

What Is It Like to Play like a Dog?

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ABSTRACT

The project consists of building a dog playground for humans that can be used by DiGRA participants to critically deconstruct the design of pet toys, spatial constraints, naming stereotypes, and training facilities for dogs (ladders, hurdles, rubber bones, chill zones, etc).

Keywords

animal playgrounds, dog playgrounds, pet toys, installation, experimentation, Nagel, Groos

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

There is a famous paper by philosopher Thomas Nagel titled "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (1974). I add: "Or to Play like a Dog?" The project I designed to be staged and discussed at DiGRA2024 in Mexico/ Guadalajara is an investigation into animal playgrounds and about the assumptions, prejudices, and observations humans have when designing such playgrounds. Particularly I want to focus on dog playgrounds that can be found in my hometown Berlin as well as in many other cities.

The practical part of the project consists of building a dog playground for humans that can be used by DiGRA participants to create critical awareness about pet toys, spatial constraints, naming stereotypes, and the intentions behind the construction of challenges for dogs (optimization of skills on ladders, hurdles, balancing stems, etc.) In the playground area the visitors might climb ladders, jump over hurdles or play with plastic toys.



Figure 1: Toy for dogs, ca. 30 cm

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The obstacles in the playground are designed to resemble animal playground equipment scaled up to human size. The objects in the playground will be inspired by commercially available play equipment, but designed according to the spatial and aesthetic frame of the project.



Figure 2: Doggy seats, balancing toy “the cross”

It is according to Nagel not possible for the playground users to experience “what it is like to be” a dog, but the installation will trigger reflection about what we think a dog might experience with its sensory capabilities and motoric abilities. On the one hand the installation suggests that the subjective character of experience makes impossible a claim for empathic human-animal communication based on objective consciousness. On the other hand the visitors will notice that even amongst humans objective consciousness is likely to be impossible – even more so between humans and dogs, or amongst dogs of different kind.



Figure 3: Jump challenge for dogs with a human user

photo by the author,
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The installation is a statement by an artist on playgrounds, human-animal relationships, human-animal communication, but also on topics that are related to problems and questions in game studies:

1. To what extent can game studies make valid statements on animal play, if these statements include claims about the play experience? (cf. Negt and Kluge 1981: "Otters enjoy ... "; Hudson 1895: "periodical fits of gladness"; Massumi 2014: "sense of beauty" etc.)
2. Are the nine categories of animal play, that Karl Groos compiles (1898), useful and sufficient, when we observe what happens at animal playgrounds? (Groos: experimentation, change of place, hunting, imitation, games of love, etc.)
3. Is Thomas Nagel right, when he proposes that we can only experience the life and behaviour of an animal, but hardly speculate about the mindset? Is playfulness as a conscious state applicable to non-human animals?

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