
Conference review: “Forgetting why you’re here”, Counterplay 2019.

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Review

“Forget why you’re here” was the mission. Set to us by festival organiser and play consultant Mathias Poulsen in his opening welcome (after the song and dance session) we were to forget why we had come and instead immerse ourselves in the joy and agency of play. This was the beginning of three days of play in the inspiring surroundings of DOKK1, Aarhus’ public library and cultural centre.

DOKK1 is a perfect venue for this festival, with so much stimulus to think differently. An amazing playground surrounds the building, framing perfectly the openness and beauty of the library itself, with areas of calm and concentration, but also fun. It is clearly adored by the community it serves, and was full of people of all ages every day I was there.

The festival itself took over the venue in a respectful way (“the fire warden is not here to play...”), with various activities running throughout the building. Art installations including The Backhome Agency, where we were given space to create mini-art works of our memories of home using art materials and a type writer, and then record stories onto tapes that could be “rented out” by others. I found this a calming intervention in a very busy schedule. Play really takes it out of you, and throughout the festival was a strong acknowledgement of the need for downtime. Retreats were part of the programme, and other installations, including Playing at the Edge of the Bed by Lucy Read, allowed people to lie down and talk to others in a more comfortable, less strenuous way.

Parts of this festival were very physical, often in ways that were demanding or on occasion intrusive - the first activity in the first session involved forcing your way through a stranger’s legs. During different sessions people climbed, danced, crouched on all fours acting as goblins, and generally clowned.

The festival really emphasised being a community, with a manifesto and the website explaining the aims of this community; to allow everyone to live more playful lives in playful societies. The website explains the various benefits of play, which is “not the means to an end, but the end itself”. The manifesto argues that society resists play, and that cultivating a play community which allows individuals to feel less alone will lead to the courage

to challenge non-playful structures. From what I saw within the conference, this community believes that any structure can be playful, and proves that with their actions. The most interesting sessions I attended showcased the values expressed within the manifesto in unexpected places, in reflective ways that had made a difference to the structures the speakers were part of.

Delegates heard from a variety of keynotes, including Troy Innocent from Melbourne, who's game, the Wayfinder app, was available for anyone to play, exploring Aarhus through urban codes. Troy talked about how he had developed Wayfinder and the fictional city of Ludea in which it is set, and the principals of his work with "playable cities". Troy maintains that any augmented reality play experiences should give experiences of the worlds around you, such as how Wayfinder asks you to explore the environment for visual clues, rather than being totally immersed in the game world whilst just happening to be physically outside, as some popular augmented reality urban exploration games can be. He also discussed the Melbourne Art Trams project, making public transport playable. Each tram was turned into a musical score through painting a coded piece of art onto the side of the tram which could be fed through an app. Again, this fed into the conference's ethos of how to change a structure to be more playful, at a scale that could impact a city.

Other speakers explored play in other areas such as education. Tilde Bekker who works within games design academia, encouraged us to try out implementing design decisions related to digital properties onto inanimate playful objects to create digital open-play experiences. She gave examples of this from her students' projects, including inserting speakers into ball pit balls that are triggered to make noises depending on if they are moved, or remain still for a certain period. Tilde Bekker also argued that it is important to use child development theory to inspire your design decisions, which was a great example of why using theory within practice makes a difference to the outcome.

The implementation of social and psychological theories within the more technical games design field was a theme that ran throughout the conference. Play could be the holistic medium that unites the humanities with engineering, to be benefit of both sectors. My favourite session of the conference was Sabine Harrer's "Playing with grief". This fascinating and deeply moving talk explored how her own experience of grief led to her realising that some video games do not support the basic life experience of loss, and in fact erase death. Death is the "bad" ending to a game, the game is over and you are encouraged to resurrect yourself; in a world of "capitalist immortality", death is equivalent to failure. Video games themselves on occasion trivialise loss, with some having gameplay which includes the gameplay "press X to mourn".

Sabine use a participatory, "muse based" game design theory to connect a group of women who had experienced pregnancy loss with BA Game Design students, designing a game that represented the relationship the bereaved felt they now had. The students went through the process of realising that being vulnerable should be incorporated within their skillset and that one cannot truly represent another's experience within a game, but one can at least sensitively and empathetically respond to it.

I found this fascinating, and enlightening, and it made me really think about how this paradigm must have affected people. I will be looking up Sabine's book "Games and Bereavement: How Video Games Represent Attachment, Loss and Grief" and would encourage anyone involved in games design to reflect on how human experience and emotion is represented within their games.

Other sessions I attended awoke my senses through explaining the science of smell, and the cultures of food. I also found inspiration to talk to others through cooperatively lifting blocks of concrete our lunchtime drinks were attached to be an inspired idea for networking.

By the Saturday morning of the conference I was feeling more than a little socially hungover and the last speakers, Annabelle Neilsen and Kenn Munk from A Secret Club, were the perfect way to end my conference, though the programme went on to include a bonfire in a forest. A Secret Club discussed how craftsmanship and attention to detail used in conjunction with traditional storytelling approaches can bring about playful moments of introspection and wonder. Throughout the conference A Secret Club had been playing a game involving passing a beautiful key and various other objects from delegate to delegate, whilst dressed as imaginary Scouts. They take inspiration from a whole variety of sources, but their practice aims for individual moments of wonder rather than grand-scale performative play, which was refreshingly different in a very extrovert society. "The shell is an amazing space" and fun can be quiet, personal, and private. I was very much inspired by A Secret Club to notice the small moment of storytelling and play in my own life, and their well thought out and reflective practice was a highlight of the programme.

The conference was a truly international experience and a great opportunity to learn from playful practitioners from across the world in a beautiful and inspiring setting. Anyone with an interest in playful practices, or joining a truly dedicated community of playful people would be well advised to attend in future years.