

Gaming in Performance. Between Research and Artistry

Matt Adams, Blast Theory, interviewed by Helen W. Kennedy

Abstract *This interview with Matt Adams explores some of the key influences and trajectories underpinning the work of Blast Theory, an internationally renowned arts organisation at the forefront of innovative interactive storytelling. Here the focus is on how the artistic practices of Blast Theory make use of and advance the possibilities of play, games, and live performance.*

Introduction

Founded in England in 1991 and led by Matt Adams and Nick Tandavanitj, Blast Theory¹ has been at the forefront of experimentation in multi-media performance and interactive storytelling. Collaborating with the Nottingham University's Mixed Reality Lab,² the group often uses cutting-edge technology to design immersive experiences through which players confront complex themes of morality, ideology, and complicity, while engaging with a mediated storyworld designed with their own unique exploration of its boundaries in mind. Their work has been featured at numerous festivals, including: Tribeca Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, the Venice Biennale, the Dutch Electronic Arts Festival, the Sonar Festival in Barcelona, and the Palestine International Video Festival. Their work with the researchers and scientists of Mixed Reality Lab has led to their co-authorship of over 45 research papers, and the artists of Blast Theory continue to contribute to and expand public awareness of interactivity and performance by means of residencies, institutional curation, teaching, and contributions to major research projects.

Helen Kennedy: *Welcome! This is an interview for a special collection that's inspired by a conference that explored the intersection between live performance and video games. So let's start by thinking about where Blast Theory might fit into that. If we think of it as a continuum or an intersection, how would you describe Blast Theory's work within that broad framework?*

1 <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/>.

2 <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/mixedrealitylab/>.

Matt Adams: We were always interested in making interactive work from the very first project we made: *Gunmen Kill Three* in 1991.³ And we tended to use quite avant-garde techniques and structures. We were influenced by performances and happenings, and techniques from visual art and experimental theatre in the way in which we made interactive work. And then in the late 90s we discovered – through beginning to work with VR – just how far computer games design had developed. And that moment – suddenly thinking about our work as a game, rather than as interactive art – was transformative for our practice. It helped us unlock a different way of making work, and of finding an audience. Thinking about the public as *players* meant that suddenly we could talk to a five-year-old or a ten-year-old about what we did and they were like, ‘Oh cool, it’s a game, how do I play?’ Not ‘It’s an avant-garde art performance at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London? Please tell me more!’ Which, of course, is a sentence no one has ever said...

From that moment on, we have made work that is both performative and live, and either a game or in some way driven by ludic design principles. I see those principles as running through all of the work, even if some work that we’ve made that doesn’t at first blush look like a game according to any sort of meaningful definition.

Helen Kennedy: OK, fantastic. There’s two follow up questions I want to ask, one which goes back into those early influences – can you say a little bit about the works that inspired you? Just a couple of key examples that were inspiring you in those early 90s.

Matt Adams: Our immediate imperative to make work was UK club culture in the late 1980s where the rave scene and an underground scene of club culture was happening. That felt era-defining and that is what many of the people around us were doing with their weekends. We felt that there was an opportunity to do something that had a club energy, with ideas and politics built into that. My background is in theatre and that was my love and that’s what I thought that I was going to be – a theatre director – when I was at UCL (University College London). But I was also really influenced by the Russian constructivists and Piscator and Brecht and those first multimedia experiments in the 1920s and 30s. When Piscator was designing theatres with cinema screens built in, and there was this enormously fertile period of new media photography and film that happened in the 1920s and 30s. So that was a big influence. And then, Allan Kaprow and Judson Church, those experimental practitioners in New York in the 50s, 60s, 70s, had a really big impact. Robert Wilson was a massive influence on us, ironically, when none of us had ever seen any piece of Robert Wilson. It was all through photos, text descriptions and Philip Glass recordings.

³ <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/gunmen-kill-three/>

Helen Kennedy: A second question that came out of what you were just saying there was around that discovery of computer games and what they were now doing, the innovations that had happened there and what the possibilities were and the way in which that shift in games impacted upon how you understood your work, your audience, your relationship with them as players. Can you explain what it is about games? What do they afford? What do they allow/enable from a creative design perspective? What is it that excited you about what computer games could do?

Matt Adams: That's a very big question.... Games are uniquely audience-focused – a game dies in a nanosecond if the player of the game does not know why they are playing or what they can do or why they should do it. So it's a rigid discipline of focus on the public who are engaging with your work. And for us coming out of avant-garde/live art/performance arts/YBA-era stuff⁴ – plenty of that has a unique level of disdain for the public and has no interest in whether they can or cannot engage with their art. So what it meant for me, for us, was to provide a framework for the development of our work.

It requires addressing micro-design questions such as: 'What am I doing', 'What can I do', 'What should I do next', 'Where am I going', 'What am I trying to achieve'? Those questions are all activated constantly, and then you have this macro level, which is across the arc of a work: Can you then make that language take you to interesting places?

It's worth remembering that in the 90s it was still axiomatic that video games were childish and puerile, and strictly for adolescent males and that they only involved violence, car chases, or silly cartoons. That they were inherently unserious, and there was not really an indie scene yet – it was beginning, but it was very nascent at the time.

Of course, there have been interesting people doing interesting things with games right the way back to the early 60s, but the cultural framework was very different.

So I was very excited about a question such as 'Can you make a game about the Gulf War that deals with virtuality and brings in Baudrillard's ideas about virtuality, and ideas from Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*'? (Baudrillard 1983; Debord 1967). 'Can you make a war game set in the Gulf War, that in some way deals with questions of epistemology?' And, in retrospect you can see that in *Desert Rain*⁵ we were engaged in trying to make a war game that could talk about warfare, and to me, that fact seemed a very intoxicating intersection.

4 According to Tate.org.uk, the label Young British Artists (YBAs) is applied to a loose group of British artists who began to exhibit together in 1988 and who became known for their openness to materials and processes, shock tactics, and entrepreneurial attitudes.

5 <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/desert-rain/>.

Helen Kennedy: *That's really fascinating, and I like that conception about the 'micro level' you describe: how games stand or fall, don't they, on how well they are communicating what you as a player need to do, rapidly enough, teaching you how to do it and making it interesting enough to keep you there?*

Matt Adams: And where games are like theatre is, the thing needs to get up on its feet at the first possible opportunity. And any draft or document or script can collapse instantly as soon as you try to do it.

For a piece of theatre, you can think, 'ohh yes, I've written a really great scene.' You try to act out that scene, it can be terrible. Games are exactly the same. You can spend ages refining your rules, until you give it to a couple of people and say, 'Alright just play this will you?' You can find all of your smart ideas instantly falling to ash in your hands. They're both practice-based disciplines and we've always felt that is our focus – it has always been about practice. We're not called Blast Theory for no reason!

Helen Kennedy: *And they live, don't they, in the moment of the play? So, the lines or the rules might be written down and the game designed but all of that is a dead form, if you like, until that moment, just as you said, when two actors inhabit a performance, or a player picks up and starts to play. Really interesting.*

You've talked about how your practice weaves together performance and game, and you've talked about the early roots.... Are there other switch points in the journey where the emphasis changed again? So, you talked about, suddenly there was this possibility of gameness and ludic design principles and then you really exploited that. So how did that go? How did that progress in terms of your aesthetics or your adoption of new technology?

Matt Adams: Yes, so by 2000, 2001, we're playing with GPS receivers, which at that time were still standalone, expensive devices that just spat out latitude and longitude. We were working with the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham, so we started to make location-based games, starting with *You See Me Now?* (2003)⁶ and thinking about the city as a space for play.

We made a number of works that do that. I think the other thing that I would mention in that respect is that when we were commissioned to make *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant*⁷ for the Venice Biennale in 2009, I came across Philippa Foot's work, and the trolley dilemma, and the branch of philosophical enquiry around setting ethical problems as questions that could potentially have binary outcomes.⁸ And to

6 <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/can-you-see-me-now/>.

7 <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/dial-ulrike-and-eamon-compliant/>.

8 Philippa Foot was a moral philosopher who posed the 'Trolley Problem' which invites you to consider a hypothetical situation in which you as the driver of a tram must, through

me, that was an amazing overlay onto games language because it's a form of play; the trolley dilemma is a hypothetical question for you to inhabit. There is something about the subjectivity of theatre, where you watch a character, and you're invited to empathise with them, or see the world with their perspective. There's something about games language where you are inserted into a situation as the protagonist (with some degree of fictional overlay) and then Philippa Foot's idea of thinking about a hypothetical question as a way of unpacking something that is ethically complex. Each of those aspects has been folded in on one another in terms of how I think about the work that we make.

Helen Kennedy: *Have the ethical dilemmas that you've chosen to put within the work, has that responded, to at different times, different kinds of cultural or political events, or propensities that you've seen? Has that been important, or have they been more, I don't know, universal if you like, or ahistorical?*

Matt Adams: Yeah, I mean thematically we're very heterogeneous. We're really drawn in all kinds of strange directions. For me they are often politically driven or recurrent. Ulrike and Eamon *Compliant* (2009) is about Ulrike Meinhof of the Red Army faction and Eamon Collins, who was a member of the IRA, and both of them made a journey towards political violence. I was interested in how people made that transition. *Operation Black Antler*,⁹, which we made in 2016, is inspired by the undercover policing scandal in the UK. [In *Operation Black Antler* you are given a new identity as part of a small team; you are briefed and then sent into an undercover operation. Most of the game takes place in a public house; there you must meet, build empathy with, and ultimately try to win the trust of someone whose political and moral views may be the polar opposite of your own.] Some of our works are very clearly refractions on particular events but, more typically, it's about how we as individuals make sense of the world around us, and what obligation we have to act politically. I'm very interested in the fact that we're all slightly called to account for our complicity in the world, and to make a difference in the world, especially if we think that we're somehow progressive or left-of-centre, and yet almost all of us are quite bad at it – and I put myself at the front of that queue. Why is it that we find it so difficult to actually activate change in the world? Our work explores that space between passivity and action, or the space between: simplification so that you can act, versus acknowledging the complexity and diminishing your ability to act.

your own actions, choose between running down and potentially killing five people on the tracks ahead or diverting the trolley and killing just one person on a different section of track (Foot 1967).

⁹ <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/operation-black-antler/>.

Those sorts of threads to me, they repeat, because it's a problem I can't get out from under.

Helen Kennedy: *That is really present in Operation Black Antler. That simplification versus complexity and the inability to operate in a condition of complexity. How do you make decisions when it's all a bit confusing and indeterminate... really fascinating.*

I wonder. You used the word complicity there, and I was thinking about some of your works that positions your player in a way as complicit. Can you tell me a little bit about the design process, where you're thinking about that player inhabiting that complicity and the potential uncomfortableness of that? How do you conceptualise that and the aesthetics of discomfort that exists within that mode of complicity?

Matt Adams: It's very common in our work for the participants to be uncomfortable and to head on a journey where the destination is literally unknown in every sense: geographically unknown; conceptually unknown; socially, not clear. Even the edges of the work are often unclear. In *Operation Black Antler*, you don't really know what is the limit of this world, if a police car goes past, is that part of it? Could that be part of it? You know, that porous nature between the work and the outside is very important.

In terms of the design process, the work often starts from an insight about behaviour, or perception. There is that kernel of something we think is interesting.

We were commissioned by the Sundance Film Festival and two other festivals in the States and in Canada to make a piece of 'locative cinema'.¹⁰ As research for that work, we did experiments here in sunny Portslade where we walked up the High Street in pairs with one person on the phone talking to the other person maybe 10/20 metres in front and telling them what to do. Saying 'Sit down here' or 'Look there'. At one point, in this improvisation, one person said: 'Look at that bank; you see the bank? If you were running from there with two holdalls filled with heavy things, which way would you go to get away the quickest?' The person on the phone was like: 'I'd definitely go down that alley. I would be away quite quickly.' Then that gradually unspooled into: 'And the police, where is the nearest police station to here? If they were called, where would they be coming from?'

'If you had to choose a window that you were going to break into that bank, which window would you choose? Have a look and see which one you think.' 'Well, actually there is a skylight up on that roof there... That looks like a good one.'

We each experienced a sense of enormous guilt and we realised that we are on the line between playing a game and planning a crime. We all felt implicated. A *Machine*

¹⁰ Sundance Film Festival, 01 San Jose Biennial and the Banff New Media Institute 2010.

to *See With* (2010)¹¹ was made in the aftermath of the financial crisis. So we were all thinking about banks: who gets robbed by banks, and who robs banks.

Helen Kennedy: *It seems like maybe those questions come back to the fore over and over again because some of those early works and experiences feel like they'd be useful things to be playing with again, A Machine to See With feels like something you could be easily working on right now.*

Matt Adams: Yeah, we always joke about *Desert Rain* (2000),¹² which is the work we made about the Gulf War, that if you make a work about the horrors of American foreign policy, you have a perennially evergreen piece of work, because American foreign policy will always be there to remind you...

Helen Kennedy: *Exactly. So where did we get to? Is there more you could say about liveness and how important that is? That sense of maybe the precariousness of liveness, which is slightly different to the precariousness of 'Will it work or won't it' of a game?*

Matt Adams: The really big difference is that, when you're in a live performance, there is some kind of contract between audience and performer that is consensual at that moment, which is that we, together, are going to make this thing happen. And I, as an audience member, I'm sitting watching you on stage and I know that you could trip over and fall flat on your face, quite literally, and ruin the pretence that you are the King of Denmark – but hopefully you won't. We both accept that this risk is present. That in itself is thrilling aesthetically, but I think, more profoundly, it's a political thing. Of course you know in England, censorship of theatre only stopped in the 60s, prior to that, your script had to be approved by the government before it could be performed. Which is partly to do with the fact that there's quite a long history of riotous behaviour in theatres, these were unmarshalled spaces where all sorts could go on. It goes all the way back to Shakespeare and before.

So, I think that's not just a sort of historical curiosity. That's also to do with a sense of being here, in this place at this moment, and this thing is happening right now. And the very best live work I've seen, you have that sense that you are *entirely* in this moment and that anything could happen next. Really good shows do not feel like comfortable things.

I was a witness/participant in the poll tax riot in 1990. On that day all sorts of rules in life were suspended because 200,000 people took control of central London for several hours, and the police could do nothing about it. That's been an incredibly transformative thing in my life because it was a moment where something that is

11 <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/a-machine-to-see-with/>.

12 <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/desert-rain/>.

performative, a march with banners and some speeches, turns in a split second into something that was much, much more serious, and much more challenging. And in 1989 my partner at the time was living in Berlin as the wall came down, and I was there the week after that and so I experienced that sense of: All the things that you thought were completely here forever can change overnight, quite literally. We forget at our peril that things can shift quickly.

Helen Kennedy: *Yes, lovely. And so beautiful. A way of describing the sort of potential that anything could happen, everything could happen, change could happen. It's immanent, isn't it, in a really interesting way. By going back to the poll tax riots and thinking about your early work, you've reminded me that they were, in a way, transforming city spaces and transforming public spaces through play. Is it still possible to do things on that kind of scale now? Have the infrastructural demands in terms of getting commissions, permissions etc., have they made that harder now than it was, or is it still possible to really turn the city into a play space in the way that you could back then?*

Matt Adams: I think it is possible. I think those works came about because we were in the generation where the mass privatisation of public space was one of the driving ideological moves. The Thatcher-Reagan period really was about destroying these common spaces and public spaces. It's worth remembering that no land was private at some point and at various points throughout history, people have taken that land and said 'I own this now and I have a sword in my hand – or a deed in my hand – and you can lump it', and working people have been pushed off the common land over and over again and of course the early Internet was a form of common space that has slowly been privatised. I think you can still make those works. I think ironically, the culture of care and safety around the public is a more challenging thing to work with now. It's important, I understand that, but I also think that we all should be able to take some fucking risks! I feel for a generation of younger people who are not talked to all the time as strong, powerful, resilient people who can take on the world, but are talked to in terms of their care, and their fragility and how they need to be looked after.... And these are not binary opposites where you have to have one or the other – but I just think that there is something about risk-taking that is really important and obviously in a number of our works that risk-taking has really manifested.

Helen Kennedy: *It is very empowering, potentially, isn't it? It has the potential to empower you: taking those risks and surviving them, and learning through them, and experimenting through them, which I think is another thing that I didn't frame a question around but, a number of your works do invite people to inhabit a different persona.*

Can you say a little bit about how you've enjoyed creating these characters to play? Because it's on the same lines as getting them to inhabit ethical dilemmas, but often it's through personas, isn't it?

Matt Adams: I think you can see that in terms of my theatre background, obviously. One of the things that I think is notable about our work is that we're playing a lot with those fictional languages. You are an undercover cop. You are Ulrike Meinhof. You are going on a mission in a desert in the Gulf War, but nearly always in your own clothes with your own voice to a level that you feel comfortable to do. So you are not called on stage to impersonate someone or to perform. It's an invitation to think about yourself in a different way, to act otherwise. Often that's through tasks. In *Operation Black Antler*, we say, 'You're going to a pub. There is a far-right group meeting there. You will go and engage them in conversation and find out what they're doing'. And then it's for you to decide what that might mean for the persona that you're invited to inhabit.

I think we all do that all the time. Our 'fun self' who turns up to a party is something that we work with. Why is Glastonbury Festival so transformative? Because when you go through the gate you can more or less do whatever you want. If you want to wear wellies and a feather boa off you go, you know, no one will stop you. It's all good. We aim to create spaces where in a relatively unpressured way there is a gentle onramp from your ordinary self who's just bought a ticket for a show, through to: I am now undercover trying to engage this far-right person and I'm going to have to sympathise with their anti-immigrant views if I want to get the information I need.

That transition can be done along a gentle graceful slope where you can both move up into that fictional position, and withdraw from it, at will. You've often got quite a lot of agency around that. For me, that's a freeing political thing because it's a sense of how you can inhabit different subject positions; you can inhabit different points of view.

Part of *Operation Black Antler* is to learn some degree of sympathy for undercover police officers. It's not really a work about the evil state and how terrible they are. It's really about the work they do: Once you start lying to someone at a party, how the hell do you keep a grip on what's going on? It's really hard, you know? And we did endless amounts of research about the work, including speaking to undercover police officers. And it's very challenging but also inherently theatrical. They act a role, all day long. I return to that sense of theatricality, again and again.

Helen Kennedy: I think that in a way you've captured something that I've noticed about your work in the past where you're negotiating the sort of technomanic/technophobic binaries that emerge around surveillance technologies or the internet or mobile phones and those sorts of binaries and extremes that are once more in play around artificial intelligence. On the one hand, there are proclamations of the transformative and liberational potential of AI, offering up new kinds of freedom, new kinds of creative opportunity. On the other hand, there are those who foresee a Terminator 'singularity' moment, when AI suddenly eradicates us all as swiftly as

possible. Say a little bit for me about what *Cat Royale* (2023)¹³ is exploring in relation to our attitude towards AI, because I think the work is asking some interesting questions.

Matt Adams: There's a whole range of great artwork about how AI is problematic, about ethics, and when we began to look at it, I felt that there's something else that we could look at which is to do with: 'Can we make AI visible?'

Can you see something learning in front of you? In *Cat Royale*, over the 70-odd hours that the piece was running, the AI offers 500 different games to the cats, and is learning each time which game is liked best by which cat. You can see a system gradually learning.

This is a machine-mammal interaction with no human ostensibly present. It was interesting that most of the negative comments that we had – and of course there was an army of those people on Facebook – said it's unfair on the cats because there are no humans. They haven't got any human contact: a classically solipsistic human thing, because obviously what cats need are humans!

Cat Royale is delightful and playful and slightly funny and almost silly and also dystopian. There were moments when I was watching it where you can see the robot playing with the cat and I'm thinking, 'That cat is having a ball. They're having a really nice time. They're loving pulling on that feather toy, and the robot is pulling back'. And that feels like a glimpse into some sort of future, which of course is: The cats in *Cat Royale* are us. It's a work about 'Human Royale', really. What do we do when we outsource our happiness to algorithms? Where does that leave us?

Helen Kennedy: I heard there briefly that obviously you've had positive and negative feedback on *Cat Royale*. What has this negative feedback been largely about? Is it the absence of a human factor for the cats?

Matt Adams: Yes, people have hated that. We prepared for over a year for hostility for that project. I undertook hostile media training. Because it's very easy to frame *Cat Royale* as 'artists shut cats in box with robot'.

Helen Kennedy: So just because we probably are getting to the end of our time, there's two things that I wanted to talk to you about again, which is about the cyclical nature of how things happen, and it feels like the *Uncle Roy All Around You*¹⁴ work and the *Can You See Me Now*¹⁵ work has a new relevance now as people are starting to do these kind of digital twin/hybrid experiences. I wondered what your thoughts were about, you know, how pioneering you'd been

¹³ <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/cat-royale/>.

¹⁴ <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/uncle-roy-all-around-you/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/can-you-see-me-now/>.

then, 20 years ago? But what's your perspective on the potential aesthetic around those hybrid works?

Matt Adams: I don't know. All I can really say is I am always interested in making work that stems from a degree of ignorance and uncertainty on my part. At times we have made work which seems eerily prescient, for example, we made *Spit Spreads Death*¹⁶ about pandemics in September 2019, just three months before COVID was first present in Wuhan.

Sometimes that's coincidence, but I think some of the time that happens because Ju, Nick, and I are all interested to go into territory where we feel a little bit ignorant and a little bit out of our depth. That enables me to follow a hunch or something that is poorly understood and that enables me to stretch myself.

I've sometimes thought about creativity like this: How far will you swim off the beach before you feel like you really should head back now. The most creative people I know are people who are very happy to keep going away from shore for a long, long way. Where other people are a bit like: 'But we can't even see the beach now, I really think we should turn back.'

Helen Kennedy: *Curiosity seems to me like a driving force there, maybe part of that ignorance, maybe a more positive way of framing that is curiosity about what you don't know. And so very quickly then: the Metaverse. It feels like the Metaverse probably has delivered on some of your worst fears around the internet in terms of its commercialisation and commodification. There is a games and performance drive happening there with more and more performances taking place in the Metaverse and building audiences. There is also a renewed sense of possibility within that space in terms of creating greater democracy, or finding new ways of inhabiting those spaces, with work that isn't already commercialised or commodified.*

Matt Adams: Yes, maybe. Lots of the things that you just said could apply to earlier phases of VR or to Second Life, for example. I don't believe that aesthetics creates new power relationships. I think power relationships create aesthetics. And if the aesthetics have not already succumbed to the power relationships, the power relationships turn up to make sure that they do. It was said with a straight face at conferences for over a decade that the internet was an inherently democratising thing. *Inherently*. It makes everything horizontal and flat and normal hierarchies will not exist. In the Metaverse, the fundamental laws of power will exist as ever. That still means that there is potential for utopian things to happen, and transformative things to happen. I believe in fighting for that, and the good artists can posit things that enter into the cultural bloodstream, and become new ideas, and those ideas can be transformative.

16 <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/spit-spreads-death/>.

Helen Kennedy: *I had a question ... one of my final questions ... about audience engagement and implication or involvement in your work. How have you sought to advance audience engagement and, in some ways, audience implication or involvement in your work?*

Matt Adams: I suppose, what I perhaps haven't said in quite this way is that: In designing games, we're giving you as a participant *agency*. Agency and control is inherently an interesting thing because it enables you to *act* as a consumer of a cultural work, to become a participant. To make decisions, and most decisions that you make are quite narrowly defined in games, but of course games are legion with examples of emergent behaviour: little hacks, cheats, cheat codes, people working out ways to get round things, subverting things.

This is, in itself, replete with possibility: to go into a piece of work where you can make a decision, or you can act in a certain way.

Helen Kennedy: *Sometimes – so you talked about agency there – but sometimes, there's also playing with how passive they might be, how suddenly things take control. So that also feels like something you've got in play in that...*

Matt Adams: Yes, that says a lot about me. You see these distinct power relationships in our work so often. One of the things that often exists in our work is a sense of isolation and loneliness – a sort of sadness. Because that's often my experience of the busiest, most social spaces on the internet. I always feel like I'm a slightly uncool kid on the edge of the party, and that doesn't feel great. I came off Facebook about seven or eight years ago and one of the enormous weights that was lifted from me was the sense of being permanently at some sort of school mixer, which I was *not* well suited for!

Helen Kennedy: *We're more or less at the end now. We talked about what you've been up to recently – What's up next?*

Matt Adams: We are making a work called *The Unstruck Sound* in Estonia next year, as part of Tartu, Capital of Culture, which is where we are going to train some young people to go out and interview people who remember life in 1974 in Estonia. And we're going to collect stories about Estonia in 1974 and then write a science fiction film, set in 2074, using those stories.

I've been really interested for a while in how in the 50s and 60s, where progressive politics was at its height, the hard-right cadre all retreated, to the universities especially. So, you know, Milton Friedman and all those guys, the University of Chicago, and they did the intellectual and cultural work to think about what a privatised, neoliberal world would look like. And for ten or 15 years, they just wrote papers and had

little seminars and conferences and stroked themselves against copies of Ayn Rand novels...

But what that meant is that when Pinochet, then Reagan, then Thatcher came, when that moment came, where the progressive ideal in the mid late 70s looked tarnished, they had all of the thinking in place to say: This is what you do – privatised the trains, privatised the buses, privatised the water, privatised the gas. All the thinking had been done. I'm interested in whether, in a moment of sort of right-wing, nationalist resurgence, whether there's a way of trying to keep our eyes on that past and to use it to think about utopian ideals and to try and articulate: What would a utopia look like?

Can we think of that? And so I think, yeah, 1974 in Estonia, I don't know anything about it really, but I imagine it was a moment where the Soviet ideal was just about still alive. You know, there was still a moment in which communism could be the panacea. Maybe it was already gone by then – I don't know, I'm interested to find out.

We did a project in Hull [England] called 2097: *We Made Ourselves Over*,¹⁷ and we did interviews there with people. One of the things that came out was older people talking about their euphoria when they moved into the new housing estates in the 60s and 70s – how they were amazing things with plumbing, and central heating, and communal spaces. And they were all brand-new, they had gardens, they could drive easily, where previously it had been hard. It was a time where working people were being given things that were of real value to them, you know? And that really stayed with me because, of course, we're so used to the idea that all of these tower blocks were terrible to start with. And that's not quite how it worked. So, I think there's just something in there about those kinds of utopian moments that I'm interested in exploring.

Helen Kennedy: *Fascinating, I'm excited to see what happens! So it's going to be a utopian science fiction and well, where will it go? Is it going to be part of a festival?*

Matt Adams: It will be a film. We're going to make a short film, shot in Estonia. Estonian cast and crew and probably in the Estonian language – we haven't quite worked that out yet. And then, yeah, it'll be showing at film festivals, shown online.

Helen Kennedy: *Interesting. It feels like you are continuing to explore a more political, critical role for the artwork. The artwork is holding open the idea that, like you said, we want to remind ourselves that things weren't always as they are now.*

17 <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/we-made-ourselves-over/>.

Matt Adams: Time will tell as to how that exists, and it may be that actually what it does is open up different forms of imaginative space at a much more modest level, just like how we might live in 2074 in a way that is responsible.

Helen Kennedy: *Have things like climate change started to leak into your work, has it become an important thing for you to think about through your aesthetic practice?*

Matt Adams: Not really through aesthetics. I mean, the project we did in Hull was also a science fiction. And in that, we made a future world where you just never see vehicles. Everyone's on foot everywhere, and it's not explaining what happened, but you just assume vehicles are either non-functional or not required. What I am interested in is a kind of imaginary, new forms of imaginary about the future that might be things that we aspire to, or can invest in. I do think that there is a real danger in the dystopian sci-fi trope that actually what you're doing is implanting normativity, *future* normativity, which is like: 'Yes, of course there will be massive surveillance in the future. It's in every film I've ever seen!' Individually, all of those science fiction projects are to *warn* us of surveillance in the future, but there is also a counterfactual going on there...

Helen Kennedy: *Exactly, a sort of a dominant oppressive technological imagining that conditions an acceptance of these things as our very near future reality. Which I think is also really interesting around the way that AI is being talked about and why it's so important to challenge that in whatever way you can. Which is why, yeah, I guess Cat Royale is an interesting work in that regard.*

Matt Adams: Yes! Because some of those forms of dystopia are essentially just disempowering, aren't they? It's like: well, if crime is going to be exponentially growing to the point where the police have lost all control and people will shoot you in the head and the police will do nothing about it. It's like, what are you supposed to do with that vision of the future? And that is a surprisingly common vision, where the state is only an oppressive force.

From my point of view, the state is actually where we collectively come together and agree things about how we want to live. It is not an 'Other' thing. It is *us*. And that imaginary of: What is the state, what is government, what is it there for, and who is it? Neoliberalism has almost entirely excavated the metaphors for the idea that we come together as a society to set rules for how we all want to live together and to look after each other, and so yes, that is an act of imagination.

Helen Kennedy: *I think that is a great place to end Matt, with that counter image that holds open the space for that act of imagination. Thank you so much for your time and we all look forward to what happens next.*

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Biographies

Matt Adams co-founded Blast Theory in 1991. The group makes interactive art to explore social and political questions. Matt has curated at Tate Modern and at the ICA in London. He has lectured at Stanford University, the Royal College of Art, and the Sorbonne.

Blast Theory has shown work at the Venice Biennale, Sundance Film Festival, and Tate Britain. The group collaborates frequently with the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham and Matt has co-authored forty-five academic papers. Blast Theory has won the Golden Nica at Prix Ars Electronica, the Nam June Paik Art Center Award, and has received four BAFTA nominations.

Helen W. Kennedy is Professor of Creative and Cultural Industries at the University of Nottingham. Her research interests are feminist games culture and the wider diversification of access to creative practice; the ludification of cultural participation, innovations in experience design and the cultural evaluation of immersive experiences. Kennedy has published widely in game studies and the emergent field of live cinema, where her work focuses on the intersections between performance, play, and narrative in the experience design. She has led a number of national and international projects seeking to improve women's access to and experience within spaces of creative production – across screens, VR, and immersive technology more broadly.

