Trust in play

field guide to urban game design

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Creating Tomorrow

Trust in Play

FIELD

GUIDE

DESIGN

TO

GAME

URBAN

ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Welcome to the Field Guide to Urban Game Design! This is a practical guide about the design process for ideating and producing playful interventions in public spaces. Our goal is to provide the first elements of a "design vocabulary" that can be shared between the many professionals that take part in designing an urban game. We share some insights and examples from our own experiences, notably those gained while organising the Amsterdam branch of the Trust in Play European School for Urban Game Design. We hope that sharing these will make it easier for other interdisciplinary groups of designers to kickstart their own work in this newly emerging field.

URBAN GAMES

Since the 1980s, "games" and "video games" have been almost synonymous, thanks to the success of personal computers and video game consoles. These first waves of single-player digital games, together with tighter regulations on public spaces, moved play partially away from courtyards, sidewalks, and playgrounds to screens and couches.

However, thanks to mobile technologies as well as to a different perspective on public life and urban spaces, this tendency seems to be reversing. The number of games and other playful interventions set in public areas is growing rapidly, with initiatives like Playable Cities in Bristol (UK), and festivals such as Come Out and Play in New York, Counterplay in Aarhus (Denmark), and Now Play This in London.

What we have witnessed at these events is that, over the past decade, a small but vibrant international scene of game designers has become fascinated with working in public urban spaces, producing experimental projects & formats, from festivals and events to installations and mobile apps. This scene consists of artists, tech enthusiasts, artistic performers, game designers and curators of playful art, working in public space, often with an interest to address social issues.

Now, urban games are not a completely new phenomenon. Already half a century ago, various movements introduced forms of urban play. In Paris, the Situationists saw playful explorations of the city as an antidote to the commercialization of public space. In the US, the New Urban Games movement, introduced games as a way for people to start collaborating rather than competing, as a way to build up new social relations.

And, indeed, playfulness can be a very powerful tool for choreographing complex activities in public spaces while keeping them engaging and (apparently) lighthearted. Strange and unexpected scenes can be explained as "it's just a game," and proposing to try "just for fun" can convince reluctant passersby to let go and attempt something different. It is no surprise that educators, policymakers, public officials, and researchers are turning to urban games as tools to motivate people, engage them in civic activities, and foster participation.

At the same time, urban game design is far from an established discipline in the fields of art, design or urban planning. In the workshops and events we have organized in the past years, we have seen practitioners from various backgrounds come together and start collaborating. Yet, we also found that this can be somewhat difficult. Different disciplines speak different languages, use different methods, and have different ideas about the goals or impact they wish to create.

With this field guide we hope to make a modest contribution to the emergence of this new discipline, profession, or form of art by introducing a shared vocabulary and a number of approaches for urban game design we have witnessed in the past years.

TRUST IN PLAY

Trust in Play (TiP), the European School of Urban Game Design, is a community of practitioners, researchers, and game artists exploring the use of playfulness in public spaces. Since 2018, TiP helps designers to understand better the creative processes for creating, producing, and presenting games in urban contexts. Just like the practice of urban game design, also the TiP network is transdisciplinary: its organizers, trainees, and stakeholders are game designers, architects, urban planners, cultural agents, and artists.

In 2018-2019 the TiP school offered a training programme in three branches: one in Amsterdam, one in Athens and a Nomadic branch for trainees in other European cities. Each branch organized a series of workshops and events, guiding practitioners through the design and production process of one or more urban games. TiP kicked off with a 5-day intensive training event in Athens, which included master classes on key issues related to methodology, artistic and community approaches, game design and development tools.

Photography © Technopolis City of Athens 2019 - Studio Kominis

DESIGNING URBAN GAMES

Designing games is fun but not easy. Those with no prior game-making experience might have a look at:

• Anthropy, A., & Clark, N. (2014). A Game Design Vocabulary. Addison-Wesley.

• Fullerton, T. (2018). Game Design Workshop. A K Peters.

• Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2003). Rules of play. MIT Press.

Want to know more about urban games specifically?

• Montola, M., Stenros, J., & Waern, A. (2009). Pervasive Games: Theory and Design. CRC Press.

• Also, http://ludocity.org and https://www.deepfun.com/funny-games/ are great places to start looking for inspiration.

INTERDISCIPLINARY GAME DESIGN

Trust in Play explored the ways in which urban games could contribute to establish trust relations between citizens by choreographing playful experiences in urban public spaces.

This means that the game concepts developed tried to connect their players meaningfully with public spaces, their inhabitants, and the complex activities happening there.

This makes urban game design a complicated affair, with different expertises coming together: game makers create compelling challenges and playful situations, but urban planners, architects, policymakers, sociologists, and ethnographers are trained to decode social life in cities. How to harmonize the design processes of these different professionals? How to make sure that the whole interdisciplinary team is aligned and that no miscommunications occur? In the following pages, we outline a unified design process.
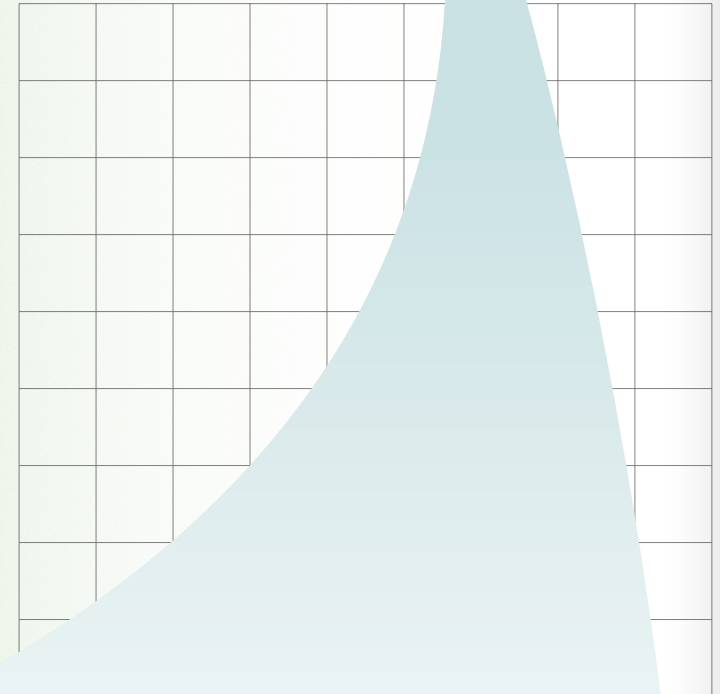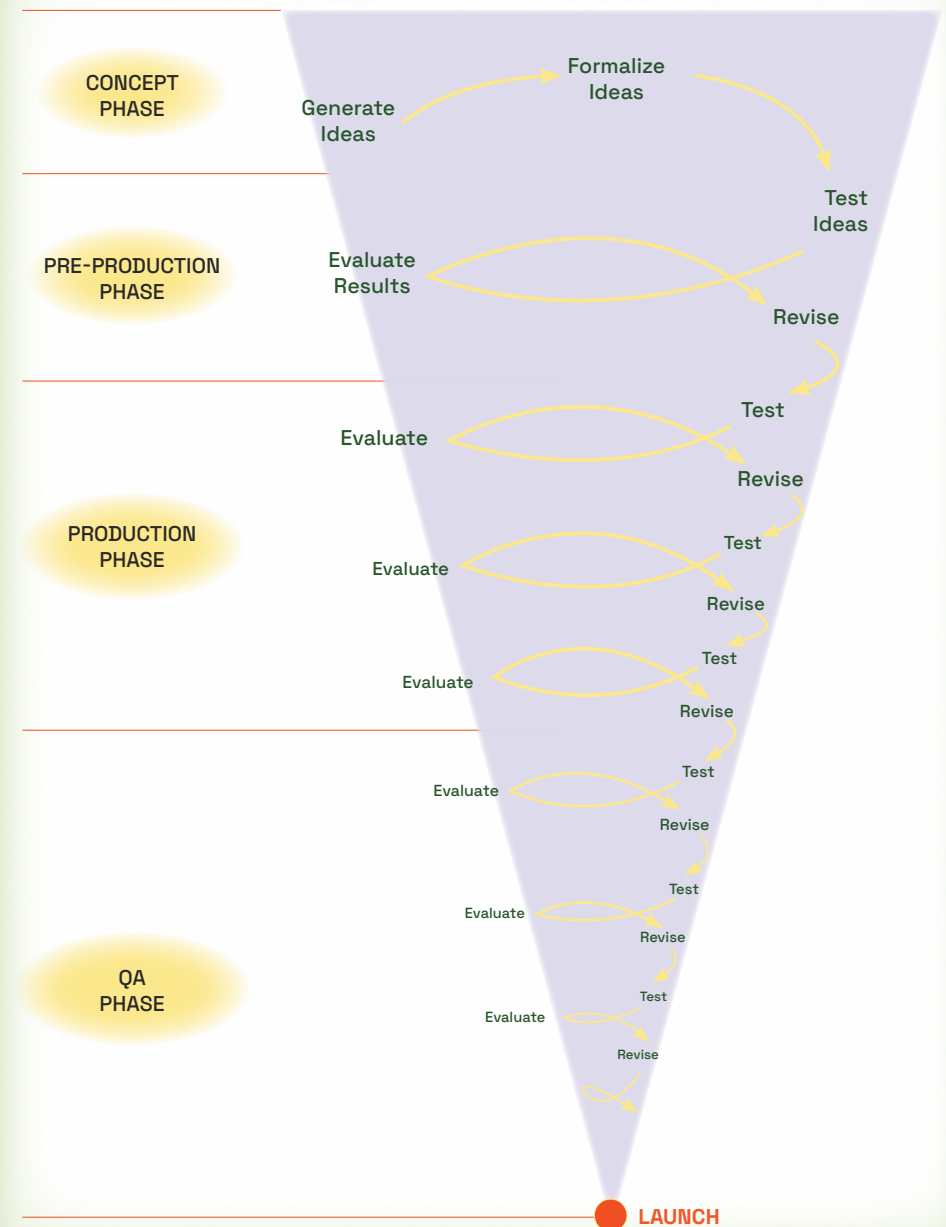
A GAME DESIGN

PROCESS

Like in interaction design or user experience design, game design processes usually take place in iterative loops. Conventionally, they are divided in concept phase, pre-production, production, and post-production (Fullerton, 2008), where the first part deals with the more divergent creative moment, the second is centered around feasibility and requirements analysis. The third focuses on implementation, and the fourth on post-production testing, promotion, and field-deployment.

However, complex design challenges such as urban games require more iteration and reflection, and rarely proceed linearly from beginning to an end. The initial phase is particularly delicate. For instance, concepts for game mechanics such as "players hold hands with strangers" can emerge quickly but require careful evaluation in context. This is where the interdisciplinary dialogue becomes precious. Architects and urban planners are trained to "read" the characteristics of built environments and their uses, while sociologists and ethnographers can delve deeper in the norms, conventions and expectations. This makes it important to align and re-align often, as well as to playtest frequently as well.

CONCEPT PHASE

Generate Ideas

Formalize Ideas

Test Ideas

Evaluate Results

Revise

PRE-PRODUCTION PHASE

Evaluate

Test

Revise

PRODUCTION PHASE

Evaluate

Test

Revise

Evaluate

Test

Revise

Evaluate

Test

Revise

QA PHASE

Evaluate

Test

Revise

Evaluate

Revise

LAUNCH

Model for iterative game design: playtest, evaluate, and revise.

GAME SPOTLIGHT

W_NDER

W_NDER is an urban exploration game that invites pairs of players to slow down and experience their surroundings through a stream-of-conscious conversation.

Walking 15-meters apart while talking through their headphones, the Wanderer and the Wonderer converse intimately at a distance without making eye contact.

The W_nder Playbooks in their pockets are filled with prompts to inspire off-the-cuff interactions and spontaneous dialogue between players, space, imagination, and memory.

Lily Higgins & Ioana Lupascu

"W_NDER was conceptualised in mid-March 2020 in direct response to the new reality of social distancing. At the time, we were ready to launch a different game that we had been working on since the beginning of the year, but quickly realised that this game was no longer viable in a COVID-world. Instead of trying to adapt the game into a social-distanced version, we killed our darling and began developing ideas for a game that would play with the rules of social distancing as the core mechanic."

Photography © Anne-Sunderman

"The new concept began with a playful "what-if"; what if we communicated over walkie-talkies while walking really far apart? What kind of gameplay would emerge? We immediately went outside to test out this idea in the spirit of rapid prototyping, or "playtotyping". We played together to discover the game hiding in this mechanic. It's because of this embodied process that W_NDER is a game very close to our hearts as passionate conversationalists and avid urban explorers. What emerged is a reflection of how we intrinsically move through the city, translated into a format that anyone can play and make their own."

URBAN

GAME

DESIGN

SHARED

VALUES

As part of a shared vocabulary for urban game design, in the next pages we would like to present

TWO ACTIVITIES and **TWO DESIGN TROPES**

that we have found working with the urban game designers in the TiP programme in the past year. The activities Align and Realign and Place-Specific Ideation both consist of a number of tasks that design teams can carry out.

As we present these activities and tropes, we hope to foster design processes that are more easily shared among practitioners with diverse backgrounds.

We invite you to see this overview of tasks and tropes as a working document that we disseminate early to share some of the design practices that the TiP trainees adopted in their work and research. We invite everyone to build further upon this list, expanding the vocabulary as the discipline itself will develop further.

ACTIVITY

ALIGN AND REALIGN

Align and Realign addresses the need in interdisciplinary design processes to continuously tune concepts, goals, and expectations between participants, as each discipline comes with its own preconceptions, practices and epistemologies.

Align and Realign should be a recurring activity throughout the design process. The three tasks that compose this activity are:

VERBALIZE OBJECTIVES AND ASSUMPTIONS REFLECT AND REALIGN BRACKET DISCUSSIONS

The first one is undertaken mostly in the beginning of the process and revisited only tangentially, but the other two recur throughout the design process. Ideally, reflective moments of alignment and realignment should take place together with major milestones (e.g., setting up requirements and goals, decisions on concepts, playtesting, iterations…).

TASK 1

VERBALIZE OBJECTIVES & ASSUMPTIONS

A task at the very beginning of the design process.

> Describe each professional background in the team (e.g., architecture, game design, public art…);

> Identify key terms for each discipline (e.g., 'challenge,' 'stakeholder,' 'participation…'), discuss and clarify them. Point at differences in meaning across disciplines;

> Identify objectives (e.g., 'raising awareness,' 'community-building…'), discuss differences in meaning and success criteria across disciplines;

> Make visible personal expectations and ambitions. Identify success criteria as a team, compare them with personal expectations.

TASK 2

REFLECT AND REALIGN

A recurring task that should be scheduled together with key moments of the overall process (e.g., before selecting a concept to develop further, after a playtest, after checking in with stakeholders…).

> Develop a list of shared success criteria (e.g., engage players from different age groups), check that they are meaningful for all team members;

> Examine if the output and decisions taken align with group objectives and personal objectives;

> Examine if the output and decisions taken align with stakeholders' needs and expectations;

> Revisit Task 1 if necessary.

TASK 3

BRACKET DISCUSSIONS

A recurring task that should be scheduled together with brainstorming, concepting, ideating, and prototyping moments of the overall process.

> Have a whiteboard, or a notebook, where team members record topics to discuss, in relation to methodological and terminological differences;

> If one emerges, evaluate its severity and decide if further discussion is necessary or could be postponed. If urgent, switch immediately to Task 2. If not urgent, record the topic on the whiteboard and put it on the agenda of the following Task 2 meeting;

> Proceed with the ongoing activity.

Photography © Technopolis City of Athens 2019 - Studio Kominis

ACTIVITY

PLACE-SPECIFIC IDEATION

For urban game design, it can be helpful to start ideating and testing games in situ early on. Place-specific Ideation is an activity that is situated in the early concepting part of the design process, and that could also be repeated in the playtesting phase if necessary. The three tasks composing it are:

MAP VARIOUS SPACES
EXPLORE AND EXPERIMENT
ALLOW FOR EMERGENCE

They proceed from a general understanding of the physical and social context where the game is placed, to a concrete first-hand engagement with it, and finally to a sort of stress-testing of the proposed concept with a variety of "what if" scenarios.

TASK 1

MAP VARIOUS SPACES

A preliminary task for the ideation phase.

> Hypothesize specific spaces and times where the game could run;

> Create a schedule of spaces to visit, and different times/conditions (day, night, weekend...). Visit the spaces multiple times in various conditions, record qualitative observations;

> Document local actors/stakeholders interacting with the spaces;

> Interview people familiar with the selected spaces, gather insights on stories, anecdotes, shared expectations...;

TASK 2

EXPLORE AND EXPERIMENT

A task for place-specific brainstorming and ideation

> Spend time in person in the selected space;

> Generate and document design ideas in place;

> Observe passersby's activities and the objects they interact with. Imagine how they could be re-thought into game props.

> Try out different actions and game props in place, document not only not only how passersby react (or not), but also gather autobiographic impression ("it felt odd" vs. "it felt strange but good").

TASK 1

ALLOW FOR EMERGENCE

A conclusive task for the concepting phase. When ideas for game mechanics, action, and props are almost finalized, it is interesting to "stretch" them for different contexts.

> Produce a concept map of places and contexts that are different from the original one, imagine scenarios for how the game experience could be different;

> Generate possible "what if" scenarios, and test game mechanics against them ("what if the game was played on that empty sidewalk at midnight?");

> If pertinent, select one or more alternative places and context, and run a playtest there;

> Document findings and insights; consider whether the original game concept can be broadened. Or, perhaps, a separate variant of the original game can be developed.

Photography © Ioana Lupascu

GAME SPOTLIGHT

Snake.City

Snake.City is a physical multiplayer game that asks people to connect "physically" by keeping their phone in two fingers and offering it to another person who holds it too, as if they were holding hands. This process is repeated numerous times with as many people as possible, creating a long "snake" composed by players.

It explores the ideas of physical connection with strangers in public spaces and of using a technological device to interact with someone nearby, as opposed to connecting virtually with far away people.

Tomo Kihiara, Gavin Woods, Giulia Gualtieri

"We all come from very different backgrounds and we were brought together by our shared interest in opening up spaces for play. Snake.City started as an experiment on how to use a smartphone to literally connect with others, in a physical and embodied way. It evolved into an open source toolkit and a web-app that enable players to come up with their own versions of the game: the only rule given by the system is that all players must be connected to one another for a set period of time."

Photography © Tomo Kihiara

"The game itself is open, so that players can appropriate it various ways, but also the code is open and can be downloaded from GitHub to make different types of other games. So far, it has been used in smaller settings – due to limitations for Covid – and its rules have been tweaked: for example, other people have reused its software to make a single-user game where players must always hold their phone with both hands."

DESIGN TROPES

In literature, the term "trope" means "rhetorical figure", and it refers to conventional ways of using meaningful words, for example with similitude or allusions. However, tropes exist also in other media, and urban game design is not an exception. Throughout the portfolio of games produced for Trust in Play, we have encountered some recurring elements, and we wonder if they constitute the first elements of an emerging new style of game design. In the following pages, we dive deeper in two types of tropes that we identified.

Agency is related to how game designers give players to ability to act (or not) on other players and their surroundings. Ambiguity in Actions is connected to the different meanings that an action might have inside or outside of the game.

DESIGN TROPES

AGENCY

In game design, the term "agency" identifies specifically a player's ability to have meaningful effects on the game, its elements, the space it is played in, and on other players. Assigning different roles and abilities to players is a common design strategy: for example, in a game of basketball all players can move and touch the ball in the same way, while in football only goalkeepers can use their hands. However, this variety increases significantly among urban games, and here we present three different ways in which this can be leveraged. These are:

ACT, OR TO BE ACTED UPON?
MEDIATED ACTION
GAME PROPS

ACT, OR TO BE ACTED UPON?

A first group is composed by games that subdivide the agency between their players in so that some relinquish control of their actions and become, in a certain sense, game pieces themselves. Some examples:

> Players can be led through city spaces following directions provided by the game;

> Players can receive a list of precise actions, and the game consists in executing them without errors.

MEDIATED ACTION

Some other games follow a different strategy and task some players to act vicariously. In this sense, agency is subdivided between players that can move and interact with their environment, and some others that cannot do it and are only allowed to tell others what to do. Many actions can take place only if players cooperate carefully. Some examples:

> A player can be "the director" of a larger group and choreograph complex actions for other players that are tasked to follow instructions;

> Players can be arranged throughout the game space so that actions are propagated as a "chain reaction" where each participant follows the action of the previous one.

GAME PROPS

Props (objects that are part of a game) can also be conferred a certain degree of agency, especially if digital technologies are used. In a way, "smart objects" can take the same role of a player having agency on others, but they can also take actions that would not be possible for human players. Some examples:

> Props can give instructions to players, for instance with displays and speakers. Instructions can be randomized, or they can be prompted by programming and sensors;

> Props can physically interact with players, for instance as objects to be moved from one place to another, or as obstacles, or supports.
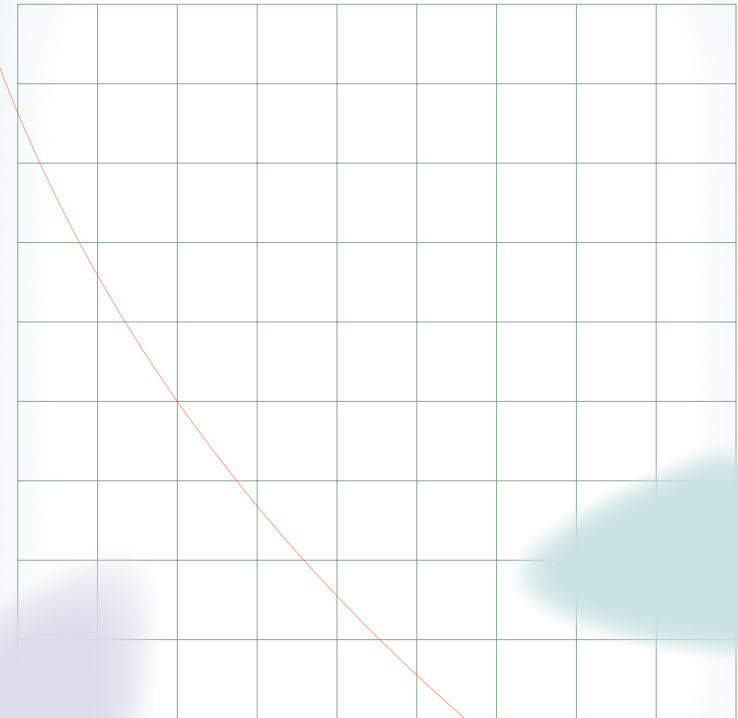
DESIGN TROPES

AMBIGUITY IN ACTIONS

Ambiguity in action refers to the fact that in urban games, the same action might have very different meanings and connotations inside or outside the context of a game. For example, a normal shoulder-to-shoulder contact in a sport like football would be rather rude in an everyday stroll. In this sense, we may call "first-order action" the in-game act, and "second-order action" what would be perceived by a non-playing bystander. In urban games this can be a rich trope to explore, as non-players are not always aware of the game world and its first order rules that players are immersed in.

FIRST-ORDER ACTION = SECOND-ORDER ACTION
FIRST-ORDER ACTION ≠ SECOND-ORDER ACTION
PLAYING "AS IF"

FIRST-ORDER ACTION = SECOND-ORDER ACTION

Games rules might require ordinary, everyday actions such as walking in a park or observing passersby. In this way, players cannot be distinguished at first sight from people who just happen to be in the game space. The playful aspect of these activities is mostly internal to the players, and the act of playing blends with other everyday practices. For example:

> In-game activities can mimic what non-players do, for instance with a game where players walk among a crowd of other pedestrians;

> In-game activities look out of context for non-players, but they are still understandable. For instance, a game might ask players to dance in a public square.

FIRST-ORDER ACTION ≠ SECOND-ORDER ACTION

Game rules might require actions that are completely out of the ordinary and impossible to recognize for non-playing passersby. In this sense, some games can be meaningful for players as they feel the pleasure of doing something extraordinary, and for bystanders for a sense of unexpected spectacle. For example:

> Non-playing passersby cannot understand what players do, as their actions are not easily recognizable, but they are clearly playful;

> Non-playing passersby likely misunderstand what players do, as their actions look like something different, but it is clear that a game/fiction is taking place.

PLAYING "AS IF"

Game rules require actions that expressly mislead passersby. It is not clear that a game is taking place, and only the players know the rules. People who are not players likely interpret what they see as if something else was happening. For example:

> Players impersonate characters that are fictional but believable and they behave accordingly. For instance, they could role-play tourists, shopkeepers, children...

> Players pretend that something in the game space is what it is not, and they behave accordingly. For instance, they could pretend that a player is an Artificial Intelligence, or that a container is a spaceship...
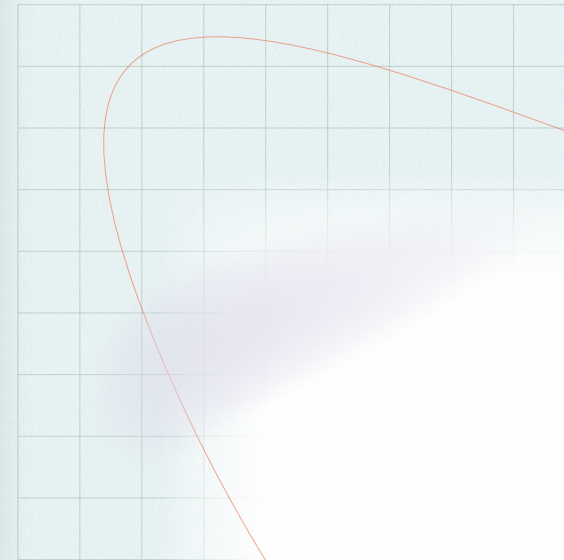
GAME SPOTLIGHT

Alleen Normaal

Alleen Normaal is a game prototype based on a chatbot and an artificial intelligence interacting with players who are cast in the role of prospective renters in an exclusive building. The conversation starts normally and becomes creepier and creepier as the bot begins asking unconventional questions. The game itself is a "para-fiction", as similar algorithms already exist in the real world and, indeed, they have significant impact on people's lives. The title means "only normal" in Dutch, and the game relates to the idea of not deviating from the average behavior.

Olina Terzi, Vitor Freire, Viviana Cordeiro

"The meaning of 'acting normally' changes significantly from person to person. With this playful experience, we aimed to question what is normal, what is normality, what is socially acceptable. At the same time, we ended up noticing many assumptions and prejudice, and also the role of technology in decision-making in cities."

Image © Alleen Normaal Team

"The game is a para-fiction, in the sense that it blends the real and the hyper-real. To do so, we created an experience that has some theatrical aspects, such as a parallel reality that is plausible but fictional. By having players interacting with a very judgmental chatbot, we created a fiction that references many parts of our current real world. As we were designing the game, we debated at length if the chatbot should have been placed on "real" housing websites, or if it should be expressly fictional."

MORE IDEAS FROM

TRUST IN PLAY

Time Hunter.

A game for two players, one is a time traveler who must find certain objects in our era, and the other gives instructions on where to go. Instructions cannot be given by speaking but only with a device that buzzes and vibrates when pointed in the right direction.

AnxCity.

A video game where a character must dodge obstacles. The game character is controlled using a slackline, which is a piece of sturdy fabric suspended between columns: stepping forward/backwards moves the character left or right. The player on the slackline does not see the screen and must be guided by other players.

BirdEyeU.

A large game played by two teams, one of which is placed at street-level and the other is on the roof of a nearby building. The teams receive numbered envelopes containing puzzles and cooperate to solve them. As they do so, they decipher instructions for assembling large colored cubes that must be arranged by the street-level team in specific shapes following instructions from the rooftop team.

Primitive Objects.

A location-based narrative game using a machine-vision app and an interactive storytelling software. The video game runs on a mobile device and simulates a dialogue with a computer from the future that tries to catalogue various everyday objects as they enter the field of view of the device's camera.

FIELD NOTES

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Trust in Play supports emerging professionals in the field of urban game design, mentoring them to build a sustainable practice and playfully exploring new relationships of trust in cities.

www.trustinplay.eu

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trust in play

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