

List Projects 30: Jeremy Couillard

July 18 – October 6, 2024, Bakalar Gallery



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Escape from Lavender Island, Jeremy Couillard's latest video game, unfolds like an absurd, profane, and half-remembered dream.

"Welcome to Lavender Corporate University Prison and Psychiatric Ward." After waking up from a dream about a city, these are the first words you see. You lie in bed, hemmed in on all sides by pixelated concrete. There's a toilet in your cell that says, "This is a real world," and a psychedelic city in a bottle sits on a table. The door slides open, and you walk down a hallway to the office of the Warden/CEO/Dean, who appears to be indulging in illicit online entertainment. He seems surprised to see you. "Zede Aksis! I thought you left here months ago! I ... I ... was just doing some online shopping," he says, closing the laptop with a thud. "Leave here and explore the city you have just dreamed of."

You exit the building and run into some creatures—an elf-like figure with a long nose; a blue guy half-sunken into the ground—that urge you to let them free. You climb to the top of the prison, and over its gates, you see a vast landscape of skyscrapers. Cargo ships cruise the ocean, and drones flit through the sickly sky. Here on the roof, you encounter your love interest, Bone Leg, who is famous for making sculptures out of her own flesh. She, too, asks to be let out of the prison: "If you do that maybe I'll see you around later and we can talk more?" she says. You jump onto some trees and into the adjoining

slums. You open the prison gate, and the crowd pours into the city.

Trained as a painter, Couillard is self-taught as a coder and digital artist. His work circulates in the realms of both contemporary art and independent games. This presentation at the List Center is conceived as a physical instantiation of *Lavender Island*, complete with paintings and artifacts drawn from its world. The playable game is joined by a continually generated "simulation" that moves methodically through the city's streets, accompanied by narrative vignettes of the lives of its citizens.

These stories are laced with familiar motifs of life under late capitalism: environmental pollution, unpaid internships, noise music shows, marital strife, yoga classes, meaningless jobs. But they sometimes morph into something more unusual. After a man stops drinking green tea at work, his mug becomes depressed and eventually wiggles off the shelf. A businesswoman designs a waterpark for the ultrarich that uses liquid soap instead of water, and her communist son pees in the pools whenever he can. Two half-human, half-finger siblings—ostracized by society due to their appearance—start an anarchist art squat on the outskirts of town. Couillard's parables



Escape from Lavender Island, 2023 (still). Video game, color, sound. Courtesy the artist



Zede's Dream, 2023 (still). Video game simulation, color, sound, loop; run time variable. Courtesy the artist

of transformation, rebellion, and defeat are more than a weird dream or a bad trip. Their willful confusion of the absurd and the everyday can be read as a practice of what Walter Benjamin called profane illumination: "A materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson."¹ This city and its rules are hallucinatory indeed, but no more so than our own.

What Is This Place?

Writing about *Lavender Island* is like writing about a dream. The elements float around like scraps of paper on a windy street: a love story, an evil corporation, alien invaders, a journey to Jupiter. It's hard to know how things happened, and why, and if the details are interesting to anyone other than the person who was there. Here is what I know for sure: this city lives and dies under the yoke of corporate domination. Before it came to rule this island, Lavender Corporation was a salad chain that gradually expanded into internet service, psychiatric wards, and private universities. Its proprietary secrets are hidden in the bellies of humpback whales swimming offshore. The landscape of Lavender Island is littered with gory public sculptures, orphaned fragments of poetry, dirty jokes, and the ziggurats of rulers past—entities that share with its current overlords the "same bylaws, hierarchy, and cruel indifference to the needs and desires of the unincorporated masses."²

The player's progression through the city's five neighborhoods is enabled by a succession of "masks," each made with a combination of corporate and extraterrestrial technology. The first allows you to shoot pharmaceuticals (Viagra, THC, Adderall) at unsuspecting citizens. The second allows you to walk through walls and obstacles by temporarily breaking apart atoms. You acquire it from a guy in

exchange for guarding his laundry from a hoard of basket-toting zombies. The third mask allows you to dance, which causes the depressed robots that populate the Clown Crypt Renovation Zone to collapse in a heap of ecstasy or defeat. The fourth allows you to suck up pedestrians and shoot them out at will. You can shoot hoops with them, sacrifice them to a clown cult, enlist them in an intergalactic army, and so on. Finally, the fifth mask gives you alien vision, revealing the extraterrestrials' secret infrastructure, subliminal messages, and pornography.

Your path through the city is interrupted by bizarre quests, diversions, and minigames. For instance, you run into Bone Leg again, who, after exiting the prison, is now manning the Psych Evaluation Mango Stand. She delivers a multiple-choice personality quiz, which results in a designation like Pervert, Passive Aggressive Asshole, or Reactionary—a diagnosis that remains stuck at the top of the screen for the rest of the game. Somewhere nearby, a line of creatures snakes from the entrance of a nightclub all the way to the ocean. "When I go to the club I like to smoke two cigarettes at once. I love having two mouths and two butts," an alien in the line tells you. When the concert begins, a lizard in an anarchist T-shirt cheerfully announces that a worm will crawl through your phone and harvest your personal information for its incubating egg. After the music ends, the egg hatches, and great mysteries are revealed for all to see.

A Dizzying Descent into Ourselves³

Escape from Lavender Island, like all of Couillard's work, circulates freely between art and game contexts. Anyone with a PC can download it for \$10. Numerous streamers have recorded their playthroughs with commentary, and it was even chosen—to Couillard's surprise—for a



Zede's Dream, 2023 (still). Video game simulation, color, sound, loop; run time variable. Courtesy the artist

speedrunning competition with a \$10,000 prize. Online reactions to the game include persistent expressions of bafflement and disoriented delight. "This is the kind of mental illness I enjoy," reads one review on Steam. "You don't need to be high to enjoy, but [it] certainly helps," reads another. This lexicon of madness, dreams, and drugs is classically Surrealist, suggesting an affinity between Couillard's practice and the avant-garde movement that began in Paris a century ago.

Surrealism, as articulated by André Breton, was founded on a belief in "previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought."⁴ According to the Surrealists, the unconscious was the route to freedom. They developed numerous visual and literary tools for channeling it—hypnosis and automatic writing, dreams and narcotics, hybrid creatures and objects, disorienting uses of scale and perspective—many of which are echoed in Couillard's work. Crucially, the Surrealists did not cultivate strangeness for its own sake. Instead, they aimed to amplify the explosive absurdity of

the everyday and, in doing so, transform the world. As Benjamin put it in his essay on the movement, "We penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday."⁵

Though relatively neglected until recently, play was central to the Surrealists' efforts to reimagine the rules and constraints of the status quo. As Susan Laxton argues:

Surrealist play activated paradoxical modes of thought and action that, while utterly without specific goals, were nevertheless able to modify reality—*just not usefully*. Ludic ambivalence and equivocation offered the surrealists a suspended, threshold space for representation—a waking analogue to the liminal states of the unconscious: dreams and half sleep, the restless figuring of the subject in formation; the ephemeral, the unforeseeable, the as-yet-ungrasped.⁶

Laxton's discussion of play relies on Benjamin's concept of *Spielraum*, translated as "room-for-play" or "course-for-action."

1 Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," trans. Edmund Jephcott, *New Left Review* 108 (March/April 1978): 49.

2 This quotation is drawn from an informational sign in the city.

3 André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 137.

4 Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 26.

5 Benjamin, "Surrealism," 55.

6 Susan Laxton, *Surrealism at Play* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 2.

Surrealist games, jokes, and puns staked out a space of indeterminacy outside the technological rationalism that increasingly dominated modern life and the agitprop instrumentality that increasingly dominated political language.

Interestingly, the concept of *Spielraum* resurfaces in Benjamin's writings on cities to refer to their ever-changing, unstable, and recombinatorial nature. Consider this passage from his essay on Naples, cowritten with the Latvian playwright Asja Lācis: "Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything, they preserve the scope [*Spielraum*] to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever."⁷ Despite the best efforts of planners and bureaucrats, the city remains a place of chance encounters and inexplicable occurrences. The Surrealists, along with their postwar inheritors like the Situationists, developed strategies like aleatory walks and unconventional maps to disrupt normal patterns of circulation and observe the city's deeper psychic structure.⁸ Eschewing routines of work and consumption, they cut freely across the city's divisions, wandering without destination. Just like Zede, they made a habit of drifting through its most unspectacular spaces—cafes, wastelands, alleyways, parks—wondering who they might encounter there and what might happen.

A Brief History of Imaginary Cities

In their book *The Dawn of Everything*, anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow point out that cities mostly exist in our imagination. Most of us regularly interact with 150-odd people, and our sense of belonging to larger social units depends on the cognitive

work of image-making and ritual. All cities, then, are a kind of virtual reality or illusion—and if they are largely imagined, it is possible to imagine them differently.

For a long time, conventional wisdom held that the agricultural revolution and the appearance of large settlements set humanity on an inescapable path to social inequality. Cities meant surpluses that had to be administered and defended with force. But drawing on recent archaeological evidence across several continents, Graeber and Wengrow suggest that this story is wrong—or at least profoundly incomplete. There are ancient cities with no evidence of a monarchy, a managerial elite, or another ruling stratum. "It would seem that the mere fact of urban life does not, necessarily, imply any particular form of political organization, and never did," they contend.⁹ Couillard read *The Dawn of Everything* around the time he started working on *Escape from Lavender Island* and was inspired by its sense of possibility. The game is partly intended to encapsulate the feeling "that we can configure ourselves in different ways, that things don't always have to be like this."¹⁰

In Lavender Island's fourth neighborhood, the Business Disintegration District, the primary task is to accrue enough money to access an underground mall. As it turns out, the mall doesn't have any shops. Instead, it's filled with alien embryos that feed on human consciousness in the air, thereby controlling the island's economy. A cabinet inside the mall transports you back to the office of the Warden/CEO/Dean, the person behind this deranged speculative scheme. "I'm inside your imagination, using it to feed these alien embryos. Once they hatch I use their energy to back my LavCoin," he taunts. "As you reveal more and more of your imaginary city, the value of my currency grows and

everyone wants a piece of it."¹¹ But when you give the embryos some drugs and dance with them, they hatch prematurely, ruining the boss's plan for now. If Lavender Island heightens the dystopian elements of our present, being there doesn't feel uniformly bleak. Zede's path through the city is interspersed with momentary glimpses of humor, rebellion, ecstasy, and escape.

Couillard loves making games. He told me that it doesn't feel like work to him. As a loading screen within the game notes, he made *Escape from Lavender Island* while on sabbatical from his teaching job. Its budget was tiny, and aside from his collaboration with the composer Chris Parello, Couillard mostly worked alone. The small scale of his enterprise results in its janky nature, but the artist treasures his independence from the alienating imperatives of perfectionism and profit. The video game industry (like so many creative industries) has been described as a nightmare of overwork and precarity, and its seamlessly functioning virtual worlds often feel impersonal, drained of human presence.¹² Couillard envisions his work as something more social: he wants players to feel like they're getting to know him. Much as the Situationists practiced drifting as "a transgression of the alienated world," his reconfiguration of gaming rules and conventions might be read as a critique of the gaming industry.¹³

Deep within Lavender Island, there is an underground labyrinth filled with grainy photos from someone's camera roll. It serves as a miniature museum of Couillard's daily life during the two years he spent making the game. You get a glimpse of the

best bar in Helsinki; a visit to an exhibition in a nightclub; the time he made coffee with sparkling water; a "dumb ass neoliberal mug at an airbnb in san francisco"; and idle walks in the city and the woods. The labyrinth also contains an egg-production facility and an anime character named Yingwu Usagiri. "I've explored this Island so much that part of me got stuck here," she says. "If you've managed to find me I guess you have roamed around a lot also. Is part of you stuck here too?"

Left-Wing Melancholia, or Endlessness

The fifth and final neighborhood of Lavender Island is Two Butts Extraterrestrial Colony. An alien at the entrance confiscates your flying abilities, but your alien vision reveals a hidden elevator that brings you to a pavilion in the sky, where Bone Leg waits for you. There's a cutscene of the two of you lying in bed, and she tells you that her friend just took his last breath. She gives you his urn—an urn with your own face on it—and asks you to bring it to the ocean. When you approach the shore, a giant goblin picks it up and scatters your ashes to the wind and the waves. Afterward, you find Bone Leg in the park and take mushrooms together. A giant mecha controlled by the Warden/CEO/Dean comes out of nowhere and fights you. After you defeat it, the cork starts coming off this bottle of a world. You rush to escape through a hole in the sky and wake up in a prison bed, having just dreamed of a city.

Was it all just a vision? It's hard not to think of the famous adage that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Lavender Island exists in an endless present, a cycle of rebirth and renewal where nothing really changes.

⁷ Walter Benjamin and Asja Lācis, quoted in Laxton, *Surrealism at Play*, 8.

⁸ See Simon Sadler, "Drifting as a Revolution of Everyday Life," in *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 91–95.

⁹ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Penguin, 2021), 277–78.

¹⁰ Jeremy Couillard, in conversation with the author, June 3, 2024.

¹¹ The figuring of imagination as a site of speculation recalls Marina Vishmidt's *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2018). See also Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2019). This bizarre investment scheme also recalls Hito Steyerl's 2015 video installation *Factory of the Sun*, in which motion-captured dance moves are harnessed by Deutsche Bank high-frequency trading bots. A major location in Steyerl's video, the Cold War-era US spy station at Teufelsberg, Berlin, also makes a brief appearance deep inside Couillard's photographic labyrinth.

¹² See Jamie Woodcock, *Marx at the Arcade: Consoles, Controllers, and Class Struggle* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2019).

¹³ Sadler, "Drifting as a Revolution of Everyday Life," 94.



Escape from Lavender Island, 2023 (still). Video game, color, sound. Courtesy the artist

This is a temporality particular to our time of unchallenged capitalist hegemony—the reign of Empire, to reference Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's influential term. As a street sign in Lavender Island puts it, "Things have always been like this and they will continue to remain until the sun dies out and we are consumed by the yawning mouth of an indifferent black hole."

Couillard is part of the first generation with no memory of actually existing socialism: the first historical event he remembers is the fall of the Berlin Wall. The collapse of state socialism cast a shadow over the left that has yet to fully lift. "Such a defeat was so heavy that many of us preferred to escape rather than face it," reflects the Italian historian Enzo Traverso.¹⁴ "What remains of this century of 'storming heavens' is a mountain of ruins and we do not know how to start to rebuild, or if it is even worth doing."¹⁵ Much of Couillard's work dwells in this affective space of left-wing melancholia—it might be read as a prolonged working through of the burnout, lethargy, and despair of political defeat.¹⁶ One of his previous works, *Fuzz Dungeon* (2022), is set in the space between thought

and reality, where "good ideas turn into bureaucratic nightmares" and "daydreams turn into mass starvation and poverty." What follows is yet another absurd plot involving a dog-rat-witch and a Sasquatch sex amulet, but its premise seems haunted, if obliquely, by the crimes of Stalinism and the interminability of our post-utopian age.

The Nintendo Gameboy was invented the same year the Berlin Wall fell, 1989—a development that meant more to nine-year-old Couillard than the demise of capitalism's alternatives. These two events remain conjoined in his mind, however, and according to media theorists Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, their concurrence is hardly incidental. They argue that video games are *the* exemplary media of Empire:

They originated in the U.S. military-industrial complex, the nuclear-armed core of capital's global domination, to which they remain umbilically connected. ... The game industry has pioneered methods of accumulation based on intellectual property rights, cognitive exploitation, cultural hybridization, transcontinentally

subcontracted dirty work, and world-marketed commodities. Virtual games simulate identities as citizen-soldiers, free-agent workers, cyborg adventurers, and corporate criminals: virtual play trains flexible personalities for flexible jobs, shapes subjects for militarized markets, and makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun.¹⁷

Though they spend most of their book elaborating this dour assessment, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter also suggest that games can channel the "multitude"—Hardt and Negri's term for an alternative community of people seeking exodus from capital. They might be a meeting point or a gathering place, in other words, for those who hope to leave the island we're on.

Zede Aksis, Ragpicker

If you listen closely to the citizens of Lavender Island, stories of escape are everywhere: some join fugitive encampments and anarchist collectives; others practice astral projection after getting home from work. Some enter endless tunnels and extraterrestrial portals; others get drunk and play video games. Perhaps the most impressive is the story of Lee, a woman who hated her job and decided she would never work again in her life:

She developed an elaborate ploy to steal customers' credit card numbers at the mall and sold the numbers in forums on the dark web. She made just enough money to get a room in a run-down apartment at the edge of the city. She started doing other small crimes like drug dealing, sex work and helping an ID card forger set up and repair printers. She didn't have a cell phone, a permanent address, or pay taxes. She paid rent and for food with cash. She kept a blog about how to live in a city undetected. It became quite popular and pretty soon a few hundred

people around town were living like her. Eventually the government found out, rounded up everyone they could, including Lee, and put them in a secret prison, with no trial, for the rest of their lives.

If you linger long enough, you'll hear Lee's name again. While she was incarcerated, she met someone named Sally:

They both had a job hammering license plates and they would stand next to each other, pounding the tin sheets, having long conversations about politics, love, and art. When the revolution came and the prison walls fell down, the couple walked into town together. They found an abandoned apartment in a formerly wealthy neighborhood and squatted there. It felt strange to them that the once underground culture they had been a part of was now in power. They were having trouble adjusting to life outside of prison and decided to apply for a grant from the new government to open a nightclub for experimental music and art, hoping that focusing on a large project would be helpful. The new government wrote back apologetically, informing the couple that the open call for grant applications was their failed attempt at humor. In post-revolutionary society there were no more grant applications. A check for the requested sum was enclosed along with well wishes on their new venture. The nightclub became a huge success.¹⁸

As you encounter more of the city and its citizens, a picture emerges of its ceaseless transformation: utopias opening, closing, and opening again. The player's role in this, however, remains ambiguous. Zede Aksis is certainly no revolutionary. He mostly does what's asked of him, no matter who does the asking. After you're reborn in your

14 Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 22.

15 Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 22.

16 See Hannah Proctor, *Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Defeat* (New York: Verso, 2024).

17 Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxix.

18 These stories are two of the hundred that are read aloud, in randomized order, in the simulation *Zede's Dream*. Some are also triggered by actions in the playable game. Each vignette stands alone, but as the example of Lee shows, closer attention reveals their delicate interconnection.

prison cell, you're given free rein to explore the island with your fully upgraded "endless butt ship." At the top of a skyscraper, you run into the Warden/CEO/Dean, who is unperturbed by his defeat and has even discovered the virtues of philanthropy. "We're offering cheap rent for artists here in the slums. Go get some tenants for me," he says. After you've collected the requisite twenty citizens using your suck mask, the Warden turns the tables on you: "Hahaha you idiot. You trusted ME to give anyone anything that's affordable? We're gonna start building luxury condos in these slums now. All thanks to you. Glad to have you back, Zede." You can fly and walk through walls, but you have no power to save, destroy, or meaningfully change the material contours of this world. There is a parallel here to the limited agency of the artist himself. While the task of the Surrealists was "to win the energies of intoxication for revolution," Couillard has no such faith in the catalytic power of art.¹⁹ I don't know anyone who does. "I just think everything's fucked and I'm trying to deal with it myself with the hope that others can relate," he explains.²⁰

The player is left in an ambivalent yet familiar position: dreaming of a world they can't bring into being and unable to wake from this dream of a world. To understand this condition, it is worth returning one final time to the writings of Benjamin. A 1930 review of Siegfried Kracauer's study of white-collar workers served as an occasion for Benjamin to reflect on the peculiar task of the revolutionary intellectual. He writes admiringly that Kracauer's book "give[s] up all hope of demagogic effect."²¹ Political impact, Benjamin insists, proceeds only from practice:

Thus, in the end this writer rightly stands alone. A malcontent, not a leader. No pioneer, but a spoilsport. And if we wish to gain a clear picture of him in the isolation of his trade, what we will see is a ragpicker, at daybreak, picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick and tossing them, grumbling and growling, a little drunk, into his cart.²²

Benjamin's melancholic figure of the ragpicker reminds me of Zede's winding path through the city, intently gathering fragments of absurd poetry and obscure lore. Perhaps all that he's collected will be redeemed someday as it crashes through the window of a drugstore or a bank. But until the dawn of the revolution breaks, Zede is fated to wander the streets of his city forever.

In the meantime, this isn't the worst place in the world to be. There is music here and dancing and plenty of things to do. By the beach, there is a court for an inscrutable form of volleyball. The players are two purple torsos with long arms and necks. As they hit the ball, the net flashes with enigmatic sequences of menacing text: BREAKFAST ORGY WITH MANAGERS; COLONIZE THE RINGS OF SATURN; BEATEN WITH A Mallet BY CLOWNS; EVERYONE MAKES FUN OF YOU. Behind each player, staticky signs display constantly shifting alphanumeric codes. The person you love is off to the side, watching. "I've been standing here for an hour trying to understand this game," she tells you. "But I keep getting distracted by the beauty of the sky and the water and the mountains."

—Ramona Ngin

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jeremy Couillard (b. 1980, Livonia, MI) lives and works in New York. Previous exhibitions include solo presentations at Denny Gallery and yours mine & ours Gallery in New York, among others. His work has been screened at venues in New York like Times Square Midnight Moment, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Flux Factory, and the New Museum, as well as Rotterdam Film Festival. He received an MFA in Painting from Columbia University in 2012, and he teaches New Media at LaGuardia Community College in Queens. Within the world of games, his achievements include two recent nominations for the Independent Games Festival Awards in San Francisco as well as a nomination for the Most Amazing award at A.MAZE fest in Berlin.

List Projects 30: Jeremy Couillard is organized by Natalie Bell, Curator, with Ramona Ngin, Curatorial Assistant.

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¹⁹ Benjamin, "Surrealism," 55.

²⁰ Jeremy Couillard, in conversation with the author, March 18, 2024.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, "An Outsider Makes His Mark," trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 309.

²² Benjamin, "An Outsider Makes His Mark," 310.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS



Curator Tour: Natalie Bell and Ramona Ngin

Friday, September 13, 2024, 12:30 PM

In-person program



Catalyst Conversations: Game Matters with Jeremy Couillard and Mikael Jakobsson

Thursday, September 26, 2024, 6 PM

In-person program



Graduate Student Talk: Daniel Pillis

Thursday, October 3, 2024, 5:30 PM

Hybrid program

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