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1, 2, 3 Playtime

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Theta, 2022, Lawrence Lek. CGI film. *Theta* was shown in the exhibition in connection with the seminar *Worldbuilding [Art, Game Design, Cultural Heritage]* at IAC, 2023. @Lawrence Lek

Introduction to *1, 2, 3 Playtime* – a lecture and workshop series in the field of games

Hedvig Jalhed and Margot Edström

In this publication, we have collected reports and reflections related to the project *1, 2, 3 Playtime* 2023–24 to articulate what thought processes and actions emerge from artists and researchers engaged with games, play and art in this context. *1, 2, 3 Playtime* was initiated as a collaboration between Inter Arts Center (IAC) and Region Skåne. The idea for the project first took root in the fall of 2022, during discussions with Annelie Krell and Rosi Gerlach from the Cultural Department of Malmö. The main questions that emerged were: What specific knowledge and skills do artists need today to creatively operate within and critically engage with a rapidly growing digital ecosystem? What challenges is the cultural heritage sector facing in this regard? In the spring of 2023, we launched a call for participation in an exploratory lecture and workshop series focusing on the field of games.

Twelve participants, coming from various artistic disciplines, such as performing arts and visual arts, as well as from the cultural heritage sector, were invited. The project offered tools to explore and develop game-based art as form, pedagogy and critical reflection. Since games constitute a multidisciplinary field this was reflected in the workshop series by exploring various methods and tools within game design in both digital and physical environments. Throughout the project, the artists transformed and developed aspects of their own practices into different game-based formats. The participants also collaborated in three groups, where their different skills and shared questions cross-pollinated the development of joint game projects. These, as well as individual works by the participants, were exhibited during *Malmö Gallery Weekend 2024* at IAC. In parallel with the workshop series, open lectures were offered in the field of gaming, such as AI, robotics and cognitive science.

These lectures engaged not only the workshop participants, but also researchers and students from the university and representatives from the game industry and other stakeholders interested in the topics. As a complementary occasion for discussions about specifically immersive aspects of games and art, IAC also organised *Immersive Days #3* with the theme 'Agents in Play' in November 2023 in collaboration with the University of Skövde.

The project *1, 2, 3 Playtime* focused on three overarching themes: Art through games and gamified art experiences / Robot relationships and anthropomorphism in art / Worldbuilding and potentials within the realm of digital art.

Gameplay and art?

Other alternatives to the chosen term 'game-based art' could have included 'Ludic Art' or 'Game Art'. Those are related but different concepts. Ludic Art highlights playfulness, improvisation and interactive experiences. It can include a wide range of forms and media, not limited to digital games, and may focus on play for its own sake. Game Art refers more specifically to art that directly draws from video game culture, mechanics, aesthetics and technology. It is rooted in the medium of digital games and often utilises their elements, such as game engines, 3D modelling or pixel art. This may result in an overly narrow interpretation focusing on the visual and aural aesthetics, at least that was our experience in early conversations with actors from the game industry. For many contemporary visual artists working with digital games, it is the very structures and technologies of these that are explored and sometimes exploited. Sophia Ioannou Gjerding used for example the videogame device known as 'cutscenes' in *Monomyth / I Do Not* (2024). These non-playable sequences open up for an exploration of storytelling in both cinematic and game space. Similarly, Hillevi Högström challenged the core function of simulations in computer games with her *A Hand in the Game – Termination* (2017), presenting a surreal and futuristic reflection on ecological maintenance in *SimPark* and our perception of nature as something controllable and subject to management.¹

The broader term 'game-based art' aligned more closely with the multidisciplinary ambitions of *1, 2, 3 Playtime*. Through our discussions and workshops, we have examined how playfulness can foster varying degrees of engagement, enabling participants to oscillate between immersive experiences and

¹ *A Hand in the Game*, Hillevi Högström. *1, 2, 3 Playtime: Seminar on Worldbuilding [Art, Game Design, Cultural Heritage]* (7 March 2024). <https://www.iac.lu.se/video-documentation-1-2-3-playtime>

critical reflections. Artist Francis Patrick Brady's work, emphasising play as a means of reshaping agency, has greatly influenced the programme's design. For this publication, he and Emma Bexell discuss game strategies and socially engaged practices, drawing from their distinct artistic fields and practices – particularly Bexell's Lego performance, *Bygga fri scenkonst i Lego* (2024).

The concept of agency in play is linked to the 'Magic Circle'. This traditional concept is challenged in Inês A. Sérgio's essay that proposes biophysical membranes as a more fruitful metaphor to embrace the continuous, adaptive exchanges between digital games and real-life contexts. How, then, does player agency shift when the participant is also a 'performer' within an immersive, interactive installation that promises freedom and autonomy but subtly nudges participants toward potentially questionable ethical choices? Artist Jon Nicklas Lundberg's *Bodies Commodities Playtime! Edition* (2024) raises questions about how habituation might reshape ethical boundaries within the structured confines of a VR (virtual reality) and soundscape environment. In *Med vind i håret* (*With the Wind in Our Hair*) (2024), the focus turns to site-specificity in mixed-reality experiences. How can an artwork designed for a large biosphere adapt to convey a sense of the 'local' through the mobile devices of participants? Artist and researcher Marika Hedemyr's work uses a choreographic score and digital material as a primary protocol to connect people to the unique qualities of a landscape and its inhabitants. A somewhat troubled player agency is instead experienced in artist and composer Fredrik Degrér's *Accelerated Hyperstition Inc. The Musical* (2024) where traditional goals and obstacles are removed, offering a 'perfect' but ultimately unsatisfying loop through auto-tuned karaoke. This setup mirrors the paradox of wish fulfilment in games: even when completion is achieved, desire remains.

Games and human robot interactions?

In the context of game-based art, how does cognition – whether human, animal, or artificial – shape the ways participants interact with systems that mirror or challenge real-world experiences? To learn more about humanoid robots and ongoing cognitive research we invited Birger Johansson, Director of the Cognitive Robotics Lab at Lund University and Samantha Stedtler, PhD student in Cognitive Science, to present their work on Epi, a humanoid robot developed at Lund University Cognitive Science (LUCS). Stedtler discussed factors like timing, speech and genderedness, shedding light on how these elements influence perceptions of social agency, trust and the

attribution of blame in human-robot interactions. Inspired by these insights and with Epi available for further experimentation Amy Boulton, Jon Nicklas Lundberg and art historian Inês A. Sério, designed a game-based performance where Epi served as a supportive companion, helping participants confront stage fright.

Games as worldbuilding

In Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967), the city was portrayed as a real-world interface to be played with or navigated within in a very restricted way. The 'game-like' human interactions in the film resonate today when algorithms and digital platforms seem to gamify everything from social interactions and professional achievements to the mediation of cultural heritage². During the seminar on Worldbuilding [Art, Game Design, Cultural Heritage], Jussi Parikka pointed to Blackshark.AI as one of the companies that offers photo-realistic replicas of the Earth's surface, marketed as 'ready for gaming'. Tati's imagination of the city as a game world can now be said to have expanded to include the planet itself, in all its various scales. As Parikka underlined, there are indeed not-so-fun reasons for examining games and game engines more closely. The same seminar featured Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's interactive performance *I can't play with you anymore* (2023). As the narrative unfolded, it not only captivated us but also confronted us with difficult moral choices. This piece called for in-depth discussions about black trans experience and strategies for ethically archiving lived experiences. Brathwaite-Shirley's art aims to show how games can open up room for those whose histories have been neglected.

How, then, can museums, as sites of both remembrance and repression, maintain a relationship with historical truth? Which element should be preserved and what should be disposed of? And, how is cultural heritage shaped by the complex relationship between the gaming industry and museums? To gain further perspectives on these questions, we invited Ylva Grufstedt, historian and game scholar at Malmö University, for a conversation with Marika Hedemyr and Sophia Ioannou Gjerding about their card game *What to Keep* (2024).

Another kind of worldbuilding was created in Anastasiya Loyko's utopian twist on traditional game logic where she instead offers the player endless

2 Marques, Célio Gonçalo, João Paulo Pedro, and Inês Araújo. 2023. 'A Systematic Literature Review of Gamification in/for Cultural Heritage: Leveling up, Going Beyond.' *Heritage* 6, no. 8: 5935–5951. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage6080312>.

opportunities to stay alive. No need for instructions and we can trust the game to keep its contract. A broken unwritten contract is instead at the core of Anabela Veloso's video installation *três bichos-da-traça* (2024) and card game *ponto sem nó* (2024). Here the viewer or player steps into the strained dynamics of a family knitwear business, navigating betrayal, hidden strategies and financial loss.

Worldbuilding in computer games relies heavily on procedural content generation and AI is an increasingly strong factor in game development. For this publication, we invited researcher Gabriele de Seta and artist Magnhild Øen Nordahl to share their insights on the evolving relationship between technology, art and material production, drawn from their 2023 three-day event, the 'Replicator Workshop' in Bergen, Norway. This speculative and experimental workshop was later condensed into the *1, 2, 3 Playtime* programme, where de Seta introduced a plethora of 'handy' AI tools. A rigorous examination of these uncovered algorithmic biases and constraints, and these methods of 'shaking the black box' influenced several artistic projects such as Freja Andersson's audiovisual installation *Playing the AI: Blurring Reality and Fiction in War Memorials* (2024). This project is based on a regulated yet risky dialogue with generative AI's power to shape memory and history, enacting the tensions between authenticity and fiction, as well as past and present. Amy Boulton's *My Companion* (2024) examines AI tools like Replika, which offer customisable virtual relationships. By engaging with these 'companions', Boulton highlights the boundaries between digital interaction and genuine intimacy, emphasising both the creative potential and the inherent limitations of AI in fulfilling human emotional needs.

The engagement from both applicants and audiences, as well as from societal and industrial sectors, in connection with *1, 2, 3 Playtime*, underscores the relevance of the project and its importance for the further development of pathways and settings for game-based art both within and outside the university. There is an abundance of ideas and innovative projects from experienced artists eager to develop their game-based thinking and applications. Additionally, there is significant interest in game-based art within the cultural heritage sector, along with a willingness to explore the possibilities offered by the structures and technologies underpinning the concept. Furthermore, the project has highlighted how the presence of games in everyday life gives rise to critical discussions and a need to address these issues through various means.

We would like to extend our gratitude to the artists, lecturers and workshop leaders who, although not mentioned here, contributed greatly to the programme:

Lissa Holloway-Attaway / Monika Czyżyk / Ali Eslami / Maren Dagny Juell / José Maria Font Fernandez / Thom Kiraly / Lars Kristensen / Nea Landin / Lawrence Lek / Lundahl & Seidl / Rebecca Rouse / Bella Rune / Omi-peah Ryding / Bobbi A Sand / Pål Schakonat / Halla Steinunn Stefánsdóttir / Fredrik Trella / Anders Visti / Gabriel Widing



Lectures by Lissa Holloway-Attaway (University of Skövde) and Iranian artist Ali Eslami during *Immersive Days* #3. Find video documentations at: <https://www.iac.lu.se/immersive-days-3-agents-play>



Installation view from *Malmö Gallery Weekend 2024* at IAC. Installations by Anabela Veloso, Inês A. Sérgio and Anastasiya Loyko.



Workshop participants gathering at Aldea (top); 3D model by Andreas Zißler (bottom). Bergen Centre for Electronic Arts (BEK). Bergen, Norway, 2023.