

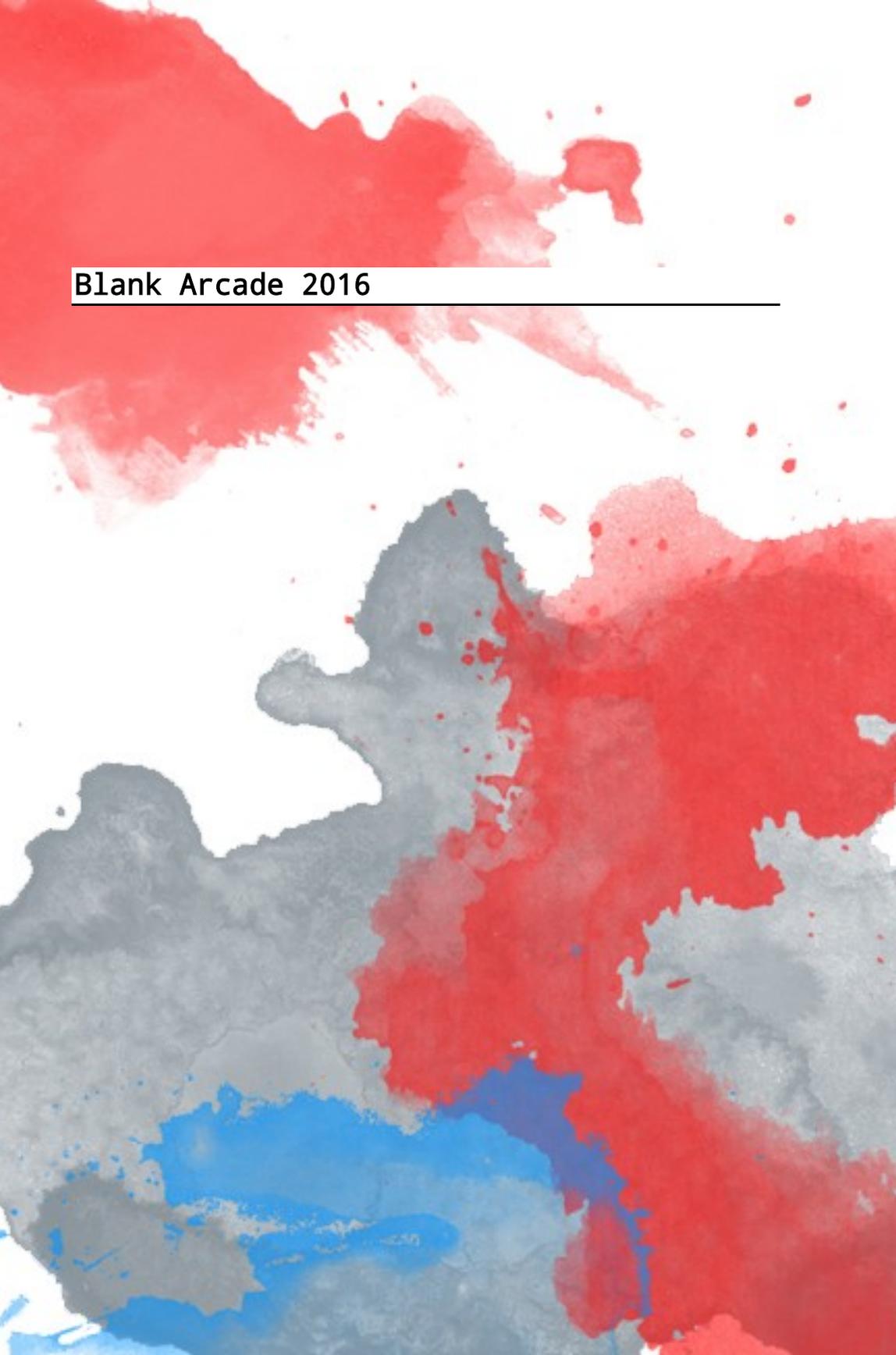
Blank Arcade
2016

Hannah MacLure Centre, Dundee, Scotland





Blank Arcade 2016





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Event curated by Emilie Reed and Lindsay D. Grace

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Digital Games Research

Dundee, Scotland, United Kingdom

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Curators



Lindsay Grace is an associate professor at American University and founding director of the American University Game Lab and Studio. He has curated or co-curated several exhibitions including the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Indie Arcade and previous Blank Arcades. His game creative work has received awards from the Games for Change Festival, Meaningful Play, Advances in Computer Entertainment and others. He has published more than 45 papers, articles

and book chapters on games. His creative work has been selected for showcase in more than eight countries and 12 states, including New York, Paris, Rio De Janeiro, Singapore, Istanbul, Sao Paulo, Chicago and Vancouver. He has given talks at the Game Developer's Conference (GDC), SXSW, the Games for Change Festival, and many others. Current academic liaison and former vice president (2015-2016) for the Global Game Jam™, Lindsay also served on the board for the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) between 2013-2015. More info at ProfessorGrace.com



Emilie Reed is currently a PhD student at Abertay University, investigating the display of video games and other interactive software in art museums and galleries. Her research is currently concerned with developing display and collection strategies that best capture video games as both a material object and a playful practice. She keeps a blog at emreed.net and

curates a monthly selection of games and art at Group Show Games (groupshowgames.tumblr.com).

Exhibit Overview: Lindsay Grace

The experience of a computer game exhibition has evolved with the medium. In the 3 years we have organized the Blank Arcade exhibits we have endeavored to integrate the themes of the Digital Games Research Association's annual conference with exhibition selections. This 2016 exhibition takes into account both the themes and the practical experience of the conference. As the first jointly offered event, combining both the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference and the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG) conference, 2016 marks an important year in games research. The history of the FDG conference has largely focused on technical research, while DiGRA had emphasized the game studies and humanities informed practices. Unsurprisingly, this dichotomy between the human and technical has shrunk. Both conferences evolved to include more of the elements of the other, bringing more technical work into the DiGRA community and more game studies informed work into the FDG community. With more than a decade between the conferences, this first joint conference marks a clear maturation.

Into the middle of this former dichotomy springs Blank Arcade with a collection of creative practice through technical implementation. Blank Arcade is maturing in its own right. Thanks to support from the Hannah Maclure Center, Abertay University and the American University Game Lab the exhibition will be running for its longest period - August 3rd, 2016 - to October 28th, 2016. It's also experienced its most selective year. The curators were only able to select a mere 14% of the submissions.

Both the submissions and the selections represent a globally curated event, spanning not only the national, ethnic and gender diversity of artists, but also the thematic and experiential. In selecting this work we aimed to provide a glimpse into contemporary ludic creative practice.

The 8 works selected represent a range of the ludic art practices within games. The selections represent

emerging practices in playful physical computing and traditional screen based play. They include polished experiences that mimic the attributes of commercial play, but they also include retro-aesthetics that share significant qualities with hobby computer graphics on a Commodore 64. The selections range from the very personal to rather universal. They remind us of the feeling of tactile touch not just through video game buttons, but through fabric as well.

The goal in collecting these works was to provide something very appropriate to games - experience. This includes the experience of flight, of surprise, of focus, of taboo or mastering dexterity and meditation. The works collected are most meaningful when experienced - not merely viewed through photographs, online videos or well-played reports. Instead this is work that must be felt first hand. This is an essential aspect of the game play experience.

While we offer report of this exhibit in print, online and in interviews we strongly encourage people to experience this work first hand. We do so to improve access to this work and to afford entre into the world of creative ludic practice. We invite readers to understand these materials as an invitation into a much more vivid experience beyond our collection.

In a world that is repeatedly culled and curated for us, through listicles, highlight reels, top tweets and up votes, it's important to remember the value of the first-hand experience. Games are in themselves curated experiences. They are the result of game designers repeatedly culling and optimizing to create a specific experience. As the medium evolves its important to recognize the value of the experiences game create, as they offer the potential to be more meaningful than preceding popular media only when they stretch beyond the limitations of their predecessors. The best of games is not among the trailers and screenshots, not among the critique or curation. Instead, the best of games is within the personal experiences of each player.

We invite you to experience the work first hand. If not



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within the exhibition itself, please seek to experience these works through download or by visiting them as they travel the globe.

-Lindsay Grace

The Sensuous Possibilities of Play: Emilie Reed

The selections in this year's Blank Arcade come from an impressive pool of fifty-seven international submissions. Given the display space in the Hannah Maclure Centre we had to be extremely selective, and even narrowed down to the finest selections several possible shows could have emerged. The eight digital games, table games, interactive sculptures and software works making up the show are all exceptional submissions, but in my mind they also hang together on a particular theme.

Because of their digital nature, their reliance on symbols and systems, the fact that reduced to their essence, video games are code, it's easy to divert our attention from the potential digital games have to engage with our senses. Sight and sound are a given, but what about touch? What textures can games have outside of the smooth plastic of consumer electronics? Further than this, can they provoke memories, taking us back to vivid sensations of a certain time and place? And what about the more abstract uses of 'sense,' sense of self, sense of space, sense of time? Can digital games let us 'play' with those, too?

The games in this year's Blank Arcade are all concerned with questions about the implications of gaming, play or interaction on the senses, whether it be the scientifically defined five senses, our sense of space around us, or our sense of place and identity. From the local community in Scotland we drew two radically different selections. Katakata, by Dundee-based sound design researcher Kirsty Keatch is an interactive sculpture which allows visitors to take turns playing with a large Jacob's ladder toy, controlling its cascading sound and motion with the tipping and tilting of smartphones connected to a network.

Jack King-Spooner, on the other hand, submitted one of his many digital games that take a playful and experimental attitude towards narrative, visual design, and sound. The tackiness of a thumbprint in clay, the rough surface of watercolor paper and warm acoustic guitar melodies are the textures that make up the world of Beeswing, a game structured around nonlinear vignettes

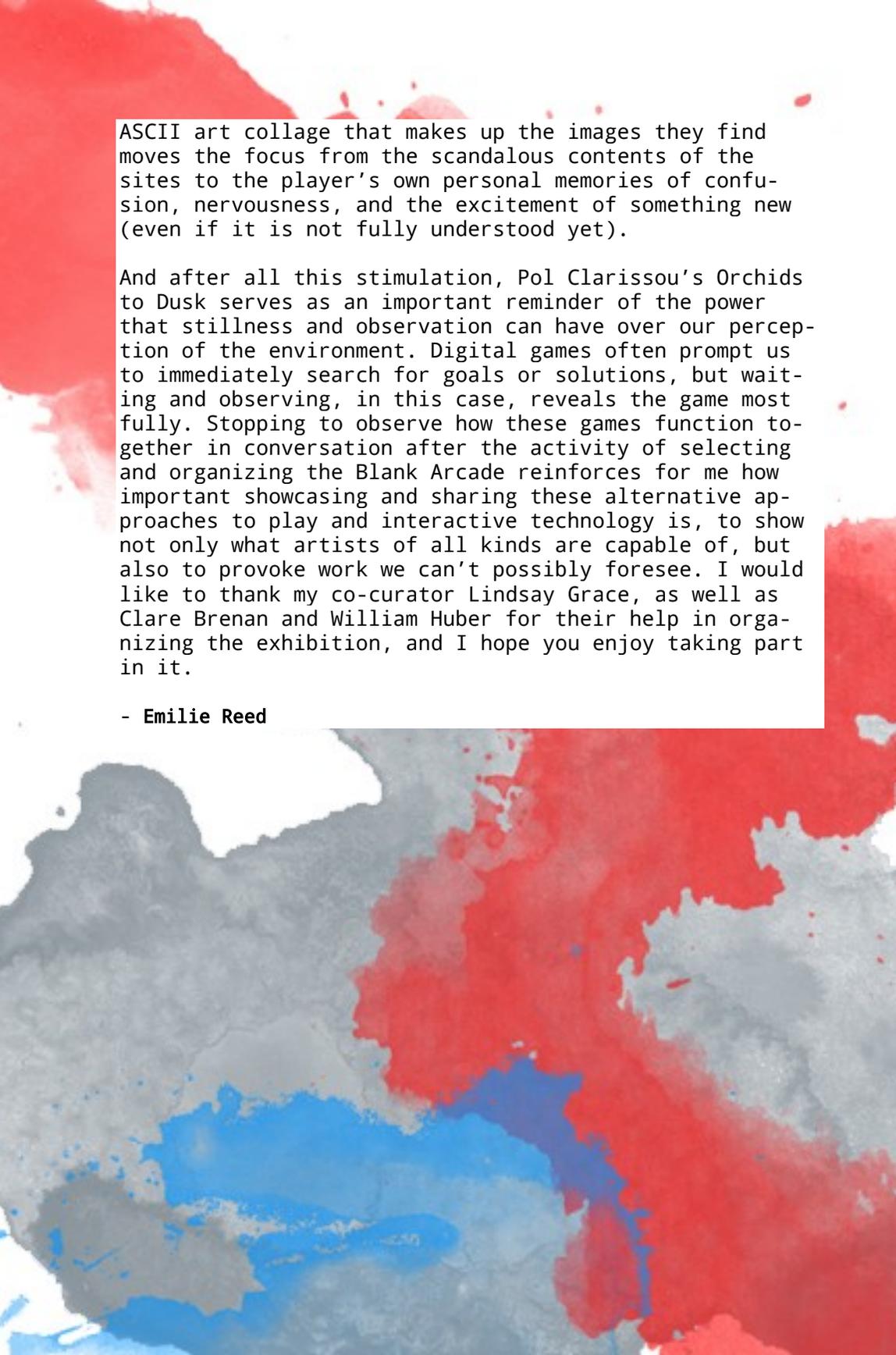
Blank Arcade 2016

telling stories from the Scottish village where he grew up.

eBee is the outcome of a fascinating project by the collective Pins & Needles to expand perceptions about the demographics and culture of electronics and computing. The table game is played with patches that use eTextiles to conduct electricity, and players collaboratively build working circuits while simulating the communal social attitude of a quilting bee. The way it brings the seemingly disparate worlds of traditional craft and technology together brings to mind Dundee's history both as a textile and technology hotbed. It was an exciting choice that I think converses well with the other local selections.

Christopher Totten also draws traditional art materials into the digital world with Lissitzky's Revenge, an arcade-style video game where every object is made from cut paper. Beyond that, taking a nod from the Suprematist art movement, this game poses the question of whether abstract geometrical shapes and solid colors can contain an emotional core. Can these simple graphics and arcade-style stages still carry a narrative of emotional weight? Abstract Playground AP 1 by Will Hurt is another selection which calls back to art movements of the past to consider how the shapes and forms associated with Modernist architecture, as well as color, pattern and music can work in concert to create an accessible and appealing soundscape that invites play as well as spectatorship.

Digital games are known for provoking exhilaration, especially through speedy movement and flight. Fugl presents the sensation of flying but with a different approach than mainstream video games, which often present time limits, paths, obstacles or shooting in concert with flying mechanics. Instead, this game frees the player within the procedurally generated environment to find their own landmarks and goals, and make a unique play experience. On the other end of the spectrum, James Earl Cox's You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter presents exhilaration of a completely different kind, putting the player in the shoes of a preteen using the internet to investigate sex for the first time. The veil of the



ASCII art collage that makes up the images they find moves the focus from the scandalous contents of the sites to the player's own personal memories of confusion, nervousness, and the excitement of something new (even if it is not fully understood yet).

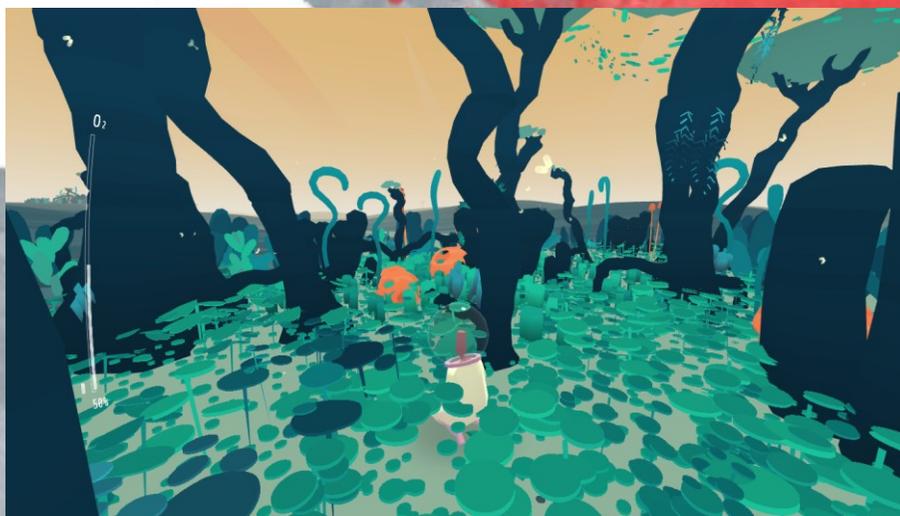
And after all this stimulation, Pol Clarissou's Orchids to Dusk serves as an important reminder of the power that stillness and observation can have over our perception of the environment. Digital games often prompt us to immediately search for goals or solutions, but waiting and observing, in this case, reveals the game most fully. Stopping to observe how these games function together in conversation after the activity of selecting and organizing the Blank Arcade reinforces for me how important showcasing and sharing these alternative approaches to play and interactive technology is, to show not only what artists of all kinds are capable of, but also to provoke work we can't possibly foresee. I would like to thank my co-curator Lindsay Grace, as well as Clare Brennan and William Huber for their help in organizing the exhibition, and I hope you enjoy taking part in it.

- Emilie Reed



2016 Selected Works

Orchids to Dust
Pol Clarissou



Orchids to Dust

Orchids to Dusk is a short contemplative wandering experience. You are an astronaut stranded on an alien planet, with only a few minutes left to live. The game implicitly lets players build the game's world together; and emphasizes idleness and acceptance throughout the experience.

As the game starts, you wake up from a coma beside a crashed escape pod on an alien planet, with a limited amount of oxygen. You can spend that time wandering the calm landscape, exploring its scattered forests and occasionally encountering another unfortunate astronaut's dead body - you eventually run out of air as well, and die.

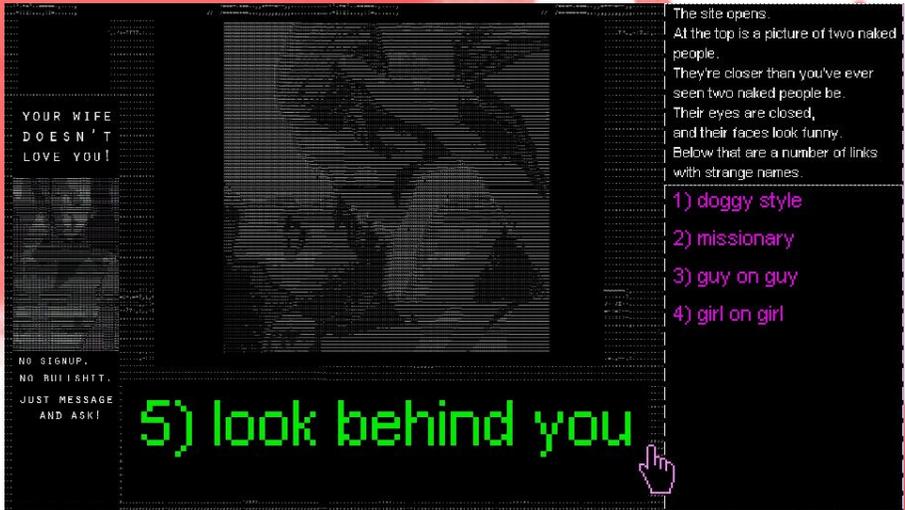
However, if at some point during your time you stop for a bit and spend some time contemplating the scenery, staying still, it will start coming to life around you - alien creatures sprout around you and circle around you peacefully. As you keep waiting, you are given the possibility to surrender to the planet and remove your helmet, embracing death on your own terms. Should you choose to do so, your astronaut's body collapses and serves as a new seed for alien plants to grow from, giving birth to another forest.

The game is networked, and its environment persistent: every forest in the game is another player who removed their helmet, and every corpse one who did not. In the long run, the game's map and landscape evolve depending on player's choices and actions - or non-actions.

A singular playthrough of the game is short and simple, but its interest also lies in the meta-play: the persistent environment and its evolution. Every player gets to partake in the next player's experience, invisibly.

You Must be 18 or Older to Enter

James Earl Cox III



You Must be 18 or Older to Enter

You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter is an ASCII collage game that investigates the social stigma surrounding pre-teen youth exploring their budding sexuality. Within this game, you are a kid looking at porn for the first time. This is natural, yet (for both the player and the character) it is uncomfortable. This unease is so palpable, it lends the game a horror flavor, even though *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* is lighthearted.

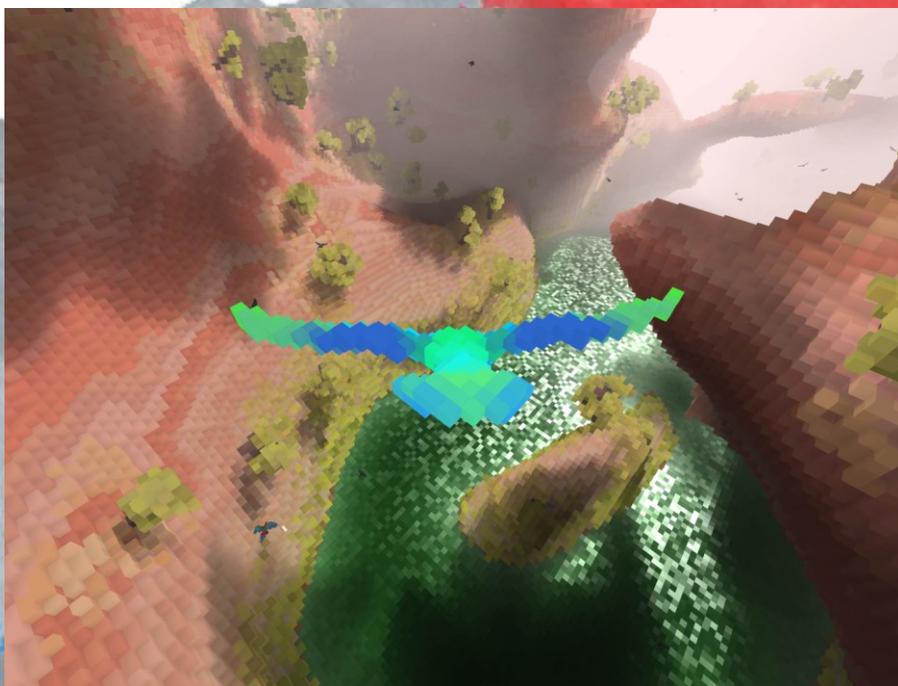
As adults in the 21st century USA, there is still a queasiness surrounding the naked body. Why do affection games upset us more than games about killing people? Through *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter*, the player reenacts a coming of age experience and is invited to think about these situations. Kids hiding away from view to discover a facet of the adult world. Conversations surrounding this game bring up our own memories of self-discovery, how we learned to navigate adult content without guidance, ultimately landing on the idea that we shouldn't be embarrassed.

You Must Be 18 or Older pushes the boundaries of our societally dictated decency as well. The images within this game are made purely out of typed symbols: ASCII art. But can these images still be considered lewd? This art helps with the narrative of the game. As the player takes the role of a pre-pubescent scouring porn for the first time, it sufficiently confounds the pictures. While playing, you have to blur your vision to see the images. Even then, some of them are hard to read. This emulates how a kid wouldn't understand what they're looking at; it leads the player into the role of the game.

While this game reflects my generation's experiences with youthful curiosity, curious pre-teens still sneak off to explore adult content without any guidance. We still buy violent games for our kids to play. Even though violence in videogames does not create violence in real life (an argument made about novels, films, comics, and many other media), that does not excuse the ratio of violent videogames to non-violent ones.

This game doesn't teach any skill or ask any questions directly. It acts as a gateway to discussion. It titillates some of us with a strange sort of nostalgia, and provides a glimpse into a coming-of-age for others. Ultimately, it provides a shared experience for us to discuss intimate topics that is otherwise considered taboo.

Johan Gjestland / Team Fugl
Fugl

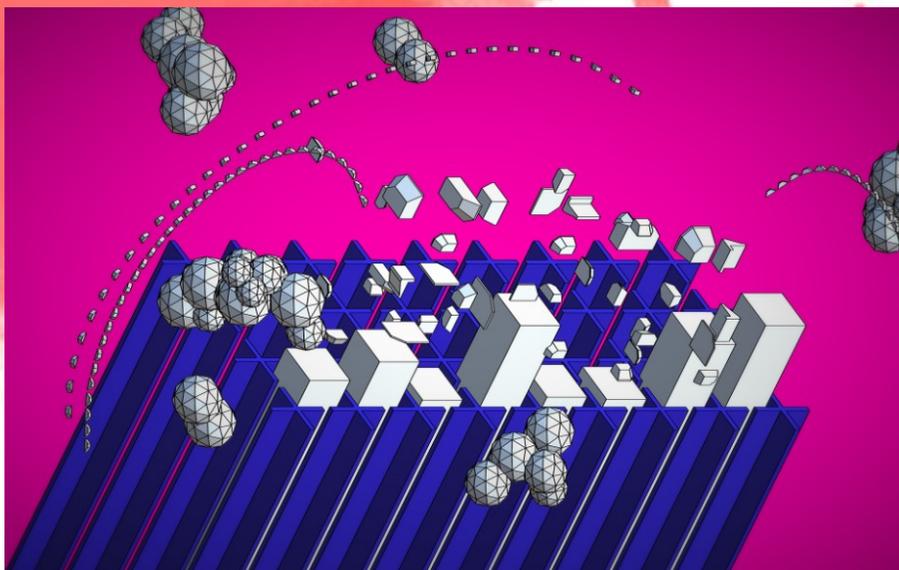


FUGL

Fugl is an explorative bird flying simulator in procedurally generated voxel landscapes, where the pure feeling of flight is the crux of the experience.

Abstract Playground AP1

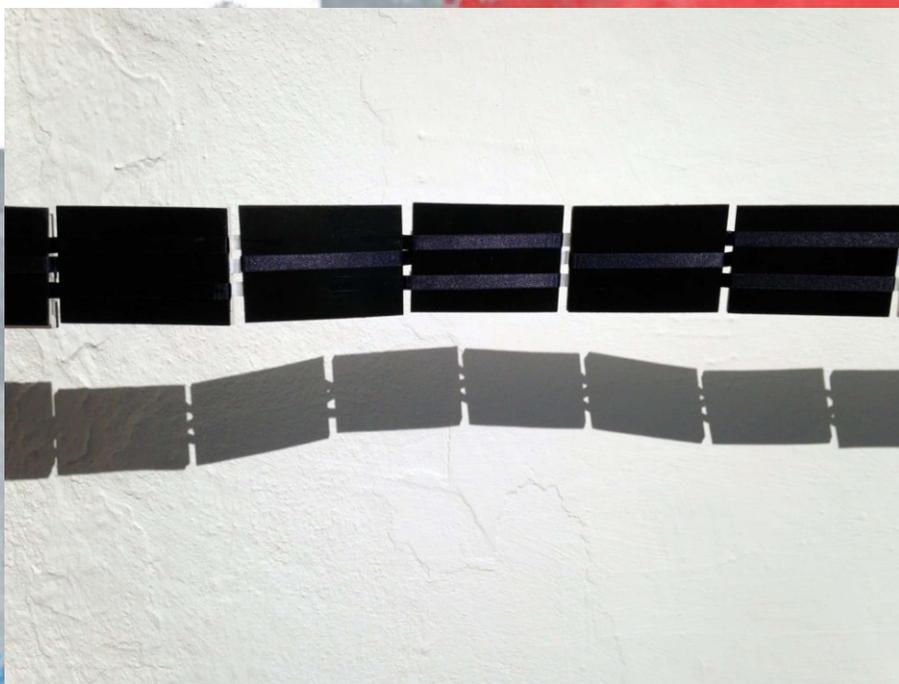
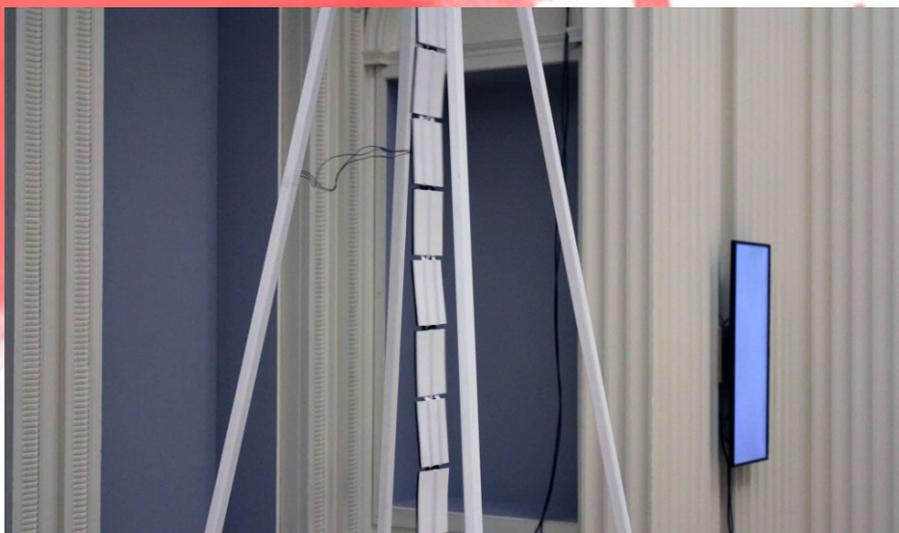
Will Hurt



Abstract Playground AP1

Abstract Playground AP1 is a screen based interactive artwork, part abstracted re-composition of Modernist architecture concerned with how forms occupy physical / digital space, part musical instrument encouraging users to “play” a potential building. It was designed alongside people with learning difficulties over a 5 week D-Lab / LEVEL Centre co-commissioned residency at the LEVEL Centre, Rowsley, UK and with no win conditions or high scores aims to encourage a state of explorative play. It exists as an installation displayed on a screen or projector with 2 control interfaces catering for people with a wide range of motor skills, and as a software artwork running on the web.

Katakata
Kirsty Keatch



Katakata

Katakata is presented as a kinetic sound sculpture, inspired by a wooden Jacob's ladder toy, controlled by way of the visitor's smartphone or gallery tablet. The Jacobs Ladder is a curious toy consisting of a length of wooden blocks, woven with ribbon, in such a way that when tilted, appears to cascade. Katakata is the Japanese name for the toy which has an onomatopoeic resemblance to the sound of its tumbling blocks.

Sculptures that play and invite participation, challenging and blurring the role of artist, performer and viewer, have been presented in the gallery through the works of Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Calder and Jean Tinguely. Katakata takes inspiration from these artists but expands on the potential for interaction through mobile digital technologies.

Katakata concerns how sound design might integrate technology, with the familiarity of the smartphone, as a means of affording participatory, game driven sound experiences. A web application allows the user to use their own smartphone to interact with the kinetic sculpture and manipulate subtle variations of its sound in realtime using orientation data sent from the mobile device to the sculpture itself.

Katakata involves the passive spectator becoming an active participant by way of the accelerometer in their smartphone, which is tilted in the same way as they would play with a Jacob's ladder. The tilting action is used to trigger and shape the sound output of the sculpture. The gesture of mapping the phone 180 degrees, to face away from the user and the minimal interface, effectively distances the user from the phone, focussing attention back into the installation space. The sculpture uses Max/MSP, Arduino and Node.js technologies.

eBee
Pins & Needles



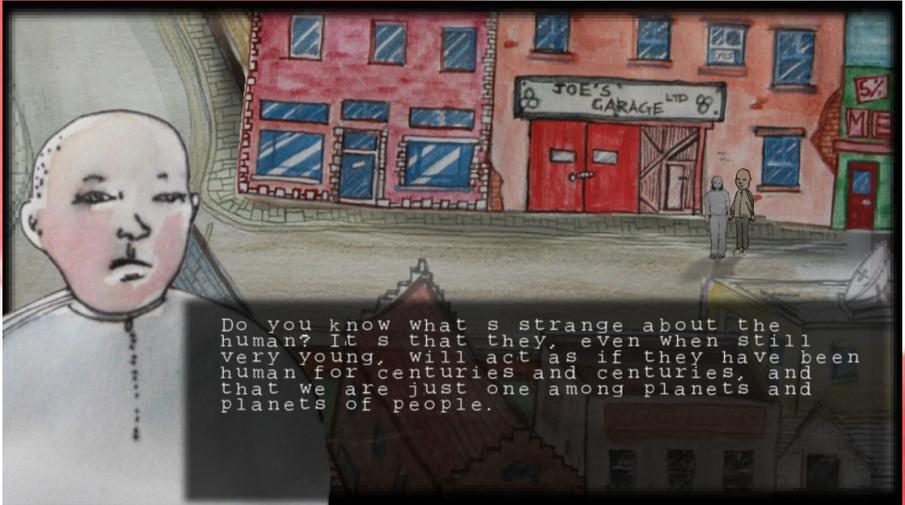
eBee

eBee is an electronics quilting game, merging the social contexts of quilting bees and board games, the strategic and systems thinking of gaming and electronics, and the tangible nature of electronics and quilting. The project aims to bridge the generational, ethnic and gender gaps in electronics and eTextiles through its incorporation of traditional quilting methods and practices, and accessibility of board games. We envision a future in which families, friends, and communities collaborate to build and play the game, and learn about electronics along the way.

The goal of eBee is to build a circuit from the central hub, or power source, through an island, and back to the power source. The game is played with hexagonal fabric game tiles outfitted with conductive fabric pathways and attached to a game board with conductive velcro. eBee can be played as a two-player, team-based or co-op game. When players create successful circuits, an effect, such as LED lights, is triggered on the island. The game produces rich emergent gameplay and results in the creation of a collaborative, illuminated quilt.

Beeswing

Jack King-Spooner



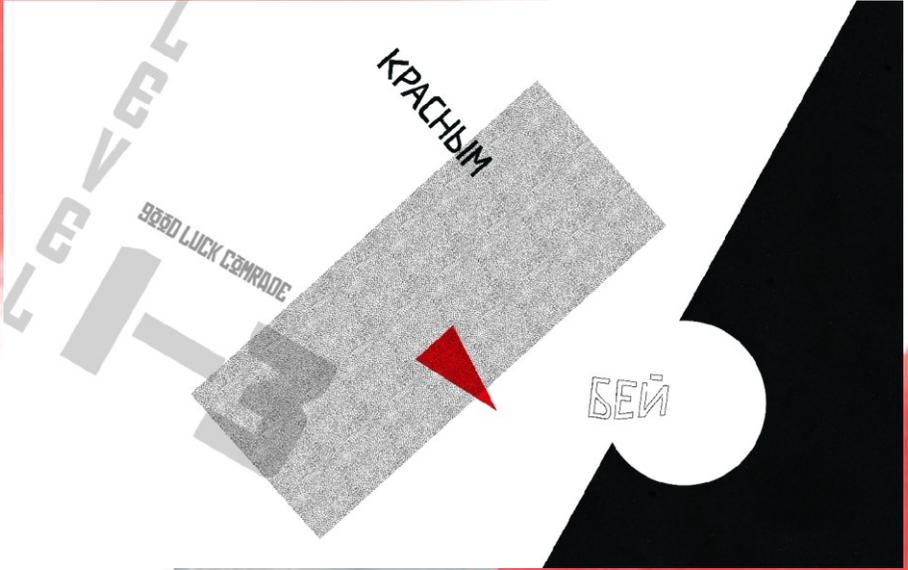
If only there was a way to catch memories, keep them fresh, have them lying around to relive again.



Beeswing

Beeswing is a game set in a small village in rural Scotland, the village I grew up in. Visit the places and people who shaped a life and discover their stories. Represented in hand painted, water colour graphics with a unique, acoustic soundtrack.

Lissitzky's Revenge
Chris Totten



Lissitzky's Revenge

Lissitzky's Revenge is an action game based on the poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (El Lissitzky, 1920) using paper cut-outs as the art medium. Players are a red wedge and must destroy the white circle in each scene by solving puzzles based on works by Lissitzky. As players interact with the game, they encounter constructivist interpretations of classic arcade games such as *Yar's Revenge* (Atari, 1982) and *Frogger* (Konami, 1981).

This Suprematist game is a simple action game for games' sake - or is it actually a Constructivist propaganda game? Will you play the way it tells you to or will you think for yourself?



Acknowledgement

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- **Abertay University**, Dundee Scotland
- **American University Game Lab**, Washington, DC, USA
- **Hannah Maclure Centre**, Dundee Scotland
- **Digital Games Research Association**
- **Foundations of Digital Games Conference**

We would also like to thank Clare Brennan and William Huber for their individual efforts in this event.

For previous Blank Arcade Exhibits visit:

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