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Kai UnEarthed: a Game About Unpoliced Futures

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Figure 1

Abstract

[KaiUnEarthed.com](https://www.kaiunearthed.com) is an interactive fiction video game that invites players to imagine liberated, unpoliced futures. Teenagers in the future encounter artifacts from our time as they go through a coming-of-age ceremony. This involves connecting with us, their ancestors, through interactive analog journals. The project was released in 2021 as a narrative prototype created in Twine, and a near-alpha prototype of the full video game was debuted at GLS 2022. While one of the designers played the game, the audience participated by shouting out suggestions for narrative choices; they also received their own journals, allowing them to interact with the analog game mechanics, taking home a personalized record of their journey. In this sense, the session was a cross between a Well-Played game analysis and a creative writing workshop. This demonstrates one possible use case for *Kai UnEarthed* in future critical game literacy learning spaces.

Links to the Game and a Detailed Description

A short film and screenshots from the game can be found at <https://www.kaiunearthed.com/>. The Twine narrative prototype can be played fully at <https://kaiunearthed.itch.io/kai-unearthed>. The game takes place on planet Earth, in a future revolutionary society where everyone's needs are met. In this world, teenagers receive energy tattoos, preparing to tend the wildness of a regrowing planet that is still healing from climate change. But first, they must complete a coming-of-age ceremony that involves connecting with us, their ancestors, through interactive journals. The game comes with a paper journal that players can use to respond to the characters through tearing, scribbling, writing, drawing, imagining, and acting.

As the story unfolds, the characters must come to terms with the history of the Capitalist Era and its catastrophic final decades, encountering artifacts like cell phones and police drones. Players can role-play as Kai, a child of traumatized revolutionaries. They can fall in love with their crush as they explore the ruins of a youth jail from the 21st century (see figure 1). They can decide how they will hold the pain of their elders and ancestors as they heal together.

We hope this project will help people imagine future worlds free from systemic oppression. We hope it will encourage critical game literacy, design, and action to rehearse and enact these worlds, similar to how Augusto Boal (2000) imagined theater being a rehearsal for revolution. The design of the game itself is based on years of participatory design research that I did with my former students, colleagues, and fellow activists when I was a high school teacher participating in community organizing against youth incarceration.

Interwoven Theorizing

Along with colleagues and co-designers, I have organized a participatory design research pilot study where we are crafting critical game literacy learning activities around the game, positioning it as a mentor text to inspire young people to make their own games imagining liberated futures. Data analysis on that study is incomplete and will be presented in future conferences and publications. However, the theories and empirical research informing both that study and the design of *Kai UnEarthed* were woven throughout the Well-Played session.

I conducted a conceptual review of game literacy research (e.g., Garcia et al., 2020; Squire, 2011; Steinkuehler 2010), as well as recent research on oppression and resistance in gaming (e.g., Gray, 2020; Gray & Leonard, 2018), generating a synthesis that I recently submitted for publication. References to these theories were woven through the Well-Played session. For example, building on Squire's (2011) notion of games as "ideological worlds", we discussed how the game's worldbuilding challenges ideologies of institutional racism and heteropatriarchy.

Kai UnEarthed has also informed – and has been informed by – a theory of Afrofuturist Development that Dr. Brendesha Tynes, colleagues, and I have synthesized (Tynes et al., 2022; in press). Drawing from developmental science and Afrofuturist literature, this framework theorizes how learning spaces can support Black students using technology to write themselves into liberated futures. This is exactly what *Kai UnEarthed* aims to do, and the session involved discussion about how this plays out through game mechanics, character design, narrative design, and prompts for nurturing critical imagination. The session will invite participants to imagine how we can all support young people in using games to prototype their own liberation.

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