Playful Encounters: Digital Games as research and representation

16 May 2025 | 10-6 pm CEST | Online Workshop | AG Medien | GASCA/DGSKA
Part 3 of the Workshop Series "Multimodal Digital Engagements"
Link to Website: https://agmedien.de/events/playful-encounters/
Please register here:
https://uni-koeln.zoom.us/meeting/register/UUwxlUNdQ-qqlOG0z_LgAw

In recent years, the potential of digital games as forms of knowledge production and representation of research has found increased interest in the field of (media) anthropology. Anthropologists and ethnographers developed (digital) games as part of their ethnographic work and designed digital playful encounters as research tools and means to produce and present their research in multimodal digital formats and to a broader audience. Game design can offer a fresh perspective for rethinking research in its evocative and narrative dimensions.
Digital gaming not only encompasses a broad variety of technologies such as audio-visual media, VR components, design-based web-applications, social media platforms or the critical use of AI technology but also addresses hybrid formats and offline spaces. Digital gaming is inherently multimodal as it often reflects diverse modes of fieldwork, production, and representation and goes beyond the often implied online/offline divide. Digital gaming ideally involves collaborative processes with research partners, but also with designers, programmers, and other institutional actors. As such, digital gaming not only transgresses the diverse modalities of production of what is played but is in itself a mode of knowledge production and social practice.
Multimodal forms of digital games allow for more experimental use of audio-visual media – (moving) images, drawings, designs, and sounds can be (re)combined and presented in novel ways to foster different kinds of experiences. They also relate, reflect, and expand analogue forms of gaming, not least due to their reach beyond geographic locations. During the workshop, we want to focus on practical and hands-on perspectives and, at the same time, critically engage in the challenges of digital gaming, such as economic constraints, bias in digital technologies, sustain- ability and archiving of digital environments, as well as asymmetries and power dynamics in collaborations between diverse actors and professional spheres.
The workshop *Playful Encounters* is part of a series of workshops and lectures focusing on different multimodal digital formats such as publishing, curating, archiving, designing, etc. This series is aimed to serve as a platform for scholars and practitioners working on multimodal digital experimentations to share practical experiences and theoretical insights. It brings together re- searchers and game designers from anthropology and related fields to share their experiences with multimodal and experimental forms of digital games in formats that relate to the digital. In a final roundtable, we aim to discuss the projects in the context of evaluation and acknowledgement of multimodal work within academic contexts.
We invite contributions presenting ethnographically informed gaming projects with a digital component. During the workshop, we will give extensive time for discussion.

Please register here:
https://uni-koeln.zoom.us/meeting/register/UUwxlUNdQ-qqlOG0z_LgAw

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PROGRAMME

16 May 2025

10.00 WELCOME

GAMES AS ANTHROPOLOGY
10.15 JOE DUMIT
    Game Design in Anthropology Fieldwork and Classrooms

11.15 KAREN WALTORP & NILAB TOTAKHIL
    Unity vs Schismogenesis: The Case of the Diplomatic Rebel Game

12.15 COFFEE BREAK

STORYTELLING AND IDENTITY
12.30 EVE NETWIG
    Ludic Oral Histories: A Comparative Study of Queer Identity Preservation
    Across Gaming Platforms

13.30 LUNCH BREAK

GAMES AS RESEARCH
14.30 POKI CHAN + CARMEN CHAN + PHIL HO
    AI-enhanced Virtual Heritage Game as Living Archive and Research Tool

15.30 STEFFEN KOHN+NESTOR SIRE
    Game Design as Multimodal Intervention

16.30 COFFEE BREAK

16.45 - 18:00 CLOSING DISCUSSION & PLAYTESTING SESSIONS

**Working Group
Media Anthropology**

Abstracts

Game Design in Anthropology Fieldwork and Classrooms
Joseph Dumit

Board games are fascinating for they unfold dynamic systems, model worldings, and embody points of view. In this talk I share some techniques for making use of board game design as collaborative research into collective forms of life (social, ecological, corporate, institutional) and how board game design practices might be useful in the field. How they might be useful in teaching ethnography. How they might be useful forms of individual and group reflection.

References
Dumit, Joseph & Sabina Belc, 2024, "From Consumers to Creators: Bridging Game Play and Playful Game Design for Impactful Civic Education," Analog Game Studies v.11, n.2.
Dumit, Joseph, 2017, "Game Design as STS Research." Engaging Science, Technology, and Society, [S.l.], v. 3, p. 603-612.
Game Design Videotalk (2021 at Humbolt Univ)

Unity vs Schismogenesis: The Case of the Diplomatic Rebel Game
Karen Waltorp & Nilab Totakhil

Diplomatic Rebel is an RPG for Smartphone and Tablet built in the Unity Game engine. Our ultimate goal is co-creating and circulating images and ethnographically powered stories that contribute to obviate schismogenesis and to de-escalate conflict in a polarized world. In the interactive story, you play the 16-year-old 'Ariana' navigating the Afghan and Danish cultures. As a Diplomatic Rebel, you create a space for you without burning bridges.You are invited to a party at your Danish high school and badly want to participate, but you need your Afghan parents' consent. This is where the game starts: To attend the party with your friends, you need to turn a 'no' into a 'yes' – A dilemma that might seem simple but, as you will figure out along the way, is more complex than appears at first sight. You now have to navigate different expectations and norms to earn points in the game. You also move across two worlds; the physical everyday world and the metaphysical dream world - think Jungian collective unconscious meets the imaginal realm, Alam al- Mithâl, of Ibn al-Arabi. The portal between the two worlds is an Afghan carpet, which you get transported to when your magic lajwar amulet lights up. In the metaphysical dream world you obtain wisdom in the form of globes that open and play small scenes – these globes of wisdom contain clues from your parents youth, or various other images from both Denmark and Afghanistan. These constitute keys to understand your interaction with the non-playable characters going forward, it helps you understand and navigate your physicaleveryday world. You get help from your Bibi Jaan – grandmother – and other helpers along the way. Do you get permission to go to the party, and have you reached a better understanding with your family as well as classmates? Have you learned something about yourself, your roots and your everyday world? The physical everyday world is monochrome in the beginning of the game, but as you collect colourful globes in the metaphysical realm and gain wisdom, you can put some color to your everyday world and life, integrating the beauty of your diverse backgrounds.

BIO's

ARTlife Film Collective is an Afghan/Danish Film Collective founded in 2018 as part of the ARTlife research project at Aarhus University (NOVA 2017-2020). Developing the 'research-through-collaborative-filmmaking'-methodology (Waltorp & ARTlife Film Collective 2021, Waltorp & Mohammadzai Safi 2024) the core group has continued as an

independent collective with the goal of creating anthropologically powered storytelling across platforms, specifically on being minoritized in Denmark. Diplomatic Rebel by ARTlife was selected for the CPH:DOX talent program for interactive and immersive storytelling CPH:LAB 2022-2023, with Katerina Cizek (MIT Co-Creative Studio) and Rashin Fahandej (Emerson College) as mentors.

Nilab Totakhil is a teacher, a Teach First Alumnae, and a founding member of the ARTlife Film Collective. She holds a Cand.scient.soc from Lund University, Sweden and a BA in Education. She actively combines her academic background with her pedagogies and teaching in her everyday work life. She strives to give all children a chance to gain an education regardless of background and social status. This motivation comes from her own background as an Afghan refugee. Totakhil is the co-author of Why Care: Voluntary work, Contemporary Islam (2021) and has volunteered as an intern for the UNESCO in India and for the NGO Wale Wale Kenya.

Lea Glob is an award-winning director and cinematographer. Her filmography counts 'My Father Kasper Højhat'(2011), 'Olmo and the Seagull' (2015, co-directed with Petra Costa). Her documentary "Venus" (2017), co-directed by Mette Carla Albrechtsen, was also published by the Danish publishing house Gyldendal as a book. Her latest film 'Apolonia Apolonia' (2022) winner of Best Film at IDFA, is again at the crux of stories based in the magnificent chaos of everyday life. In the same vein, ARTlife was an invitation to use her craft to help a young generation give form to their stories that are not often seen on the big screen. Glob joined the Collective in 2019 and is a core member of ARTlife.

Mursal Khosrawi holds an MA (cand.scient.pol) from the University of Copenhagen's Faculty of Social Sciences. She is a public opinion maker and a regular panelist on P1 Morgen, Radio4, and Danish National Radio's 'Debatten'sharing her views on issues related to inequality, minority issues, refugees, immigration and integration policies in Denmark.

Khosrawi is a founding member of the ARTlife Film Collective and the current President of the think tank Handletanken, which works towards equality with a focus on gender. She previously worked at the Danish RefugeeCouncil and is a regular contributor to RÆSON and Altinget.

Karen Waltorp is associate professor of anthopology and filmmaker. She is Head of ethnographic exploratory and multimodal Lab and founder og ARTlife Film Collective. She is Principal Investigator on DigiSAt - Digital EverydayLives Far From Silicon Valley (IRDF 2022-2025) and CLAIMS to Energy Citizenship in South Africa (DFC 2024-2028) joining long term ethnographic research and multimodal formats for collaboration and dissemination. She is director of "Manenberg" (2010), winner of the New Nordic Voices and RAI Film Prize, author of "Why Muslim Women and Smartphones: Mirror Images" (2020) and co- editor of "Energy Futures" (2022) "An Anthropology of Futures and Technologies" (2023) and the special issue "Digital Sociality" (2024).

Ludic Oral Histories: A Comparative Study of Queer Identity Preservation Across Gaming Platforms

Eve Nentwig, University College London
This presentation examines how queer gamers in London use different gaming platforms as tools for identity exploration and cultural preservation. Through comparative ethnographic research conducted between 2023-2024 at a queer-friendly gaming café, I analyse how players navigate between Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) - a tabletop roleplaying game centered on collaborative storytelling through shared imagination - and Final Fantasy XIV (FF14) - a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game with detailed 3D graphics and predetermined narrative structures.

The study introduces the concept of what I have termed 'ludic oral histories' to examine how players preserve queer experiences through these contrasting platforms. D&D offers unrestricted creative freedom through its rule system, where players verbally describe their characters and actions, collectively imagining the game world. This flexibility allows players to explore fluid gender expressions and relationships without technical constraints. FF14, despite its more rigid digital framework, provides tools for character customisation and social interaction that players creatively modify to express queer identities, often through unofficial modifications that bypass the game's heteronormative limitations.

Players actively translate their characters between these platforms, revealing how each medium's distinct affordances enable different aspects of identity documentation. While FF14's visual customisation tools allow for detailed avatar creation within programmed parameters, D&D's open-ended storytelling framework permits unlimited narrative possibilities. The research demonstrates how players combine these complementary features - using FF14's visual representation alongside D&D's narrative freedom - to create comprehensive expressions of queer identity.

Accordingly, my presentation will include practical demonstrations of:
Character migration between D&D's verbal storytelling and FF14's digital avatars
Community-created modifications that expand FF14's gender expression options
Discord server structures maintaining continuity between gaming spaces
Documentation practices during both tabletop and digital sessions

This comparative approach reveals how games' multimodal nature enables marginalised communities to actively preserve their stories through play. Players leverage various digital tools (Discord, character creators, 'mods' or modification tools) alongside analog elements (tabletop roleplay, physical artwork, community spaces) to create hybrid archives of queer experience. These practices show how different gaming platforms can serve complementary roles in cultural preservation while fostering lasting community networks.

This work contributes to discussions of multimodal anthropological methods by demonstrating how games' diverse storytelling mechanisms can document marginalised experiences. It addresses key themes related to your workshop including:
Digital-analog hybrid practices in gaming communities
Power dynamics in platform customisation
Sustainability of community-created archives
Collaborative knowledge production through play

AI-enhanced Virtual Heritage Game as Living Archive and Research Tool

Poki Chan, Concordia University
Carmen Chan, Royal BC Museum
Phil Ho, Royal BC Museum

Traditional historical repositories often follow rigid, linear structures that struggle to incorporate new discoveries or multiple perspectives. We propose enhancing the scalability of virtual heritage (VH) to accommodate the increasing volume of associated information and metadata. VH should be preserved for its evolving value rather than as a fixed state. Champion and Rahaman (2019) advocate for a framework that provides resilient infrastructure for 3D digital heritage models. However, similar to concerns about standardization reinforcing dominant historical narratives, the imposition of 'best practices' may shape accessibility and interpretation in ways that lead to epistemological consequences (Baik, 2022). The exploration of VH's scalable design and application is currently limited, but this discussion seeks to critically address these challenges.

This project demonstrates how Virtual Heritage Game (VHG) provides an adaptive and interactive approach to both archiving and historical representation, enabling more flexible engagement with data. By leveraging VHG affordances alongside artificial intelligence (AI), we integrate crowd-sourced input to dynamically restructure and expand historical knowledge, fostering inclusivity and participation. AI-driven features update raw data and refine 3D heritage models, ensuring representations remain

current and reflect newly discovered historical insights. Unlike conventional archives, which prioritize researcher-driven narratives, our VHG facilitates direct user engagement, allowing players to interact with historical data and reinterpret narratives based on their lived experiences and evolving perspectives.

While digital games are widely recognized for their potential to connect people with historical content, there are very few successful examples of their practical application (E. M. Champion, 2016; Mortara et al., 2014). Our VHG design addresses this gap by combining immersive storytelling, real-time visualization, and collaborative problem- solving to create an interactive and evolving historical experience. Functioning as both a game and a real-time repository, our design enables participants to actively engage with and contribute to historical narratives. This participatory approach fosters discussion, encourages reinterpretation, and supports the continuous evolution of historical understanding. By facilitating interaction across time and perspectives, VHG shifts historical representation from a static archive to a dynamic, living record shaped by diverse contributions.

We propose to design a VHG that serves three primary functions: (1) as a research tool that facilitates the collection and analysis of ethnographic and historical data, (2) as a dynamic data repository that structures oral histories and collective memories in an interactive, evolving format, and (3) as a means of research representation that moves beyond static archival methods to offer an engaging and participatory platform for historical exploration. Through this approach, digital gaming not only expands the accessibility and reach of historical knowledge but also democratizes the way history is constructed, interpreted, and preserved. Our initiative aligns with the workshop's themes by demonstrating how VHG pushes the boundaries of digital storytelling and participatory historical research. By integrating AI- driven processing, real-time updates, and crowd-sourced historical data, our approach fosters a living, evolving historical record rather than a static archive. This project contributes to the broader discourse on multimodal digital engagements by demonstrating how digital games serve as dynamic, inclusive platforms that rethink knowledge production and representation in heritage studies.

References
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Champion, E. M. (2016). Entertaining the similarities and distinctions between serious games and virtual heritage projects. Entertainment Computing, 14, 67–74. Q2. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2015.11.003
Champion, E., & Rahaman, H. (2019). 3D Digital Heritage Models as Sustainable Scholarly Resources. Sustainability, 11(8), Article 8. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11082425
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Game Description
Taste of Time: Hong Kong Food Memories is an interactive digital experience that blends oral history, 3D projection technology, and AI to recreate and preserve Hong Kong's rich culinary heritage, particularly soy sauce Western cuisine.
Soy sauce Western cuisine is a defining part of Hong Kong's food culture, reflecting the city's colonial past, economic transitions, and cultural creativity. Rooted in cha chaan tengs (Hong Kong-style tea cafés), this cuisine blends Western recipes with local ingredients, making them more accessible to the working class. Its evolution tells a story of adaptation and resilience, demonstrating how food serves as a living historical record.
Designed as both a game and a living archive, Taste of Time allows players to engage with personal food memories and historical narratives through an immersive, voice- activated menu system.

Game Design as Multimodal Intervention
Steffen Köhn and Nestor Siré

Our mobile video game PakeTown presents an ethnographic depiction of the history of alternative media distribution in Cuba. It is a joint project between a multimodal anthropologist and a Cuban media artist working with ConWiro, an independent Cuban game studio. We discuss our game as a multimodal intervention that generated new conversations with our research participants, new modes of collaboration, as well as new knowledge about our field that we wouldn't have been able to gather through traditional (non-interventionist) fieldwork methods such as interviews and participant observation. Developing PakeTown in conjunction with one of the initial video game companies in Cuba's still tightly regulated private sector provided a valuable understanding of how its founders, as key figures in the islands' emergent digital culture, overcame complex technological and political constraints at a time of profound social change. Moreover, the process of designing and marketing the game to resonate with local audiences offered us intriguing new insights into Cubans' everyday media consumption patterns.