, just to narrow down on the creative media scope of it.

T: And then maybe sort of in that… in the history of the creative media VR, you've kind of got this like boom in 2015 a couple of makers were making kind of NGO type documentary work that was specifically for…

F: Hmm-mm.

T: Money-raising, or consciousness raising. The… the biggest example is Chris Milk, and the UN making Clouds Over Sidra, and their kind of hypothesis or what they proposed at that time in 2015 was that, because you feel so immersed in the world, because you feel present in the space, and because you can feel present with the characters of the documentary, it gives people a more real experience of these spaces that perhaps you're trying to raise audience awareness of, and spaces like Calais or, the experience of… of migrants crossing into Europe, and that there was… is maybe a benefit of people having a more real experience of that. I… I'm using air quotes. I realise you won't be able to hear that in a podcast, but… 'real'…! And they described this kind of realness and the emotional responses that people have to that content as being empathy, and then this coined a term "the empathy machine". Which, actually, if you look at the history of media, and from what we've even just discussed just then, you can see that VR has lots of histories it could look to. We already talked about performance art and stuff, obviously cinema, and obviously games, and also military technology, but you can… if you look through sort of like the history of cinema, cinema was also called an empathy machine…

F: I find like the whole empathy machine thing such a grim statement and position to take. To imagine all of someone's upbringing and societal integration, and stuff, is insufficient at making you care about the life of this one person, and this like 5 to10 minute experience on a £300 Facebook bit of tech is going to, you know, magically change your mind. It… it's…

H: Absolutely.

F: It's a kind of unpleasantly neo-liberal kind of thinking, unlike one bit of tech and, you know, this person making their plea to give them rights is going to fix it.

H: I think it is something really neo-liberal, as you said, about tech sort of saving humanity, and you know, this kind of narrative is fed into the climate crisis as well, and it feels very kind of unqueer; it's almost like a white saviour, these white straight men from Silicon Valley are going to save the world.

F: Absolutely.

H: And it's very patriarchal in that way, so it's very unqueer I think this narrative around the empathy machine.

T: Yeah, for sure, and also just even this idea of empathy, you know, that… that… inherent in that concept that I'm going to empathise for these people I'm meeting inside VR, there's like a real power dynamic in that, and especially when you consider that, there aren't really like queer exhibition spaces for VR just yet, or, you know, not many anyway, and so the majority of spaces people are encountering these pieces of work

are like big film festivals with loads of money, and these people are, you know, pretty privileged people who are at film festivals in the first instance, and then they get to go inside VR and feel empathy for these people represented in the work, so, yeah, definitely, it's… it really actually replicates a lot of this like, "oh, you just need to feel for others, and that's your neo-liberal duty in modern society".

F: Hmm-mm.

H: It does feel you know, it is a privilege today to be able to view VR, and I think that's also part of like the whole film festival model as well, is that, you know, who are we making VR for, and right now it seems to be only sort of like the privileged that can actually view our experiences, and often this doesn't connotate with a queer audiences are often marginalised, and don't have access, so our audience really sets the content that we're creating, I think this has to be thought about in terms of our work processes on how to create queer content.

F: Sure… yeah. I mean, I think you can kind of break down queer VR into two categories, where the one is VR about queer people, for people in general, which then, you know, you interpret as for non-queer people, the kind of like… "Queer people deserve rights 101, please treat me nicely; I'm a real person" informative film, however it's done, whether it's done tastefully or not, and then you have, queer VR by and for queer people, about stuff that they are going to like, that they are going to want to watch, that they might seek out, and that maybe isn't actually as accessible to people outside of that, bubble. There is validity in doing the former, in that educational tool, but it's not what excites me personally, I guess, and, you know, it's not the sort of stuff I'd seek out.

H: I think there is impact though, in creating queer content for straight people, because even if we do dilute our ideas down, the experience could be used as an educational tool, to sort of build a bridge between our two worlds, and often, by there not being sort of that information channel, often that's where sort of like fear and hatred starts to build up…

T: Hmm-mm.

H: Once again, so I think it's actually really important be thinking about, perhaps not necessarily queer ideas, but LGBT ideas and feeding that into like straight channels.

F: Yeah… yeah, sure. So let's talk about some of those ones that are currently existing. So, I mean, if you do a little Google search for queer VR, actually one of the top results that comes up is Tessa's own creation program for the VR theatre last year, so Tessa, do you want to talk about a couple of the pieces in that, and, we can discuss whether we feel they are for queer people or not for queer people, and how they're done?

T: Sure, so one that is really interesting to talk about from this perspective is this work, Virtual Drag, by Alison Bennett, Megan Beckwith and Mark Payne, and that experience is… it's quite an early VR as well, and it's quite an early VR using kind of

photogrammetry, and it's definitely made in a kind of slightly DIY manner. They scanned a load of drag queens that were in the scene that they're in in Australia, because of the kind there may be lack of access to the technology, or just because it's being an early use of that technology, the scans are kind of pretty janky, and they decided to embrace that as part of the work, and also as a comment on drag itself. Obviously drag is like an art form is something that has been used to kind of talk about queerness throughout the history of kind of academic queer critique, how drag itself brings into questions ideas about gender, gender performance, binary genders, those kind of things, like if it can be performed then what is it? it both has kind of queer aesthetics to it in how…

H: Hmm-mm.

T: Broken down it is. It's… it features queer people as drag queens, really identifiable queer characters, but they don't… there's no narrative; they don't like ask you to do anything…

F: Hmm-mm.

H: Hmm-mm… often this sort of… sort of the low-res exports, or kind of tangled masses of bodies, or the kind of things that don't go quite to plan, or aren't as clean, they are kind of queer in some way, and they have a queer aesthetic, and… and things that don't work are sometimes queer which I find quite a funny thing to say.

F: Yeah, Jank is my favourite queer aesthetic (laughter), yeah, you know, failure is my favourite queer aesthetic. It's interesting to contrast that, which is a very kind of like self-consciously janky experience, with others in the… others in the same program, like the Authentically Us pieces, which is part of Occulus' like VR For Good program, and they're very… you know, they're very well filmed documentaries, and they're not janky at all; it's kind of the opposite, but then, they're very, very moderate, and they're quite like easy to digest, and it's very unchallenging. I mean, one of them is like a… a trans woman veteran who wants the Army to accept her, which is, you know, not an experience I can relate to. I feel like that reflects the opposite side of a lot of queer VR stuff.

H: I think there is a kind of fight to be won really, and it's kind of like we have to pick our battles, and if we can sort of get LGBT ideas in… in any shape or form onto a platform, or into some kind of cultural sphere and then that is a kind of battle won, in my opinion, even if it might not be something that's entirely to our own like personal values, at least it's kind of some visibility, because I think there's only one thing worse than bad visibility, and that's invisibility. So I think platform as much as possible, because everyone has their own unique experience as well, and… and, you know, we can't talk for all queers.

F: Hmm yeah

T: I think, just like maybe before we move on, we could talk about if not talking about queer people represented in VR, or queer narratives, there perhaps are some VRs that maybe represent like queer uses of the technology, so something like

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Testimonies, which is quite an old VR now by Zohar Kfir. It's a a piece of work about sexual assault, and recovery from sexual assault, where you basically encounter a number of survivors, but the technology, the way that the headset is used is that you look… you use eye gaze as a way of controlling which videos come towards you, and only while you're watching the video, or while you're directly giving eye contact to this person giving their account does the video play, it's definitely something that I think is a kind of ethical minefield if you're having people give their personal testimonies about, really serious things that have happened to them, if your user or your audience can just wander away, and that person continues to speak, what are the ethics of that? Inside Testimony, their work around is that if you're not giving your full attention to the person giving an account then that video disappears, and you no longer engage with that content, and also when we talk about consent practices, maybe if if you've got a queer club space you're really explicit about, you know, the consent practices in that space, consent before touching one another, consent before dancing with one another, for example, in that VR experience, or in many VR experiences, consent is… is questionable because someone might, you know, especially in an experience which is about surviving sexual assault, which is… can be a very triggering experience, it also gives the audience this autonomy to stop listening to that account or take breaks, which is something that actually a lot of VR that I've experienced, apart from removing the headset, you actually don't have that many options to pace yourself, or control how much you're taking on.

F: I think it… it's interesting to think of Testimony as an example of perhaps a queer use of VR as a medium by taking away the agency that is inherent in the medium, and so, you know, by that act of control, and by doing it differently, some different, you know, VR pieces, it's like a statement there. There are some nice queer VR pieces out there, and people making new stuff that I feel is a bit more, you know, representative of perhaps queer VR for queer people, like there is the Pantheon of Queer Mythology, which I believe was just at Tribeca, so that's an example of, you know, having more like queer community stuff, talking about like hook-up Apps, and clubs, and stuff, and I feel it's a very positive piece, and use of VR, but it also kind of highlights the… one of the problems I think the medium has with reaching queer audiences, which is that it was at Tribeca, you know, it was at a big film festival, and I think the fact that a lot of the VR experience release circuit is built around these big, fairly expensive, slightly exclusive festivals is itself a problem with, maybe not so much the medium, as like the distribution channels.

T: Hmm-mm.

H: Hmm-mm.

F: That's a good place to then think about, well, (music fades in) what could there be, you know, if we kind of moved on from this, what there is now, what can we think about for the future, and what's the opportunities of the medium?

H: So, we… we just talked about queer potentials of VR, and we thought we'd expand on the future of queer XR, and different ways that creators such as ourselves as well, can start to think about the future, and how our queer ideas can be integrated into our work practices, and the different theories (music fades out) around creating

queer VR and XR. One of the ongoing themes of XR is body ownership, and particularly in regards to embodiment, and being able to sort of be in a sort of experience where you are a certain identity, or you can interact with certain objects in a certain way that makes you feel embodied, or sometimes present, and it kind of really sort of integrates into queer theory because often being queer is sort of experimenting and playing with… with your own body, and the different identities that comes with this, so, Tessa particularly has been doing quite a lot of investigation into body ownership, so do you want to take over, Tessa.

T: Yeah, so… so definitely like when sort… like… I mean, there's lot… been lots of phases of… of VR, but if we sort of go back to kind of 2012 time when there was a lot of like academics starting to explore the technology, because academics were the only people who had access to the technology, one of the big things that people like Mel Slater, who was an academic working in VR was exploring was… was this illusion of body ownership, that if you go into VR, and you're given hands that move with your hands, or with the controllers, that very quickly you kind of feel that the body that you have inside the VR is your body, and then there's lots of kind of debates about, if that body is put into peril inside VR experiences, you know, you experience that as quite real…But also that, yeah, you can perhaps inhabit other bodies, say bodies of a different race, ethnicity, and obviously of a… of a… the opposite gender, that might help you kind of understand more about privilege, and kind of… what's the word I'm looking for here…?

H: Are you talking about safety and sort of queer spaces as well?

T: Yeah.

H: And kind of, sort of being able to feel safe in a certain social VR space, particularly I've heard anecdotes of people of a transgender experience, feeling more safe in digital spaces than in our own world because they can sort of pick their avatars and be able to have an avatar that suits their gender identity more than in our current world, so it's kind of this idea of being safe, and being treated in the way that you want to be, and it's kind of… like a Utopian queer vision some might call it…

F: Sure, and I think sometimes it's the ability to have control over your like bodily presentation, and control over aspects that you may not be able to control in real life, or perhaps it may be, you know, difficult to control them in your life because they're behind like gate-keeping or medicalisation, and that sort of thing, and so, you know, I know, Tessa, you do a lot of research on areas of like homuncular flexibility, which I guess to like summarise, that is like being able to adapt to controlling or inhabiting different bodily… bodies that don't map to like a standard human body of like two arms, two legs, head, torso, sort of thing.

T: Sure, yeah. Well kind… kind of like one way that it's described is… is the way that the… the brain's like body schema, how your brain thinks of its own body is actually really flexible, and that that can be illustrated by, say, for example, if someone is blind or partially sighted, and they're using their stick as a way of gaining information around them, the way the brain computes that information, it it's not what they're

feeling through a stick; it just becomes experience to them, just as any other sense does, and that you can incorporate objects into your… your sensorium basically, specifically inside VR, what this means is that, yeah, you can inhabit bodies that are perhaps wildly different shapes, or move in wildly different ways than like a traditional human body, and you can still feel that body ownership over that body, and someone who writes and talks about this a lot is kind of Jaron Lanier, one of the things that he discusses is kind of this, if we're thinking from a queer perspective, the potential that maybe, because of the way the human body is made up in the real world, we're kind of forced into ideas of perhaps walking, or using our hands and fingers as the most… the way of moving through space that makes sense the most, and obviously you can have… there's a lot of critique like disability studies critique and crip critique, that could come in there, but that in VR we aren't necessarily beholden to… to moving through space in the same way, and he talks about the tongue as being like actually the most dextrous muscle in the body, and if there was only a way to hook up a sensor system to the tongue that that might be a… a slightly more… a more fluid way of controlling your movement through a virtual space than sort of having to kind of walk around, or use your hands as a kind of motor device, and… and there's lots of VRs that have tried different ways of getting us to move through space that… that feels natural, and obviously, if it becomes your tongue that is the… the main drive or the main motor inside virtual reality then that could totally flip ideas about disability inside virtual reality, because it just kind of flips who is able to move through that space the easiest and that's also a kind of really queer way to think about VR as like if you think of a queer experience in real life as… as one that is maybe haltered in space, or doesn't get to move through space as easily if you change the ways that we move through space in VR then it kind of flips all those ideas on its head, so that's why I find homuncular flexibility really interesting, even though obviously it's quite hard to get your head round.

F: Sure, I mean from a video games perspective, there's a lot of parallels and precedent there, you know, certainly in the inhabiting a different avatar, if you will, you know, for what you're being inside the game, or in a social space, or something, and certainly like most of my queer friends, the stuff they find really fun about video games or other, you know, interactive digital spaces is the creating of new bodies, whether that's like, you know, in the Sims, or something..

H: Yeah.

F: Or if you're using something like Pie Crew, which is a… like… kind of like dress-up game platform, which usually gets used for making like social media avatars and stuff, and, you know, I find VR could give this as a huge potential but it's kind of weird in VR, because you're embodied, you actually rarely directly perceive yourself, you know, except for kind of glancing down and seeing your legs, and I certainly find when I'm in something like VR chat, you realise that all the worlds are just littered with mirrors, because people, I guess, are kind of seeking that like, you know, aff… affirmation that they are inhabiting a different body because, you know, you're just kind of… you are at…

H: Hmm-mm.

F: Eye level, and so you're not seeing your digital self. I mean, you know, you can… you perceive it in other ways like how you walk, maybe how tall or short you are, but, it's like a fun tension of… it's quite difficult to communicate the physicality of having a body, I can feel my fingers sort of thing.

T: Hmm-mm.

F: But, yeah, there is this flexibility for existing in a different space and like, you know, digital spaces have always had a significant queer community, which, you know, often goes unexplored in the popular narrative for whatever reason, but…

H: I mean, I just think that the queers were there first in some ways because, you know, the online world is like… is kind like the land of opportunity and community in my opinion, and… and I think from the beginning, you know, the dating Apps was started by queers with Apps like Grinder, which was like long before Tinder, and…

F: Hmm-mm.

H: These were… were like ways of find and connect with a community, and… and before Grinder there was forums and these big chat speakers because often queers were kind of isolated in… in their world, and that actually did flock to the online world to seek community, even as early as like the late eighties and nineties. I know quite a lot of hacker queers these days, and I find this crossover quite interesting, because being queer in the world is often about hacking, and…

F: Hmm-mm.

H: And whether that is in their identity, or social events, or just finding ways to make things work for them, and there's a sort of crossover between the digital world and this mindset of hacking, and making things work for them, and I think…

T: Yeah.

H: This kind of translates in some ways to… to creating.

F: Yeah, if… if you… if you kind of define hacking as like readjusting a program to suit what you want to do with it then that is, you know, functionally the same thing as changing a society, or a world that you inhabit to exist in it in a way that you want to, you know, so it's…

T: Hmm-mm.

F: Queers are hacking VR…

T: And you could also go…if we're talking about the digital world and it being inherently queer, there's also like the… the reality that, you know, when a lot of people were logging onto online platforms, online social platforms, none of the kind of cues for say gender try and assess other people's gender, you realise you… you don't

actually… you're not beholden to those things anymore, so a lot of the early writing - I'm thinking of Sherry Turkles's book on like chat rooms and multi-user online dungeon spaces about how, pretty naturally, people were gender-swapping in there just as an experiment, and just through like… through that experimentation, coming to queer realisations about like, 'oh, well if I can pretend to be a man in this digital space, 'then what is it, what is male identity' that are kind of performers that you can put on or stop putting on, so in that way it's good. A lot of his… like queer theory is borne out of like digital community spaces and…

F: Yeah. And I think like… you know, I know a lot of people for whom their first time of experimenting with any kind of like alternate gender presentation, or like…hmm-mm maybe I want to be a different gender and identify as that, is like picking different characters in a video game, and say like, "oh, I'm going to play the female character, and how does this make me feel to inhabit a female avatar instead?" And, I always… I always end up coming back to comparing video game stuff to VR, because that's what my background is, you know, that's what I do, video games have this big and quite accurate media perception of being like lots of first person shooters played by racist 13-year-old boys, but it's… you know, there's… there are big, huge indi-game scenes that are very, very queer friendly, and they're… you know, they're games made by queer people and for queer people, and sometimes impenetrable from the outside. If we think, 'well, how can we take this kind of creator audience space into a VR thing?' we… we have to look at what those spaces entail, and like, you know, VR, we've already briefly mentioned it in this podcast, but it's quite expensive, the headsets don't fit a lot of people. It's… you know, it can be quite technical to actually make things, and then set up, and then watch stuff. You know, it's if I want to watch a VR piece, I have to procure a headset from somewhere, but then the… like the queer games scenes that I know are usually built around very easy, low barriered entry tools, like Twine or Bitsy, or making like websites, or modding other existing games, and then they're things that are easy to then play, so like you don't lots of tech, and whatever, and so, I think an opportunity for VR, and I'm not quite sure how to reach it, is that kind of DIY, easy to make, easy to experience scene, and like however we do that, as headsets seem to last like, what, 18 months at the moment.

H: Yeah, I think there's this idea of like open source queer DIY nature that we mentioned earlier in our conversation about being self-organised…

F: Hmm-mm.

H: Yeah, I think that really taps into the sort of way that we work, and… and I think this idea… I think you mentioned it earlier also about if it… if it's about us, and it's not for us, but I've been looking at MIT's Co creation Lab which has this work process called Collective Wisdom, and they had this idea that if it… if it's about us… I don't know…

T: "Nothing about us without us", I think is their phrase.

H: That's the tagline. Yeah, I was trying to get to it. It's a catchy tagline if you can get it, and I think this idea of working with the community, even as an ally, is really important, and I think that's work that can be done now in… in the sense that, like just

including queer artists into your workflow, and not having that sort of authorship, is super important because co-creation… I think I had a quote somewhere… co-creation offers alternatives to a single author vision, and it's consolation of media production methods frameworks and feedback systems, so it's kind of an… an alternative to creating work in the sense that you can sort of work with the sort of complex techniques, as long as you sort of adopt the process of working with the community in… in the right way, and engaging them, and having central discussions, and I think this also is… is… could be a solution to getting rid of that powered dynamic, and the relationship with author… with authorship. So… so I think there are different ways that you can work with queer content and ideas, and that doesn't necessarily have to be, by the queer community, but it could be co-created with the queer community, if that makes sense.

F: Hmm-mm… yeah. And I think it's… it's interesting that you say power dynamic there, because the other queer VR power dynamic that I think of is, well, here is this piece about queer people, and it is being aimed at or watched by a… a majority non-queer audience, and it becomes this kind of like slightly tourism sort of "here's a little bit of queer experience", and I think like it would be interesting to think about, well, what kind of platforms and communities, or like distribution models could we have for more kind of, like slightly exclusionary spaces, but where the people being excluded are the ones that the queer people don't want to be watching their stuff, or they don't want to directly appeal to… you know, big film festival circuits are one of the majority ways of distributing VR pieces, and the other majority ways is like market places like Steam, or the Occulus store, neither of which are particularly friendly to queer creators or audiences, and so like I think there's exciting opportunities and more like kind of anarchistic or like peer-to-peer distributions, like the Side Quest store, the Occulus Quest, where it's like, these are pieces that are not actually authorised by Occulus to be on this, but we want to share them anyway, or like, you know, I… I was talking about zines earlier, and that kind of like DIY distribution as well, where it's like…

H: Hmm-mm.

F: Can we take over this medium in a way that actually we don't want to share it with non-queer people, you know, and just want it to ourselves?

H: Sure.

T: And maybe also just the idea that maybe as VR becomes more commonplace, I mean, that is the ultimate question, like will it become something that people have in their homes? That idea kind of died a couple of years ago, but since we all live a socially distanced ex… existence now, like, perhaps that's something that might come back, the idea of like, yeah, using a VR headset to be a new way to c… connected online communities, there could be an argument for saying like, "if you build it they will come"; if you make a…

H: Hmm-mm.

T: A… a multi-user online VR platform that's flexible enough, like, will queer people do what queer people always have done, and make a space for themselves within it, and, twist it or hack it to their… to their needs.

F: Yeah. When you say twist and hack it to their needs like, you know, one… one of the… one of the boundaries to entry for watching VR, let alone making it, is the fact the headsets cost several hundred pounds, and that the cheaper, older versions, like phone-based headsets are increasingly, you know, discontinued, unsupported, and they're only really viable for more linear stuff instead of interactive like, you know, I'm recently reminded of a trans friend of mine who built their own desktop headset, just because it was way cheaper, it meant they didn't have to buy new tech, you know, and obviously that's not a… not an accessible way for most people to do it, because I can't build my own, you know, but like, you know, a lot of history of queer media has been adopting older tech, or equipment, you know, like cassette tape recorders, or whatever, and so, you know, I wonder if there is an opportunity for all these discontinued old headsets that aren't supported, Occulus don't care about, you know, and probably going to go to a scrap-heap sometime, for me, rather than the real cutting edge lead point to VR, that's where the exciting opportunity lies, like all these thousands of unwanted gear VRs, that's…you know, I… I'd bet money on that's where the kind of like the push of a new queer VR medium comes from.

H: Hmm-mm…

T: (Laughs) bold, bold assumptions!

F: That and also I'm a cheapskate, you know, so I'm not going to buy a Quest any time soon (laughs).

H: I think, yeah, there's this idea of queer communities and queer creators get more money, is that going to sort of make queer work better, but isn't the very definition of being queer kind of an anti-capitalist thing, so actually it kind of makes sense that we sort of have these sort of low-budget creations (laughs), I would also advocate to anyone that's listening that I think more funding to LGBTQ artworks is very, very necessary, and but, yeah, in terms of this idea of LGBT and LGBTQ, and… and, whether something that is LGBT could be queer, but I think the development of just a market place for… for…LGBT narratives and experiences is super important, and I know you've got a bit of aversion to this, Freya, but I think just having film festivals that are… are LGBTQ start to engage with VR are super important, not necessarily because of the sort of film festival distribution model, but more because a film festival is a forum, and it's a community; it's where ideas are shared, it's where ideas are nurtured, and… and… and I'm a really big supporter of like film festivals for… for many reasons, and I think, right now, there aren't many queer film festivals that are really doing a lot of VR, and particularly now in Covid. I know that… it kind of feels as though there needs to be more of a sort of appetite from curators and programmers in the queer arts for VR for there to be sort of more evolution.

F: Yeah, it's a kind of chicken and egg thing, isn't it, this? It's difficult to make the stuff, because the audience isn't there, and then the audience isn't there because it's difficult to make the stuff. I think for me, the… the thing that would appeal about queer

film festivals would be that making of a safe space for people to create and watch, and enjoy, and, you know, potentially even being kind of 'exclusionary' to non-queer people, but that… that's… you know, that's more your area of expertise with the film festival circuit.

H: There was a BFI report that was put out last week, by Darren Emerson, it was kind of about Common Ground and there sort of tour, and the idea that Darren or Film… or Film City were proposing was for… for the… the BFI fan network to have their own VR headsets, which could be shared amongst exhibitors, which… it's a really nice idea, and it kind of gives sort of some financial pressure off exhibitors to sort of show VR in their cinemas, or in their art spaces, and I think, you know, just having this extra platform, it would be a really nice way to sort of find new audiences, because that's really what it's… that's what a lot of LGBT art is about, is about finding new audiences.

F: Hmm-mm.

T: Hmm-mm, VR is a hugely exciting medium for this variety of expression, and reaching audiences, and, you know, we've just talked for like an hour about how it has this opportunity, but also has this, you know, well, is it really doing what it could be? what could it be doing? Ironically, I think the thing that's been holding back VR in the past has been the fact that it's actually something that you have to experience in a physical location a lot of the time…And so it's quite exciting as the slimmest, slimmest silver lining on current events, to see things moving online, and to see where that might go.

H: Yeah, I think right now if Covid does remain, and XR exhibition remains a sort of… a public exhibition remains a problem for the next couple of years, and then perhaps we should start thinking… just going back a step, and thinking about how to make things accessible for more, is something that I would advise, because otherwise you'll make something very beautiful, but no-one will see it for another five years (music fades in). So, that's something that I would think about, particularly for the current climate.

F: Sure. I think that's a good place to leave things, you know. Queer experiences jank, and that was a kind of janky ending, (laughter) so… what a way to wrap up.

I hope you've enjoyed hearing Tessa, Harry and Me, Freya talk about Queer VR, you've been listening to the first podcast from Container a new online magazine exploring the humans, processes and motivations behind creative technology. Every few months we will be releasing a handful of stories to read, watch or listen to, you can subscribe on Soundcloud or wherever you get your podcasts and find out more at containermagazine.co.uk.

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