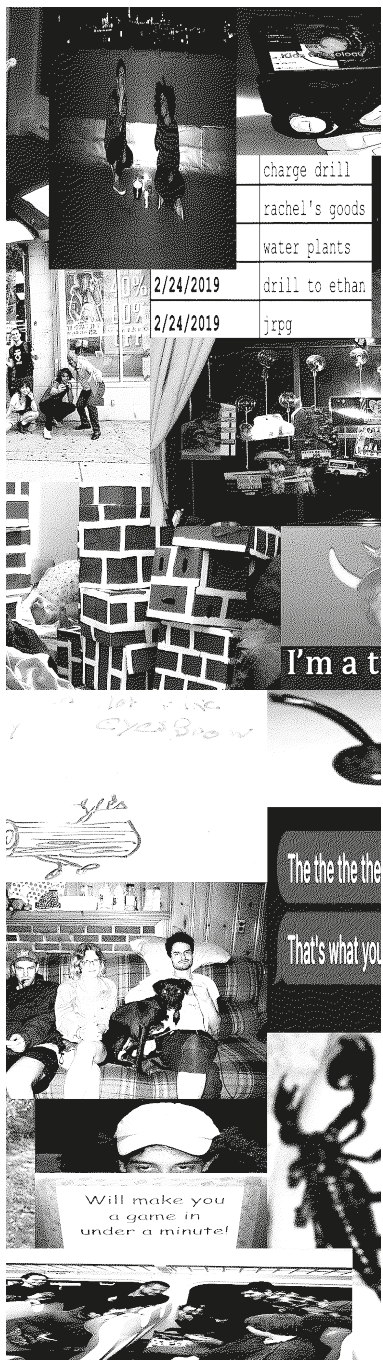


Small stories about video games + the world



JRPG Combat Systems are BEN, BLA, DEN, FF1, 888, JJ and 000. Each member gives a slightly different account of how they came together, but shared amongst the New York-based game design collective is a challenging approach to game making that produces living, iterative systems, suggesting a more communal possible future for the way games are made.

Best embodying the collective's approach is *beat tape* (2019), a collection of 20 modular battle systems that rethink the norms of combat in the traditional Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG). Each concept is intended as a starting point; a component part designed to be remixed and built upon. Systems design serves as a catalyst for further ideation that re-contextualises and re-imagines.

Stark visuals and esoteric pseudonyms frame the collective's self-aware and humorous practice, delivering a challenge to the games industry's desire for visual and technical perfection at every stage of a game's production. Their work allows games to exist in their most honest form, in which experience and community are at the forefront.

BEN, 888, BLA and 000 spoke to PLAYSTYLE about their origins, ideology and the place of their work within the world.

How did JRPG Combat Systems come together as a collective?

BLA Originally it was a joke about people handing out beat or mix tapes in places like Union Square. I thought it would be funny to hand out JRPG combat systems. Our full name (Junior's Papaya Gang Combat Systems) comes from two restaurants we hung out at, Junior's (a diner famous for cake) and Papaya King.

BEN We wanted to make collections of content-free combat systems to which other creators could add aesthetic and narrative components. It was supposed to be like music producers putting out beat tapes to shop around to MCs who could rap over them. I had sort of been kicking around the idea since 2012, when I made a skinless JRPG called *Square for Rami Ismail's Fuck This Jam*, but it never amounted to anything until I met the other people in the group.

000 In one version, one of our friends made a prank phone call to Frank Lantz, the former head of the NYU Game Center. I kind of can't remember this clearly. In this so-called prank phone call, the friend said he was the leader of an organisation called 'JRPG Combat Systems' and making some sort of demands. I forget what he wanted exactly. If anyone ever finds this video, please delete it.

Tell me about the modular video game. Why did you choose to create systems, rather than full titles?

BEN Systems without any context at all have this menacing, mechanical quality to them that I still feel like is an untapped power. And I don't mean systems with beautiful, graphic designer-style abstraction

but truly stark, ugly necessity when it comes to aesthetics. Thus the idea of a whole collection of those kinds of pieces seemed worthy of creation, at least in theory.

888 I think a big intention with the *beat tape* was to try and make 'making video games' a more approachable thing, for people outside 'The Games World' to feel like they could try, both by giving them a toolbox of readymade systems to use in their own work and more generally by just opening the black box a little bit and making it easier to understand what an individual component of a game actually looks like on its own. when extracted from the dense web of contexts it usually exists inside.

The first video games i ever made were in *RPG Maker* which was great, because all the pieces for what you wanted to do were there and you could just focus on arranging them. I guess there was an aspect of trying to help set up a similar possibility space – these days there are a lot of easy to obtain programs that are capable of a lot more breadth of options, but in the process seem to have lost some of that entry-level ease of access.

000 Systems, components and parts are piecemeal, quickly executable by a single person. They're a succinct means of illustrating ideas rapidly, a focused way to capture a "core" of a principle without getting distracted. I think the point was for us and players to fly through these as if you were bouncing from the tip of one iceberg to the next.

We would include code, assets, and project files with the games, so that anyone could take

anything and make it their own. But to be clear, not every 'system' for a release was made of code necessarily. Sometimes it was a .txt file, or a visual collage, etc. The point was more 'accessible conversation' rather than 'here's something we made.'

BEN The backstory is that I hated the idea of narrative, art, sound, and polish being the thing that mattered in a game because I lacked the ability and community to make anything that excelled in those areas. At the time I felt like it was an ideological, essentialist view of media but it was really just petty frustration that I have since completely reversed.

On top of that I also thought that JRPGs had atrocious game design even with all of those things stripped away. The aforementioned Square was made to illustrate this essential awfulness of JRPGs but it kind of had the reverse effect. Stripped of any real signifiers or complexity, a turn-based combat system and random battles becomes a kind of relentless but compelling, industrial slog. Perhaps some of this was influenced by how much I was listening to Throbbing Gristle's *20 Jazz Funk Greats* album at the time...

What do you like about the contemporary games scene? What do you dislike?

888 This is hard to answer generally,
because I think there are several
completely different 'games
scenes' going on at once with
different scales and mindsets.

I dislike the amount of emphasis placed on the idea of lone genius auteurship in a medium that so uniquely lends itself to interdisciplinary collaboration.

PLAYSTYLE explores the way we play, examining interactions that take place between video games + the world.

Each issue features a single story about people, projects and ideas that place the medium of games into a wider cultural or societal context. We look to give space to an evolving view of video games that challenges many of the codified ideas we have about what games are, what they can be and who they are for. Our stories place games in relation to topics such as art, design, architecture, music, fashion, food, sports and more, whilst creating space for voices often unheard within the traditional discourse that surrounds the medium.

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000 So many of us are like, “where do I belong in the games scene?” Each arcade, festival, conference has its own vibe. Inevitably, we feel like we part-belong, or part-don't-belong. Games in art/film-specific shows/festivals are a whole other thing too. I'm glad major nodes in the scene are being covered already through various organisations, venues, and events. But I would love to see more, to see those in-between sections get filled out. How do we bring attention to those sections? Help them find each other? It would be wrong to not admit it's an exciting time in 'games.'

I dislike that the success of game pitches relies heavily on nicely formatted visual art and nothing to do with the playability of/reaction to systems. I love pretty art, but you should be able to be understood or receive funding if you present a game that's filled with wretched placeholder art or sterile squares. I think to evaluate the potential of a game by the quality of its visual appearance is an insult to what games are.

BEN I really like the diversity of the contemporary games scene in terms of the types of games being made and the developers making them. In part I think this is due to the plethora of free, accessible game making tools that are available, which is the other thing I really like.

The thing I dislike is the prevalence of 'games as a service.' They shift the emphasis of video game design into this kind of coercive psychology, focused on pleasure and endlessness which undermines narratives and systems that are not suited for constant content updates and variety.

BLA Most games are too long, too nostalgic, or for babies.

Which other mediums or spaces can games learn the most from?

BEN Theatre. Like video games, it is multimedia and collective and it takes place in real-time. It also often involves or is influenced by audience choice. At a bare minimum, since the gaze isn't fixed, where a person chooses to look and where they choose to sit changes the experience. So theatre is similar enough to video games, but in terms of inventive ways of telling stories I think it has quite a bit to teach.

BLA Most games have not responded to social media in a meaningful way. *Wordle* and *Animal Crossing* feel like two games that have finally learned a lesson from social media.

888 The nice thing about games is they have enough moving parts that basically any outside medium you bring to the table can be used meaningfully somewhere. A more actionable answer is maybe opera, since it specifically shares this quality of being able to converge other media into itself and has a few hundred years head start on examples of people trying to do so in different interesting ways.

000 What a hard question. Sure, any medium, but also things that aren't mediums. Everything is the same thing. You could be watering your plants and removing the excess dead small parts – games could be learning from this. You could be hanging out with someone, having a good time, and then grotesquely picking it apart in your brain later to deconstruct the emotional responses you had to it – games

could be learning from this. You hated going to the DMV – why?

To answer more practically, some ideas/experiments: Books, film, theatre productions, claymation. Tapestries. Field guides, encyclopaedias, grocery flyers; these are IRL UI designs that you can flip through. Literary modernism, prog rock, religious ceremonies. Music release formats: For JRPGCS, the release format was meant to mimic beat tapes, i.e., a collection of random 'beats' ('systems') that 'musicians' ('games-makers') could 'remix' ('use?') for their own works. Games. I think isolating, picking apart, and further iterating on already-existing, traditional parts of games can be interesting.

What does the future of games look like?

000 Who knows? Like any over-encompassing medium, it'll split into a million factions, all of which are disgusted and encouraged by each other. Some section of it will inevitably be hyper-capitalist. But I do think the future of games will look more... active.

888 In my ideal world, people on both the tech and creative ends will pass some threshold of innovation-saturation, where they stop feeling the need to race through ideas to be the first one to do the next thing and instead just focus on making intentional considered work with the overwhelming bulk of intellectual raw material we already have available.

Realistically though, the future will probably bring something I am not capable of anticipating and will crankily resist and all of that is probably normal and good.

BEN More divergent and decentralised, hopefully. Video games

are a powerful medium that mean different things to different people. The less that game making can be tied to a narrow monoculture of “game devs” and more tied to a full spectrum of purposes, the better.

BLA More accessible, lower-tech phone mobile and web games. Online multiplayer being more accessible to develop for. Shorter games. A social media platform that's somewhere between Scratch, Roblox, and TikTok makes sense. Something where people can play a game and immediately edit it. How can game development be memed?

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