

merritt k on changing your path



March 28, 2017 - merritt k is a writer and podcaster. Her first book, *Videogames for Humans*, is an exploration of contemporary interactive fiction and was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award for Best LGBT Anthology. Her second, a collection of poetry with Niina Pollari, will be published in 2017 by TigerBee Press. She hosts the podcasts *Woodland Secrets* and *dadfeelings*, and can be found on Twitter at [@merrittk](#).

As told to Amy Rose Spiegel, 2591 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Writing](#), [Technology](#), [Independence](#), [Collaboration](#), [Politics](#).

You've built and designed games with many different people and worked with other writers on the book *3 Conversations* and *Videogames for Humans*. You're also a poetry editor at *Ignota Magazine*. How do you identify a good collaboration?

Things are most interesting when you share some point of connection, but across a span of difference. You're building this bridge, right? That's evident in the Charlotte Shane chapbook [*3 Conversations*], where we're coming to a lot of similar topics from places of difference, then finding commonalities. That's been my experience in doing the podcast, too—talking to people and realizing that we have some shared cultural connections or social experiences. I don't want to be working with someone who is too much like me. I'm already enough of me for myself. I don't need another one.

Part of it is insecurity. Having someone else collaborating with you can feel a lot safer. Maybe that's self-deprecating. I get bored with myself easily. The other day, I tweeted about the chapbook [*3 Conversations*] that Charlotte and I cowrote last year. It was a quote of Charlotte's, and then like, "Hey, buy this thing because Charlotte's a genius." Then, I was like, "I guess I'm pretty smart too," but it's much easier to promote someone else's work. For certain kinds of people, promoting your work online is very difficult, which is why you get a lot of that, "Look, I did a thing." Which is the most self-deprecating, minimizing possible way of phrasing your announcement of work you did. If you looked at the people who say, "Look, I did a thing," compared to the people who don't, you would find that it's people of color, women—people for whom standing behind work on its own is harder.

I'm curious about your background in sociology. What led you to that field, and why did you leave?

When I was young, I wrote. I was in a terrible band, writing poetry, and doing visual art. I didn't see any way for that to become a thing. I got to a place where I saw artists as these people who were qualitatively different from me in some way.

There's so much pressure if you're one of the "smart ones," the "achievers": *You're going to do all these things*. Once I hit high school, I was bored and checked out, and I did really poorly. Before that, I had always done well in school, and then I fell apart. I didn't care about anything. I went to college because I felt like that's what you did. I sort of had this vague plan of, "I'm going to go to school in England."

I ended up doing the best in this sociology class, and was like, "I guess this is what I'm doing now," because the metrics that I had for knowing what I'm good at or what I care about were because I was being rewarded for it. It took me all the way to grad school before I realized I hated it and dropped out. I remember being in grad school and thinking, *How do you do art? I don't understand. I need some kind of map to do this*. You don't realize how easy it is to do until you start doing it.

What was the first creative work you were introduced to, and that you made, when you were beginning again?

I picked up this book that was about making games as a creative practice, Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, and I was really into that idea. It catalyzed my thinking—it was something I could do and a medium I knew something about. I started playing around and finding people doing similar work. I got a positive response to a piece I did in that capacity pretty early—this interactive game, *LIM*, about social dynamics, in an abstracted way. The whole thing was made up of squares of little cubes. It was very rudimentary. People were able to read all kinds of things into it about grace and ability. It got picked up in a way that the long-form academic writing that I was doing didn't. It was the same time as my master's thesis got rejected for publication. It was like, I could keep putting more time and energy into this thing that people don't seem to be interested in, or I could do this other thing that I like and that people love me for. It was very easy to pick the latter.

So much of the work that gets produced in academia gets locked up in these closed journals. Their citation rate is extremely low, or nonexistent. It's produced for professional standing and is only discussed between a small subset of people. On the other hand, I saw this thing of producing work that could be disseminated easily online, and realized, I like this a lot better. I like being in conversation with people much more than being a solitary academic.

Ignota Magazine publishes work from queer and trans artists and writers and links how these works and people fit into a broader historical context. What brought about that project?

Daniel Shannon, Ryka Aoki, and I are raising this child. We started from wanting to create a media project that pushes work by and for people on the margins of publishing. There are all these outlets that are starting to make space for more voices. Those voices deserve their own outlets that are taken seriously.

I'll see literary journals or magazines be like, "We're having a queer issue." This is a huge pet peeve of mine, because, inevitably, the editor is like, "What's queer? I don't know—is it sky? Is it a bear? Who knows? No one knows! It's anything, it's everything, it's nothing." If you were doing an issue on boats, we could all agree what a boat is. We could all agree that a barn is not a boat, so you better send us some fucking poetry about boats, or it better be written by a boat. As soon as it gets to sexual or gender difference, everyone is like, "It could be anything." When something is everything or anything, it becomes meaningless. James Franco is submitting poetry to your queer poetry journal? I will not be having any of that.

I see brilliant people doing work and being underpaid or not getting the recognition they deserve. I want to pay all these beautiful, amazing, talented people. I want to put their work in something people can look at and be like, "That's a real literary journal. It's not a zine. It's not a chapbook." Not that those things aren't important, but when you have an ISBN, or when you have a journal, it looks more real to people who care about those things. Fuck those people, but those people control a lot of money and resources. Showing that you have some sense of legitimacy matters, and I don't think is that hard to create.

You're a poetry editor at Ignota. Do you feel like poetry is an essential part of all the forms your work takes, as in your hypertextual games?

A lot of the work that I was doing, it was like, "a game," but it was a poem. I was tricking people into eating their vegetables by telling them it was covered in chocolate. Then I realized: No, I can just do the thing, and it's okay if not as many people see it because it's not on the front page of a video game site.

A lot of the game stuff I was doing was Text Tool, and interactive in the loosest sense of seeing hypertext to create a rhythm. I like having connections between passages where I could control the speed at which people would move through. It was a fruitful, creative time for me, and it still influences the stuff that I do.

I'm less interested in doing that kind of work now than I am in doing more traditional work that can be published. I have a poetry collection coming out with Niina Polari for Tiger Bee Press. Aside from that, I haven't actually had much time to do writing, which I keep chastising myself for. I keep thinking, "You should be writing for different places, getting your name out there, doing all this stuff." This is probably a problem that's generalized to every freelancer in capitalism. This feeling of you should be doing more. It's like you're letting down your potential if you're not doing enough.

You describe yourself as a “lapsed game designer.” A lot of your older games aren’t available online anymore. What was the importance of making that shift away from that form and of making your archive of games less public?

I was following the same pattern that I had for the rest of my life. I got into games when I got praise for doing them. I made the decision to stop. In terms of killing a lot of the archive, a lot of it felt personal in a way that I was uncomfortable with. I used to be freer with the things I shared with the internet [until] around 2014, when organized hate campaigns—stuff like Gamergate—got taken to a new level. Not that those kinds of things didn’t happen before, but being personal online was a much more dangerous proposition after that for a lot of people.

How does writing from a different place, of privacy or self-shielding, after engaging with the alternative affect your work?

There are a lot of things that I’m more careful about talking about now, that I’ll talk about in certain spaces because I’m reasonably confident that they’re not going to circulate as widely. In the chapbook with Charlotte, I talked about stuff that I don’t talk about online because I knew that someone couldn’t share the link or screencap it. My work has become less personal in that sense, but it’s become more personal in a deeper, less superficial sense.

How do you structure your priorities? Like, “Okay, this is what I want to work on right now, and this other thing can wait a little bit.”

Working on *Ignota* is actively costing us money. I do make some money from doing podcasts. That is a limitation on me, of, *I have to at least put this much time into recording episodes of the show, writing up notes, finding guests, doing all this work.* I want to dedicate time to other pursuits. It’s tough, right?

I’ve been living below the poverty line for most of my life. That is always there. It’s always looming. Money is harder and harder to ignore, the less you have of it. I don’t have the luxury of thinking about all these things that I would like to do because I need to figure out ways I can afford to do this magazine that is important to me. I need the money to pay contributors and web servers.

Another thing I learned from my time in games is that putting your whole life into something and making that the way that you make a living—as well as the way that you express yourself—can be a disaster. For a long time, I thought that was the dream. I don’t believe that anymore. I love that people support my work, but I would rather find other ways of making money.

I haven’t and I won’t write think pieces. I have found other ways of making an income in the past, and I will likely do so again, because having that freedom to not have to compromise is important. I don’t know that I want to talk too much about that—but when male artists or writers don’t want to talk about how they make money, it’s often because their daddy is paying for it. When women don’t, with exceptions, it’s because they’re doing things that society or the law wouldn’t approve of. I don’t think it subtracts from a person’s creative output. Having two separate modes of the work that you’re doing can be freeing.

You say it’s surprisingly not that difficult to start your own magazine or startup. Can you tell me about the moments within creating *Ignota* where you were like, “Oh, this is actually eminently possible! This is not the total rigamarole I thought it would be.”

People have the sense sometimes that you need permission or you need a lot of money to start something like this. You don’t. This isn’t in any of our backgrounds. We don’t have seed money yet. We’re doing the startup route: The magazine is one experiment. We hope it goes well, but if it doesn’t, we have other things that we’re going to do. The whole startup idea is interesting. I assumed it was a lot more rigorous. It turns out that pitches to people with money are about telling me a story that they like—it’s more about presentation than it is about having deep analytics and research. Of all of the things I didn’t get from academia, the most useful one I did was knowing how to navigate academic, business, and intellectual spaces by putting on an air of being confident and refined. I was the first person in my family to go to college, but over a few years, I picked up all of the gestures that signaled you belong there.

What are your ambitions for the work you're doing now, as an individual artist and as a part of a larger organization and community?

I would love for *Ignota* to become an ongoing project that lets me spotlight other people's work. I love being an editor. Thinking about how to frame others' work and situate it in these broader conversations, I always find satisfying. It also means I get to talk to people. I am a very social person. I never used to think of myself as one. In my childhood, driving down the main street in town with my dad, he would get stopped every block and have a conversation. I would be like, "Dad, I want to get home," but that's who I've become. Hence, the podcast, and, hence, the editorial work; those are both things where I get to ask people questions. It's not as much about me. I am increasingly uncomfortable with that idea of the solitary artist. Just like I was uncomfortable with the idea of the solitary academic.

I am invested in this idea of a queer voice. I want work that speaks to or invokes these histories of queerness and isn't a pop cultural analysis. It isn't like, "Here's why the new Marvel movie is good or bad at queer inclusion." I want stuff that doesn't just deconstruct, but that builds up something that other people can then build on or inhabit. I want to help build those foundations. If we want to move beyond the special issues of journals and magazines and collections that are dedicated to [queerness], then we have to focus on cultivating a voice—and cultivating voices in conversation with one another.

merritt k recommends:

Peep Show

Kay Ryan's collection *The Best of It*

Wearing sunscreen every single day

Ladykiller in a Bind

The Hall of Ocean Life at the American Museum of Natural History

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Vocation

Writer, Poet, Podcaster, Lapsed Game Designer

Fact

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