

Art – it's a funny old game

Chase correspondent **AMY FORDE**, marketing and communications assistant at Rotherham Open Arts Renaissance (ROAR), talks to games designer Zoyander Street.

I FIRST met Zoyander Street when he had a studio at ROAR over a year ago now. At that time, he tells me, he had seven jobs (yes, my jaw drops too) and although not having that amount of occupations on the go now it is safe to say that Zoyander is still a very busy bee.

Not only is he a games designer (his artistic practice), some of which is currently on show in ROAR's Buzz Gallery, he is also currently completing a PhD with Lancaster University analysing how game developers have conceptualised the emotions of players. Throw in some Japanese translation work and you will have started to build a picture of what Zoyander does, and it is very impressive.

Zoyander's fascination with games design first unveiled itself through his practice of blogging which over time became more specific: "I got really deep into games criticism. That sort of defined what I was doing for a long time."

It was during his time studying for an MA in the History of Design at the Royal College of Art that this interest became even more apparent.

During a seminar, the lecturer explained that there were some parts of history that were impossible to understand. Zoyander recounts a memorable example where the lecturer admitted that historians would have no idea what it would be like to be a merchant in a coastal town in a specific part of history. At that time Zoyander was playing a game called Dwarf Fortress. The questions which arose while playing this game seemed very pertinent, as he summarised: "I felt like the problem that they had characterised as impossible to model and make sense of as a historian was the kind of thing I was exploring in this admittedly fictional and bizarre game."

From this point he asked if he could establish a reading group and wrote a paper on his analysis which paved the way for more study in

this field, later looking at weapons in Square Enix's Final Fantasy and finally exploring Sega's Skies of Arcadia as a case study for his MA dissertation.

Although this study proved crucial to his academic research and laid the foundations for his current PhD study, it was not an easy period for Zoyander who was suffering with his mental health.

Things which had accumulated during his life had built up and come to a head. Coming from Rotherham there were



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difficulties he faced studying for his BA at Cambridge University. He was frequently told the point of being at Cambridge was to break a person so they then became stronger. He elaborates: "My opinion is that those sort of systems are built for privileged people – people from really cosy backgrounds probably do need to be psychologically broken so that they can rebuild themselves – whereas if you come from an economically deprived town in the north of England and you have been bullied your entire life you probably don't need that."

It was in fact the gap between London and his next move to San Francisco that Zoyander first came to ROAR. Realising he needed somewhere to work that wasn't his mother's house, he ended up having some desk space at the organisation, eventually using the only other room available, a storage closet. Ironically, it was this same storage room which became his studio at Westgate Chambers years later.

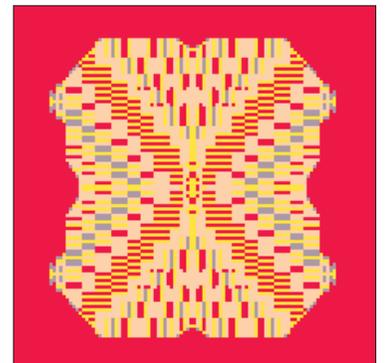
Although having gone through a difficult time, he reflects positively: "It was really really great because it meant I was going to this very pleasant environment every weekday, getting out of the house and meeting all these really amazing people."

His next move to San Francisco was a real turning point. At the time there was quite a hub of indie games designers living in the Bay Area, something he tells me was beneficial to his work.

It was also during this time Zoyander transitioned, something he says was both socially and medically easier in the USA.

In many ways it took a while for Zoyander to realise all of this was a creative practice. Having coded for many years, earning money making interactive displays for other students at the RCA, he also had a familiar relationship with HTML.

The first thing he made which he tells me he was proud of was a game called Carpet Generator created in Pico-8, an alteration of Conway's Game of Life:





"I modified it so it was multi-coloured and things didn't die, they just froze. I put on a kaleidoscope effect hidden in Pico-8 which creates these shapes that look a lot like Persian carpets. I also put in some controls so you could paint with them."

Zoyander explains how three artists – Andi McClure, Liz Ryerson and Loren Schmidt – really inspired this work. Andi McClure created two art creation tools using game engines. Zoyander's favourite Icosa simulates an icosahedron inside of another icosahedron, one reflecting the other.

After living in Canada for a year and experiencing some visa issues, Zoyander eventually ended up back in South Yorkshire. After putting a plea on Facebook, he was offered a room in Sheffield in "an emotionally normal house with a large collection of art in it" with fellow artist and ROAR member Jennifer Booth. Although originally a temporary move, he tells me: "I realised this is where I needed to be. Everything I like about everywhere else I have been exists here. Everything I could hope for in terms of a creative practice exists here. And without all that visa stuff I have basic stability." And it appears the only way is up. He

has recently been awarded a two-year paid residency as part of The Freelands Artist Programme with Sheffield's Site Gallery. He is currently making interactive documentaries which featured in 2018's Festival of Mind.

These documentaries, made in Pico-8, are extremely low resolution images which show an abstract representation of a person breathing. He tells me there is no real sound, only bleeps: "There is no way of having a voice recording and I don't want one because one of the issues being trans is the way your voice sounds. And I feel like I can actually represent people more faithfully by not showing what they look like or what they sound like."

The audience are made to choose a question for the virtual person to respond to and are left simply with the text response.

Even though Zoyander explains this is a "false choice" he says people still get really into it: "I'm quite into that line between what is actually happening and what people imagine is actually happening."

You can keep up with Zoyander on his website <https://zoyander.cc/> where you can also find his social media links.

