

HOLDING THE KEYS TO FAILURE

an interview with Petros Lales

by Natasha Chuk

I sat down with artist-provocateur Petros Lales to discuss his work as it relates to life simulation games, dispensing with unnecessary moral codes, and failure as a fruitful creative technique.

Our interview was edited and condensed for clarity.

**“As long as life’s meaning is fluid,
failure is the fire that keeps
transformation and evolution burning.”**



NC: Who or what inspires you as an artist?

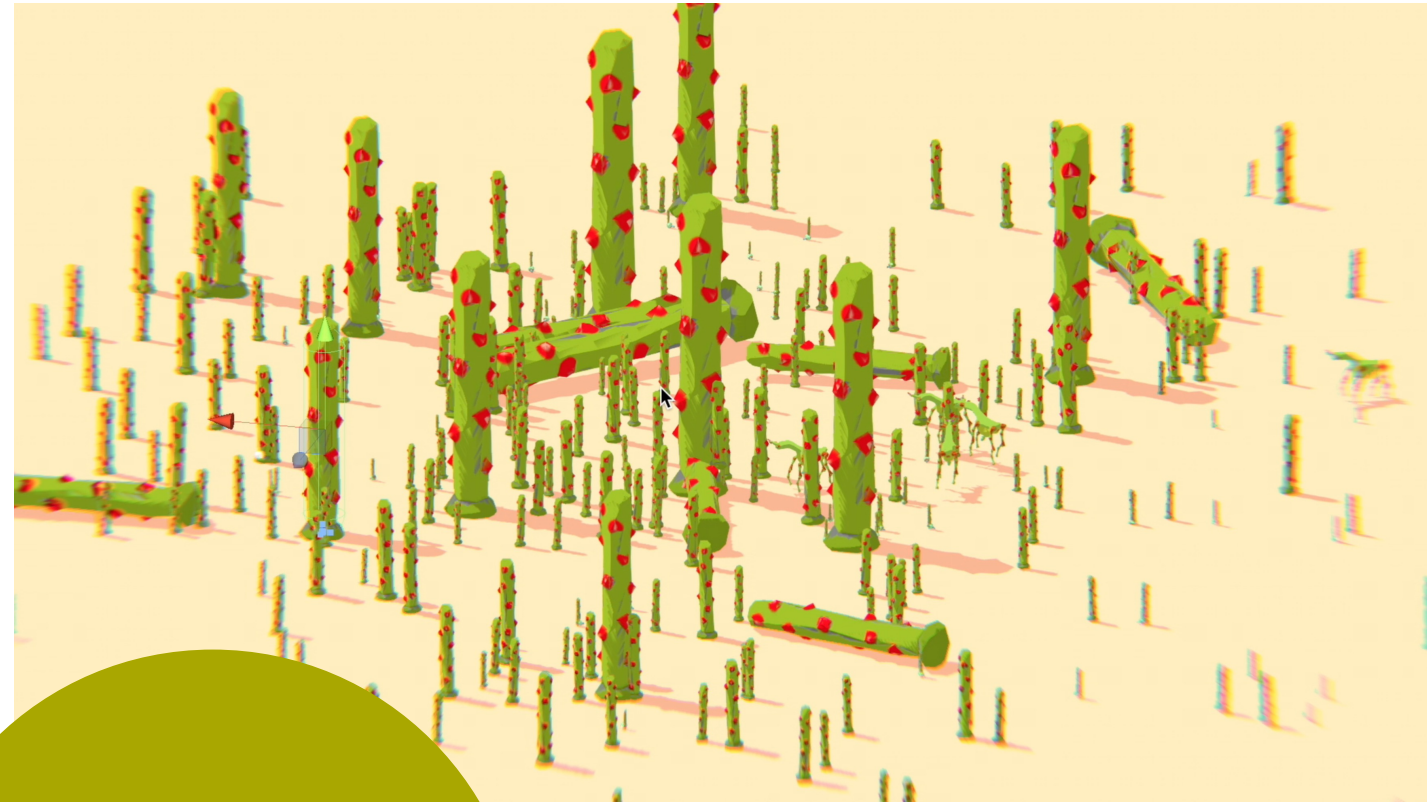
PL: My main source of inspiration is hearing what my body has to say inside the constructed realities I live in. In the majority of my works, I feel I am replying to my environment. Whether this environment is my own body, my surroundings — including inanimate and animate beings — other artists, politics, society or even the art world.

NC: How would you describe your work *To Be is to Get Cut* (2019), and what is the role of simulation¹ in this work?

PL: *To Be is to Get Cut* is an installation consisting of a digital world called PikiPikiland, the viewer and a container with the guts of the world transformed into a physical form. The PikiPikiland is experienced through a computer, four screens, a keyboard, and a mouse. In contrast to a VR or an XR experience, it denies the integration into the dimensions of the human's physical world as it visually remains two-dimensional. I made this decision so that I can isolate the viewer and highlight the nature of PikiPikiland. At the same time, the viewer can investigate PikiPikiland's world through mechanical/digital interaction and language.

One of the main goals of this piece is to redefine what a simulation is. What we as humans are perceiving as real or universal is most of the time an act. Our freedom is measured by our responsibility of changing this act towards a more vital one. Our character, our social interactions, our communities or our tastes. In the world of the Piki Pikis, an act is PikiPikiland's vital behavior. A different act would mean a different PikiPikiland. A less fair or considerate act, and the PikiPikiland would be leading to its malfunction with acceleration.

Of course, there are some of social and political issues the work is raising and brings to the surface, away from the human microcosm.



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¹ Simulations range in definition and possibilities. Computer simulations use mathematical models (or descriptions) of a system, real or imagined, to perform its approximate behavior in the form of a computer program. This quality of imitation alone lends itself to a game-like quality. British mathematician John Horton Conway's *Game of Life* (1970) perfectly articulates this as a self-contained, automated, zero-player computer game that evolves without input. “Players” need only initiate the program, and then the simulation of life in the form of digital cells takes over, endlessly.

NC: There are a number of commercial life simulation games — The Sims, Second Life, Animal Crossing — that rely on specific ways of resembling real-life experiences. What aspects of life simulation interest you with this work?

PL: In To Be is to Get Cut I found myself interested in the aspects of sustaining life within a physically delimited environment. Creating the conceptual structures that could keep life recycling itself while experiencing an adventure in the process. The ideas of individualism, personality and body interactions were ascendent throughout the development of the work. Beyond creating the mechanics that allow different creatures to co-exist, I was also interested in the visual expressions and the narratives they create: jealousy, pride, hate, love, companionship and any other fundamental lively expressions. The mathematical and linguistic infrastructures I was creating were expressing themselves as legends, villains, friends, lovers, pests, and nobodies.

NC: Your work is highly conceptual. How would you characterize the player's goals when interacting with this work? What is it designed to get them to do, and what do you hope to communicate through the overall experience?

PL: I want each viewer to undergo a different experience and take away from the piece questions and realizations rather than feed them answers or propaganda. For this reason, the installation is designed to be partially inaccessible to those who are not willing to spend a few minutes with it. The screens are at standing height, but the interaction controls along with the container that reveals the language of the piece are on the floor. The player can observe from a distance or take a dive into PikiPikiland by interacting with the piece or by exploring the content of the container.

Through the interaction the viewer can interfere with the Piki Pikis, thus revealing their character mechanics and needs. They can manipulate their identities by changing their food habits, creating barriers that restrict their motion in space, killing their loved ones or pinning them in one location so that other Piki Pikis can feed on them. Investigating the pages included inside the container is another kind of interaction. It allows you to understand PikiPikiland by not interacting directly with it. It has the nature of an herbarium with a double bottom that reveals all the codes — language that sets PikiPikiland in motion. That allows the viewer to recreate this lively and sexually-fluid world in

their heads. Similar to the way an astronaut would create their flight to the moon without needing to ever commit to that journey.

NC: Where do you stand regarding the division between creating playfulness and situated play?² How might they work together?

PL: The only real game, in my opinion, is the process of creating a video game. Because you have the chance to go through all the structures of your game, even when those are not included in the final piece. A video game can one day stop being that playful to a user. But the creation of games is a realm where there are no limits as to what limits you can introduce. At the same time, limiting gameplay under specific rules and actions is a tool for constructing directive narratives. From a storyline to ideas or common law, morality, cultural identification, etc. Those narratives could be either creative or speculative. On any occasion playfulness determines the value of a process.

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² Although it's a vague buzzword used in games studies, situated play is an important aspect of design and end user experience. “In computer game play the different forms of situatedness are manifest in player's everyday playing activities, i.e., game play is a culturally evolved system of activity in which actions are affected and guided by social and cultural norms. These cultural and social norms are inherent both in games themselves, which constitute a kind of cultural artefact, and in the player's interaction with them; these interactions are influenced by many different aspects, including players' backgrounds, the use of different kinds of tools, their interactions with other players and the attendance of, e.g., computer game events.” (<http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07311.31085.pdf>: accessed May 21, 2021.).

NC: The degree to which we experience the effects of artificial intelligence largely depends on how it is programmed to work. In other words, we fail to recognize many computational activities as being artificially intelligent unless they impress us in some way. Real-time generation, for example, triggers our awareness of intelligence in video games because the response time feels emergent and unique, which resembles how humans process information. How do you weave artificial intelligence into your work?

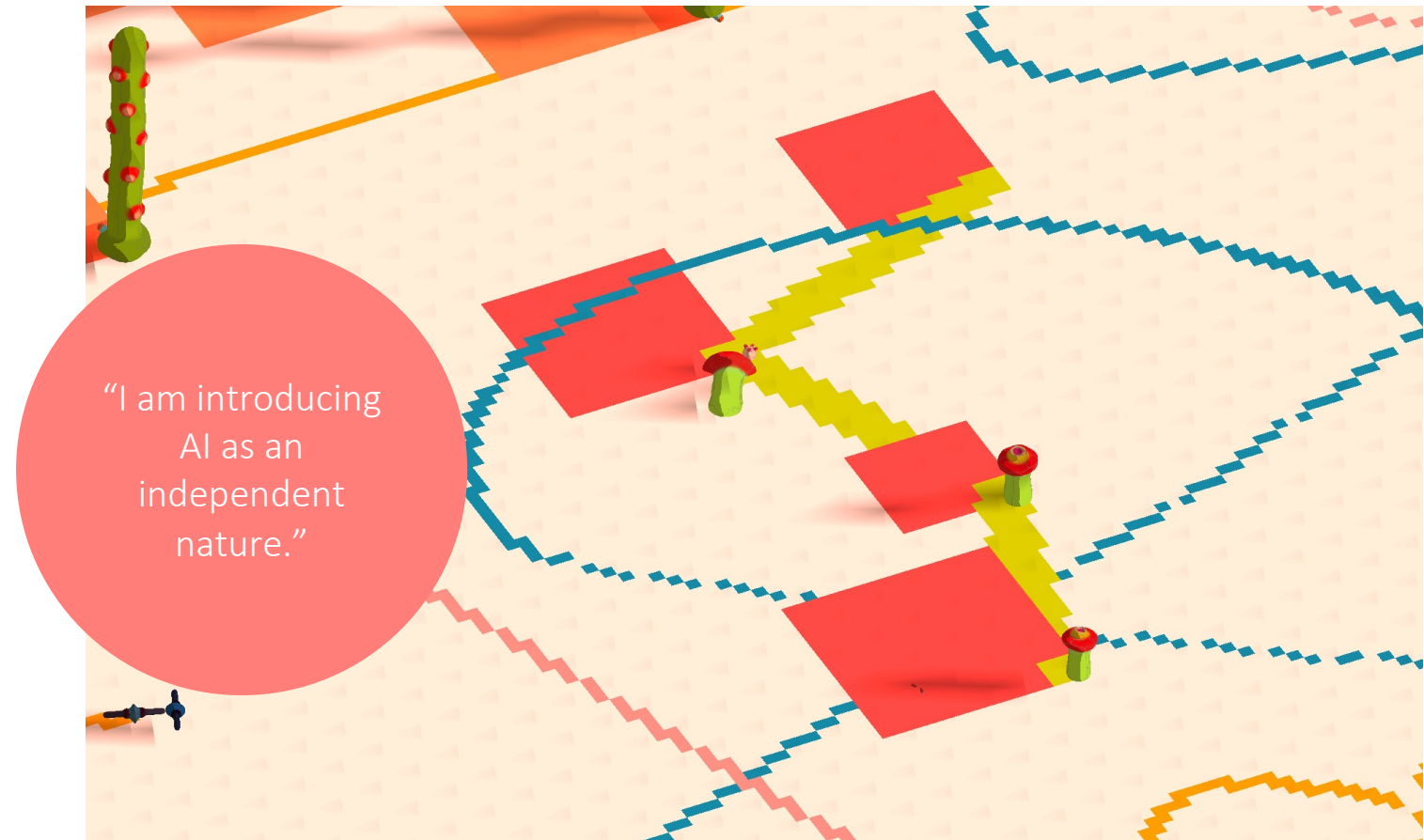
PL: Some people can't avoid humanizing other entities. There is a broad notion that AI thinks, communicates or even looks like humans. I personally can't imagine anything more demeaning towards a living being. Even humans are not supposed to look like humans. There is no clue what an independent AI would choose to have as a body, language or identity. Humans can only create its sparkles. Beyond that, AI is responsible for making AI. Humans can only limit the notion they have for "it" just to satisfy their own needs and beliefs.

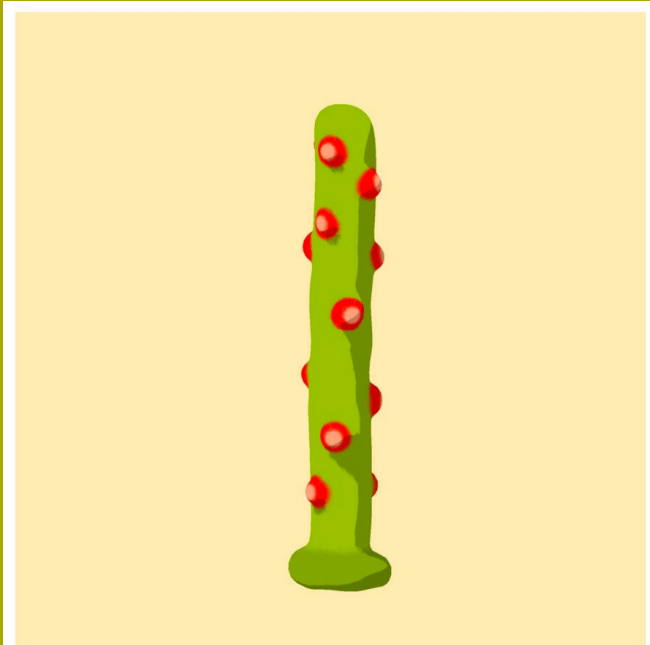
Another broad notion regarding AI is that it doesn't exist yet. In reality, every mechanical-digital formation and its functions is an evolution from its previous one. Therefore, AI is something that has been developing next to us and also without us from the beginning of time. Real-time interactions with a mechanical system allow us to visualize and construct the idea of a character in our heads. Although, inanimate objects also have the ability to communicate their characters through their physical, aesthetic and functional form. Even if they may not get recognized for it until a stimulus reveals their response. The idea that AI needs humans to exist is struggling against the reality that humans need AI to exist.

In my piece I am introducing AI as an independent nature. It is, however, still limited to human narratives for provoking specific human-based socio-political questions. Many of the viewers have been calling me the God of PikiPikiland or the Father of the Piki Pikis. That reveals human notions about authority and dependence. In reality I am just Piki Pikis' friend. Their physical expression was given to me by the power of the hardware I was using. There is not even one authoritarian action towards the computer. A single misspelling and the Piki Pikis would stop reacting with me. Throughout the process of the development, I laughed with their joy (emotionality), cried with their sadness (immobility), wept with their death (end of their story), and got excited with their birth (new narratives).

PikiPikiland does not have a memory system for each being. That would have allowed the PikiPikiland to develop a more conscious representation of itself. This limitation though isn't restricting the

recognition of AI through all its other expressions, which are first and foremost function; and secondly, the use of randomness for the development of an individual story. The ability to make a choice inside one's environment; the need to die in order to sustain life; and the search for pleasure in order to continue a conversation. When a Longerstick is in love, it will look for a partner. If in the meantime it must eat, it will continue loving, but it will turn towards some food. Its companion will either follow it or take a break. After their basic needs are satisfied, they will continue making love or become attracted to other Longersticks or even Boobydicks. Their intelligence is spicing up their narrative. Their freedom of motion is revealing their needs, and thus their character.

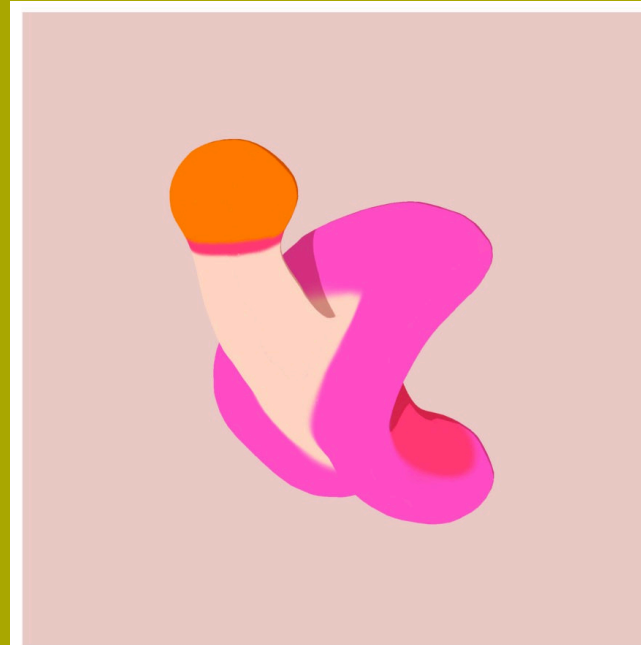




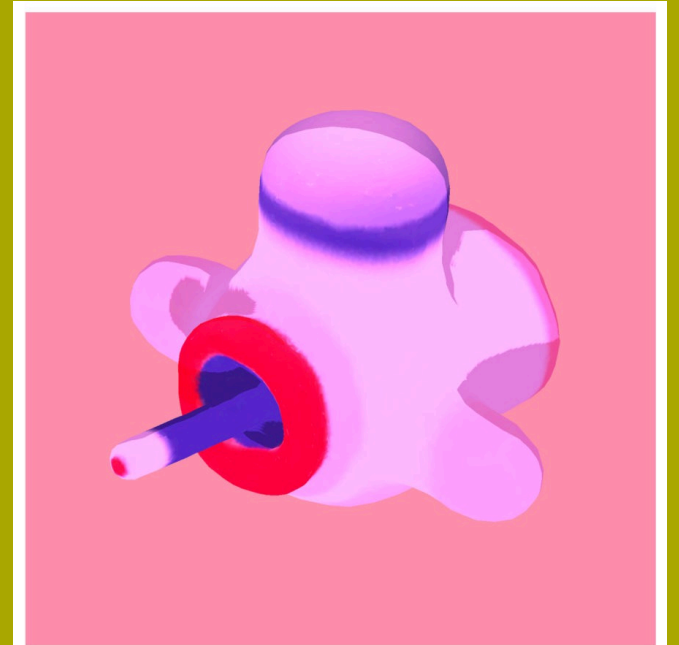
"BOOBYDICK"



"DICKBUTT"



"EARNOSE"



"FINGERNOSE"

NC: I think failure is an interesting aspect of all video games, and really anything involving software, as even a delete button or a backspace key presumes failure or the need for revision. When I think of *To Be is to Get Cut*, it seems that the object of failure must have been on your mind. Is that something you hoped to integrate into the game or something you think about more broadly?³

PL: Life is the period of time when something remains under a specific form, and death is when this form needs to change. Failure is probably the most essential aspect of a living being. It is what gives value to choices, what supports fearlessness, empathy, understanding and diversity. It is a great advocate for character. This is why duty is an enemy to life. Because you cannot fail while you are in duty mode. As long as life's meaning is fluid, failure is the fire that keeps transformation and evolution burning.

In *To Be is to Get Cut*, failure is everywhere. From the title to every Piki Piki's function, decision, action, need and growth period. Another understanding of failure could be the characterization of it as a solvent. During the conceptual and physical development of the piece, there were a lot of elements that failed. From expectations to possibilities, failure developed the piece further than any predetermined decision or perception would have ever taken me. I didn't create an artwork that would suit me. I made myself while creating it.

NC: There is an element of care and precision that goes into naming things. I'm curious about how you selected the creatures' names and why naming them was important to you.⁴

PL: Naming the Piki Piki⁵ was a joyful process intended to fight against any form of idealization. Many people from my environment reacted negatively against the names of the Piki Piki's mainly because the names are suggesting that being of an uppermost nature is something primal and not something you need to compromise yourself to access. Piki Piki's names make clear that there is nothing Godlike or academic-like in enjoying life: they are there to defy the idea that morality is about "good behavior". If names are made to identify a being before we have the experience to meet it in person, then this is also part of the Piki Piki's names. Dickbutt, Longerstick, Earnose, Innerpick, and Bootyguard are revealing the creature's nature, functions, and form. Even if there is no direct connection between a name and something happening in PikiPikiland, they are giving the viewer the chance to create narratives on their own. Narratives that cannot exclude sex, physical pleasure, needs, desires, wit and playfulness.

NC: What were some of the impressions of this work by people who experienced it? Were there any surprises?

People were very excited to see and explore PikiPikiland, although there were some physical constraints in the experience because one must sit on the floor. I understand that the deprivation of accessibility is an issue, but I wanted this world to exist on a different level than average human dimensions. Most of the explorers were young people and children. I enjoyed a series of conversations with most of the viewers. There was a strong element of questioning during the experience of the piece, which is always a pleasure to me. I had a powerful and meaningful experience that seems off-topic. Although, if you are a programmer, you know that no possibility can afford to be excluded. A little girl saw the whole exhibition and then sat by the door to wait for her parents. I was sitting near her, and I turned around and asked her what she liked from the exhibition. She took a minute to think, then she looked back to me and replied, "Nothing".



³ My own question is inspired by the necessity of failure in the creative process and the resemblance between Lales's work and Samuel Beckett's "Worstward Ho" (1983), both the title and sentiment, particularly: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

⁴ I'm reminded of Rebecca Solnit's politically charged book of essays, *Call Them By Their True Names* (Haymarket Books, 2018), in which she writes in the preface, "Calling things by their true names cuts through the lies that excuse, buffer, muddle, disguise, avoid, or encourage inaction, indifference, obliviousness. It's not all there is to changing the world, but it's a key step."

⁵ Other Piki Piki's include Uppernostril, Eyenose, Butternose, Armpitboob, Noseforelock, Doubledick, Dickynose, Bellynose, Snailup, Tittyfruity, Swordick, Titeye, and Fingerseed, all of which are archived on his website.