

The Lived Politics of the Negative*

Tabletop Game Designers on Punk, Practice, and Utopia

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Abstract

Contra the capture of the radical impulse by the homogenizing marketing label ‘hopepunk’, this panel conceives of punk instead as ‘the lived politics of the negative’ (Muñoz, 2013). From this position, tabletop game play and design become potent refusals of the co-opting forces of the Global North, and concrete means for imagining and indeed realizing an outside and an afterward to the present crises shaping the conditions of our planetary existence. This panel mounts a challenge to colonial capitalist hegemony through the words and practices of four tabletop game designers, blending craft, theory, and experience to articulate a pluralistic and ethical vision of a punk at home and flourishing in the ruins of this crumbling world.

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Introduction

Applied Hope: The Solarpunk and Utopias Jam ran from May to August of 2021 and saw an incredible outpouring of creative work from a global collective of tabletop game designers. As conceived by Jo Lindsay Walton, Applied Hope was “a jam about using games to generate hopeful stories and scenarios about the future, to enrich our collective imagination and our capacity to feel joy about the future, to come up with ideas we might otherwise never think of, and to focus on details we might otherwise miss.”¹ Riffing on themes of climate change and ecological crisis, posthumanism and post-scarcity, afrofuturism and solarpunk, this radical communal project saw many incisive contributions that not only pushed tabletop roleplaying game design into new territory, but also posed profound challenges to the hegemony of tabletop publishing in the Global North.

However, in the years since the jam concluded, several of these creators have found their works “forcibly assigned” the homogenizing label of *hopepunk*, a genre term coined by fantasy author Alexandra Rowland in 2017 that has been variously described as “weaponized optimism” and as the “neoliberal circumscription of the imagination.”² As one among many points of inspiration for the Applied Hope jam, “hopepunk” felt innocuous enough, but since then it has become clear that the term, whatever its origins, has been rendered yet another instrument of global colonial capitalism, a marketing term rather than a call to resistance.

Contra this capture of the radical impulse stands the work of four game designers, participants and winners of the Applied Hope jam: wendi yu, Vitor Mattos, Gabriel Henrique Caetano Barbosa, and Cezar Capacle. Conceiving of punk instead as “the lived politics of the negative,” tabletop game play and design becomes a potent refusal of the co-opting forces of the Global North, and concrete means for imagining and indeed realizing an outside and an afterward to the present crises shaping the conditions of our planetary existence.³ This panel mounts a challenge to colonial capitalist hegemony through these designers’ own words and practices—with a special focus on their games *Marvelous Mutations & Merry Musicians!*, *Moon Elves*, *Roots & Flowers*, and *Scraps*—blending craft, theory, and experience to articulate a pluralistic and ethical vision of a punk at home and flourishing in the ruins of this crumbling world.⁴

¹ *Applied Hope: The Solarpunk and Utopias Jam*. Hosted by Jo Lindsay Walton and Eric Stein. itch.io, May 31, 2021 to August 31, 2021. <https://itch.io/jam/applied-hope>.

² wendi yu, “award-winning comment,” Twitter, May 21, 2023, https://x.com/wen_di_yu/status/1660299929045147657; Aja Romano, “Hopepunk, the Latest Storytelling Trend, Is All about Weaponized Optimism,” Vox, December 27, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/12/27/18137571/what-is-hopepunk-noblebright-grimdark>; and Simon McNeil, “Hopepunk: A Genealogical Sketch,” Simon McNeil, December 30, 2021, <https://simonmcneil.com/2021/12/30/hopepunk-a-genealogical-sketch/>.

³ José Esteban Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That’: Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons,” *Social Text* 31, no. 3 (2013): 95-110.

⁴ wendi yu, *Marvelous Mutations & Merry Musicians!* itch.io, May 3, 2021, <https://wendiy.itch.io/marvelous-mutations-merry-musicians>; Vitor Mattos, *Moon Elves*, itch.io, July 2, 2021, <https://maik-malaik.itch.io/moon-elves>; Gabriel Caetano Barbosa, *Roots & Flowers*,

To begin, let us look more closely at the constitutive terms of the genre label in question: ‘hope’ and ‘punk.’ Starting with the latter term, as quoted above, this panel conceives of “punk” as the “lived politics of the negative,” a theorization that we draw from the work of José Esteban Muñoz.⁵ Muñoz theorizes a “queer punk aesthetics” that “actively attempt[s] to enact a commons that is not a pulverizing, hierarchical one bequeathed through logics and practices of exploitation.”⁶ The “something else” of this commons is animated by negativity, charged by “circuits of being-with” that course with “difference and discord,” and are “laden with potentiality.”⁷ This commons, which Muñoz identifies in the early Los Angeles or Hollywood punk scene, was “marked by surging queer and racialized singularities and energies,” and was “grounded not only in a time but also a place.”⁸ To be a punk in this scene, at this time, was to be “hailed by a mode of negation associated with the outsider’s trajectory, the space to find an otherwise elusive mode of being-with.”⁹ This mode is not a shallow nihilism, but rather a “kind of negativity that displaces simple oppositions between the positive and the negative and instead shows us something else.”¹⁰ Importantly for our discussion of the design and industry of tabletop roleplaying games, such a commons is directly opposed to the “idealist notions of collectivity that often feel utopian,” to the operation of universalization that works to convert a heterogeneous constellation of singularities into a homogeneous field of interchangeable units, a transformation that converts the irreducible into data points for market capture.¹¹ To conceive of punk in this way is to refuse, in the strongest terms, the forcible assignment of a pulverizing and exploitative genre label, and the market segments that label is intended to create.

Turning from punk to hope, Adam Greenfield’s recent book *Lifehouse* (with chapters excerpted at *Ill Will*) furnishes us with the idea of the “Long Emergency,” a “reconceptualization of the entire sequence of climate change” that can help us find the “correct scale at which we can begin practically building structures for dignified collective survival.”¹² Greenfield advocates for the “construction of ‘lifehouses,’” a “new way of viewing the spaces discarded by our decaying society, and for developing strategic forms of action for their appropriation and collective usage.”¹³ In the same way that Muñoz finds a radical potential in the specific time and place of the Los Angeles punk scene, Greenfield looks to

itch.io, June 28, 2021, <https://thegiftofgabes.itch.io/roots-and-flowers>; Cezar Capacle, *Scraps*, itch.io, June 30, 2021, <https://capacle.itch.io/scraps>.

⁵ Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That,’” 98. I am grateful and indebted to wendi yu for putting me onto the work of Muñoz. Indeed, wendi’s Twitter thread “i loathe the word hopepunk” was my first exposure to Muñoz’s theorization of punk and was the critical impetus for this panel. See yu, “i loathe the word hopepunk,” *Twitter*, May 21, 2023, https://twitter.com/wen_di_yu/status/1660290172649365506.

⁶ Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That,’” 96.

⁷ Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That,’” 96.

⁸ Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That,’” 96, 97.

⁹ Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That,’” 97.

¹⁰ Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That,’” 97.

¹¹ Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That,’” 98.

¹² Editors, “Beyond Hope,” *Ill Will*, June 22, 2024, <https://illwill.com/beyond-hope>, n.p.

¹³ Editors, “Beyond Hope,” n.p.

the “local experiences, local struggles, and local values” of real communities to dictate the practices of assembly that will support “mutual care” and “collective power” in those communities.¹⁴ Faced with the “terrifying set of conditions we’ve inherited,” Greenfield argues that we ought to act “directly, immediately, locally, without waiting for the state or any other institution to undertake our defense.”¹⁵ In Greenfield’s vision, the “lifehouse” serves as a site of “fellowship and vital material support,” a refuge “provisioned against the hour of maximum need and linked with others in a loose, confederal network.”¹⁶ The lifehouse functions as a locality of pragmatic assembly where the “stewardship of collective services” takes place, where a neighbourhood “might realize a vision of social ecology,” with community members “tending to themselves and the planet by practicing and experiencing solidarity, mutual care, and self-determination.”¹⁷ Like Muñoz, Greenfield’s lifehouse does not flatten difference in pursuit of an ideal collectivity, but is instead a “heterotopia of resistance,” a negative space “organized outside, apart from, and in opposition to the main currents of a society.”¹⁸ In the “wildcat infrastructure of care” that a “meshwork of lifehouses” constitutes, Greenfield sees the potential for a “syndicate of initiative,” the members of which “act only in their own names, guided solely by their own assessment of the moment and what it requires.”¹⁹ Such a syndicate “start[s] with what is closest at hand, build[s] outward from there and link[s] [its] efforts with those of the others who have set themselves the same task.”²⁰ Such an outsider infrastructure seeks no authorization or label—indeed, it refuses such ascriptions of universality and right. The project of “sanctuary, restoration, sustenance, and solace” must be, can only be, “managed and governed” by the people by whom and for whom it is carried out.²¹ The lifehouse refuses hope as slogan, and in fact, puts hope aside, moves *beyond* hope, to focus on “develop[ing] [our] own capacities” for resistance and regeneration, right here and now.²²

Having quickly sketched out this theoretical foundation, it is time to turn to the work itself of the four designers with whom this panel is chiefly concerned. Each of yu, Mattos, Caetano, and Capacle’s submissions to the Applied Hope jam were recognized by the organizers and the community for their remarkable contributions to design in the tabletop roleplaying space, and for their serious, nuanced engagement with the jam’s titular theme.²³ In each of these games, whether it’s yu’s “band,” Mattos’s “cosmonauts,” Caetano’s “troubleshooters,”

¹⁴ Adam Greenfield, “Beyond Hope,” n.p.

¹⁵ Greenfield, “Beyond Hope,” n.p.

¹⁶ Greenfield, “Beyond Hope,” n.p.

¹⁷ Greenfield, “Beyond Hope,” n.p.

¹⁸ Greenfield, “Beyond Hope,” n.p.

¹⁹ Greenfield, “Beyond Hope,” n.p. Greenfield draws the phrase “syndicate of initiative” from Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1974).

²⁰ Greenfield, “Beyond Hope,” n.p.

²¹ Greenfield, “Beyond Hope,” n.p.

²² Greenfield, “Beyond Hope,” n.p.

²³ See “Prizes!” in the community forum for *Applied Hope: The Solarpunk and Utopias Jam*, January 15, 2022, <https://itch.io/jam/applied-hope/topic/1867893/prizes>.

or Capacle’s “scrappers,” we see a kind of *pragmatic collectivity, heterogenous assembly*, or *improvisational sociality*, each game asking its players to experiment with new and radical modes of being-with. By deliberately situating the players as outsiders that must learn how to care for themselves and their communities in the aftermath of some massive catastrophe, some ultimate negation, these works deliberately take up the position of the ones already discarded, the ones already exploited, who do not seek to claw back the “world before,” but instead seek to elaborate new modes of relation in the “weird ruins” of the present.²⁴ It is this panel’s contention that, in studying such works of radical design, in engaging bodily and socially with these works through play, that we can each begin to elaborate our own “lived politics of the negative” in the neighbourhoods that we call home.

The full panel, moderated by Aaron Trammell on July 24, 2024, can be viewed on the Analog Game Studies YouTube channel.²⁵

²⁴Caetano, *Roots & Flowers*, 5 and yu, *Marvelous Mutations & Merry Musicians!* 4.

²⁵Analog Game Studies, “Generation Analog 2024 Panel 1D: Homepunk,” *YouTube*, July 28, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9GKWyseQs>.

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