

***TREE*game Design Reflections and Dispatches from Treewhere**

Margarete Jahrmann, Thomas Brandstetter

University of Applied Arts Vienna, Experimental Game Cultures
Georg-Coch-Platz 2
1010 Wien, Austria

margarete.jahrmann@uni-ak.ac.at, thomas.brandstetter@uni-ak.ac.at

Stefan Glasauer

Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg
Computational Neuroscience
03048 Cottbus, Germany
stefan.glasauer@b-tu.de

ABSTRACT

In this paper we describe and reflect the design process of a radically new approach in experimental game design, applying *Ludic Method* and *The Psycholudic Approach* in an idea of games for/with non-humans: The Tree Game prototype is an experimental board game that investigates new ways of addressing environmentalism, democracy and the relationship between society and nature. Our game features two radical mechanics: 1. A fundamental asymmetry in rules between the roles of “citizen” and “industrialist” and “lake” and “wood”. While the first two play something akin to a typical Eurogame, the latter can’t influence the game state, but instead play a drawing game that prioritizes creativity and expression. 2. Players’ roles are switched randomly at irregular intervals. This means that each player will potentially play each role during the game. Our aim is to create a game that lets the players embody multi-perspectivity and radically different concepts of agency.

Keywords

Ludic method, Board game, critical play, environmentalism, game mechanics

PREAMBLE DISPATCH

How can we think beyond the human-centric perspective? Even if a purely rational understanding of the role of non-human beings in our world were possible, this would not satisfy our longing for a subjective and empathic sense of what it might be like to be such a being. There may be a solution that is much more deeply rooted than human culture, which has been superseded by seemingly rational practices such as research, inquiry and science. That solution is PLAY.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

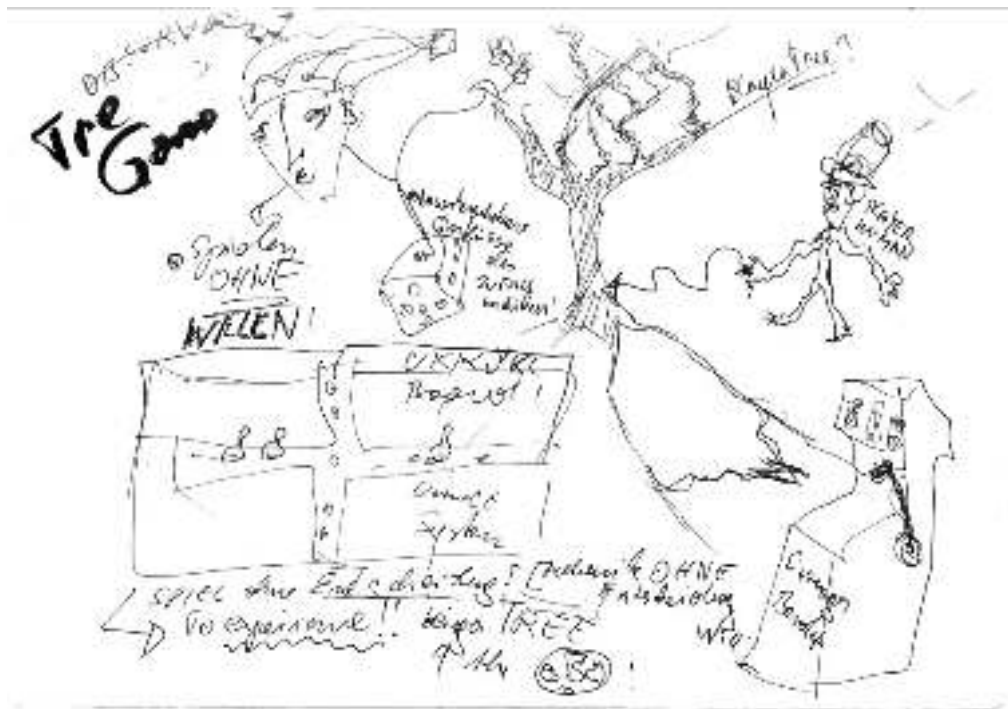


Figure 1: The first concept drawing for the *TREEgame*, made after a conversation between author MJ and author SG under the cherry blossom tree. Margarete Jahrman, 2024

INTRODUCTION

The *TREEgame* aims to be an experimental artistic game, closer to an art piece that can be experienced and interpreted subjectively than to a mainstream board game where winning is the ultimate goal. The *TREEgame* combines several game mechanics in radically new ways, turning some of them from “dark” to “bright”, exposing others as deception or illusion, and implementing one that is rarely ever used in games. The *TREEgame* is a novel board-based game for four players that investigates a highly simplified ecosystem of human and non-human roles: a citizen, an industrialist, a forest, and a lake. The citizen tries to fulfil predefined tasks of collecting combinations of goods, the industrialist produces goods and aims to increase production, but at the same time creates pollution, the forest and the lake also create goods, but to a lesser amount, and suffer from the pollution. While some aspects of the *TREEgame* resemble mainstream mechanics of collecting, other aspects remind of gambling, and yet other of collaborative games. In the following, we reflect on design decisions of the *TREEgame* interspersed by “dispatches from treewhere”, thoughts behind the thoughts of designing this game. But first we need to briefly explain the rules of the game and the game setup.

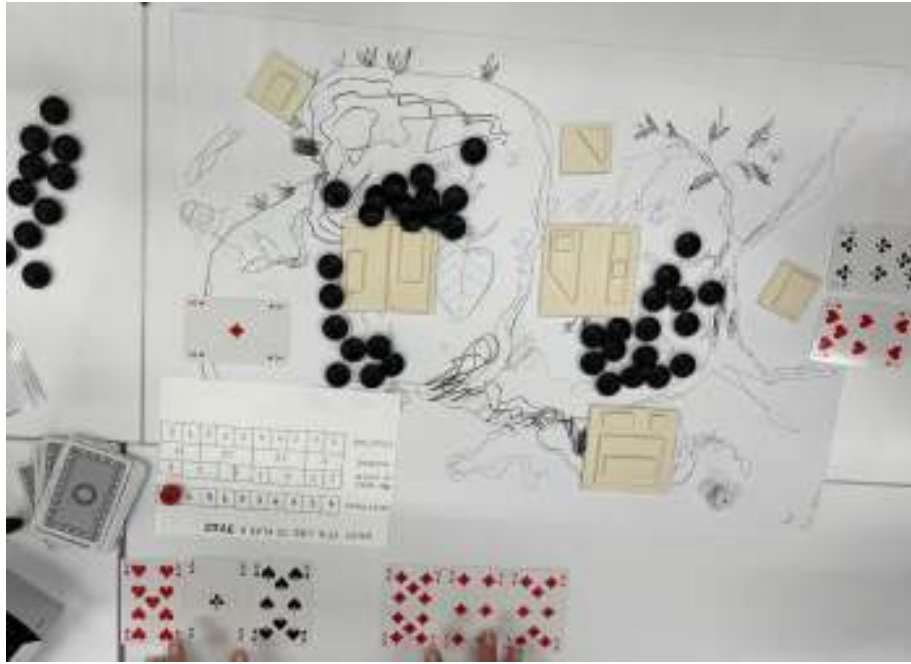


Figure 1: The end state of the *TREEgame* after a playtesting session.

RULES AND SETUP OF THE GAME

In the following, a simplified description of the rules is given with the aim to convey the general idea of gameplay without the need for explaining all the details.

Setup (see figure 1): to play the *TREEgame*, you need a small number of components, most of which can be sourced from other games or everyday objects (e.g. playing cards to represent goods, tokens to represent pollution, play money, dice). A large sheet of paper serves as the playing board.

Rules: each player has its own set of rules, with lake and forest having the same.

Citizen: the citizen's goal is to fulfil predefined tasks that require collecting a set of goods produced by the industrialist or forest/lake (e.g., collect 5 cards of the same suit). Each time a task is fulfilled, the citizen can build a new house by placing a house-object on the paper, and then gets a new task. To collect or exchange goods, the citizen spends action points. They can spend those point also to change the industrialist's investment scale or remove pollution from the tree or the lake. The winning condition is possession of three houses.

Industrialist: the goal of the industrialist is selling goods to gather money which is spent for building villas. The action points of the industrialist are spent for increasing investments, that is, moving the token on the investment table, and/or filling the store with goods (cards). The possible number of goods in the store depends on the investment scale. Producing goods produces pollution, which is placed on the lake and the forest drawn on the big paper sheet. The winning condition for the industrialist is possession of three villas.

Forest/lake: the players of these roles follow instructions that are determined by throwing the dice: remove a certain part of the pollution and produce goods depending on the level of pollution. If pollution is too severe, no goods are produced.

In addition, each turn the players are required to add to the drawing on the paper, or, if pollution is above a certain threshold, delete parts of the drawing.

At the beginning of each player's turn, one die is thrown to determine whether a role change takes place. If the die shows a six, each player gives up their current role to another player, with the next role also being determined by chance.

DESIGN REQUIREMENTS

The design process of the *TREEgame* is faced with a series of requirements concerning the intended target audience, the gameplay experience, the management of player expectations stemming from genre conventions and the rules and mechanisms used. Some of those requirements are in tension with each other, while others even contradict each other to a certain extent. Two sets of requirements proved to be the most challenging, namely those concerning the experience of learning the game and those relating to the experience of gameplay. Let's have a closer look at them.

Dispatch 1: The Psycholudic Research Group developed a new game principle that is derived from the experience of changing player positions in the game. In a series of playtests of established board games (e.g. *Catan* (Teuber 1995/2013), *Kezboard* (self-published 2019)) from October 2023 to March 2024, we developed the constant role change as an extension and “game changer” mechanic applicable to existing mechanics. Freedom from a role can be achieved with the help of chance (die/random generator in AI and computer games). A change of perspective takes place. MULTIPERSPECTIVITY is the first finding/result of our experimental game series. This mechanic of rapid and unpredictable change of perspective can be applied to democratic processes and can be understood as a relevant social principle. It can influence our thinking about the environment and real-world social conditions: not everything that exists has to be fundamentally reversed in a “revolutionary” way, but is changed situationally and continuously, but only in one respect: that of perspective. This change can be applied to established and entrenched game mechanics. Its impact on the question: “What does winning mean?” is immense and radical. A randomized change of perspective is simple but effective.

The first tension exists between the need for differentiating the player roles and the mechanism of role change. The player roles (industrialist, citizens, lake and woods) have to be differentiated to achieve one of the core aims of the game, namely multiperspectivity: perspectives can only be truly different if the players experience the game and its world in different ways, according to the role they occupy at the moment. The *TREEgame* is designed to make the experience of the lake and woods players incommensurable to those of the citizen and industrialist players.

Both play completely different kinds of games: The citizens and industrialists play games that resemble so-called Eurogames (Woods 2012), where the accumulation of victory points through some kind of resource management is central, with clear and transparent rules and mechanisms that give agency to the players to help them make decisions towards achieving of those goals. The lake and woods players, on the other hand, play a game that is more akin to a creative drawing exercise. Their decisions don't affect the play space of the citizens and industrialists - the removal of pollution, which affects how many cards are available and therefore has a clear impact on the strategy of the citizen, is entirely rule-based and randomised.

Dispatch 2: One of the initial questions leading to the game was what it would be like to play a tree. Is playing a tree like standing there, rooted in the ground, waving your branches, throwing apples at the industrialist's car? That picture already resembles an animistic point of view, with the tree having an agency, some free will of deciding what to do next. However, while some of us certainly would subscribe to such 'soulfulness' of trees, others would doubt it and consider the tree, or a lake, as re-acting or adapting to changes in the environment, but not having an agency like us, like our dog, maybe even like the mosquito trying to bite you. Thus, playing a being without agency means following instructions. These instructions can be influenced by external events outside of the gameplay, which are simulated by the randomness of the dice. Notice that the die in this view is not implementing interventions of divine destiny, but simply the influences of events not accounted for by the simplifying implementation of the rules.

Thus, while we acknowledge that, in the sense of Jane Bennet (2010), attributing vitality to all materialities might offer an option for playing trees or lakes and feeling empathy towards them, we would like to critically review and embody this view through the practice of play. Consequently, our question was: can we embrace concepts like Bennet's notion of "the agency of assemblages" but find another more differentiated form to play the tree? Are there alternatives, which do not tempt us to anthropomorphize too much by projecting our own accustomed model of agency on trees or lakes, but still emphasize their efficacy in the interaction with the other players? In this sense, we attempted to find out what playing "a being without agency" could be like without falling into the trap of what, in ethnology, is diagnosed as "going native": pretending to be exactly like the other without having made the unique experiences that shaped them. Because it is not possible to be or feel like a tree — but it is possible to play a tree! To have a truly respectful relationship with non-human entities, it is necessary to acknowledge and respect the differences. It should be noted that Bennet herself does acknowledge these differences: in an interview (Khan 2009) she clarifies: "the agency of assemblages of which I speak is not the strong kind of agency traditionally attributed to humans or God."

If the players of the tree or lake are asked to draw something, they may freely decide what to draw, but this has an exclusively aesthetic effect on the playing surface - it doesn't change victory conditions, game state or strategies for the citizens and industrialists. Their game can be seen as an expressive way of world-building that is closer to narrative role-playing games like *The Quiet Year* (Alder 2013). In contrast to those RPGs, however, this game has not only radically reduced agency, but it also offers only a very rudimentary narrative framework, meaning that it's entirely up to the players to imbue their activity with meaning and to interpret what other players have drawn.

Dispatch 3: What happens (to capitalism and the climate) when the prospect of PROFIT is removed as a motivation to play? At the Creative Days Vienna/Klimabiennale¹ in June 2024, we put the game principle up for discussion in a lecture. The business expert and head of the Vienna Creative Agency immediately posed the question: What does profit mean now? Is the concept of profit becoming completely obsolete? How does the capitalistic idea of profit change in a situation of permanent change of "role" - i.e. role play in a radical form? In the debriefing of the experimental game situation, our playtesters commented that the change of roles made winning and the associated strategy "feel wrong".

Back to the *TREEgame*: While citizens and industrialists both play a more traditional boardgame, their roles are themselves differentiated by distinct goals and distinct ways of achieving those goals. Sure, from a mechanical perspective, both must collect a certain number of victory points in order to win. However, while the citizens play a set-collection game that offers them some agency and tactical options in planning how to best collect the cards they need for a given set, the industrialist's agency is much more limited.

From a design perspective, however, the asymmetry of roles combined with the mechanism of role change poses a problem for the experience of learning the game: as each role has distinct rules, and each player will potentially play all roles, each player must learn the rules for all the roles. Usually, asymmetrical boardgames with very distinct mechanisms for different factions (for example *Root* (Wehrle 2018)) don't include role change during the game, so the players can learn and practice their faction's rules at least for the length of one game, if not several.² While the *TREEgame* is not overtly complex, the potentially rapid change of roles presents a challenge for conveying and teaching the different rules for each role.

Dispatch 4: Democratic systems include the possibility, or even necessity, for changing roles in their political and administrative processes. The president of the United States can only serve for two periods, then has to return to his, and hopefully at some point also her, previous role in society. Many countries have lay judges within the jurisdicative system, who serve for a certain period, and thus change their role from normal citizen to judge. Only about 40 % of the German municipalities are administered by a full-time mayor, and even those are elected. By design, politicians in democratic systems change roles, even if they stay politicians, when the government changes, or when they are asked to assume a different role in the government. It is the change of perspective that comes along with changing a role in society that makes it so valuable for democracy.

The second tension is between the necessity for each player to have the specific rules for three distinct roles (lake and tree have the same rules) present in their mind, which presents a certain cognitive effort, while at the same time often playing roles that have little actual agency (lake, woods or even industrialist). This can lead to a perceived imbalance in mental workload and reward, which in turn can create frustration, as players might feel cheated if they invest the time and effort to learn and remember a series of rules without being able to use them most of the time. So, the design challenge is devising rules for several asymmetrical roles that model a fairly complex system in an abstract way, while keeping those rules simple enough to enable each player to learn them in a short amount of time and memorise them in an instant (namely, as soon as the role change happens).

One answer to this is to try to keep the interface, that is the playing surface, playing pieces and playing aids, as clear and intuitive as possible. This, however, stands in a tension with the drawing aspect of the game (Jahrmann 2024), as the game board will become more and more cluttered by pollution markers and doodles in a variety of styles as the game progresses.

DEGENERATE STRATEGIES

At the outset, the *TREEgame* seems to offer what is called a "degenerate strategy" in game design. The concept refers to strategies that lead to an automatic win for one

player, as there is no possible way to counter it, and therefore ruin the play experience for other players.³ In the *TREEgame*, this strategy would be for the citizen to use as many actions as possible to keep the investment scale down and only obtain their cards from the lake or woods. The success of this depends on the distribution of cards in the deck, as there might always be a card that is needed in the industrialist's display, but even then, the citizen can change their Wishlist or even risk taking the occasional card from the industrialist. In any way, the game will probably be very boring and frustrating for the industrialist, who will be unable to do anything, will only get a very small amount of revenue and therefore will be extremely unlikely to win. However, it will probably also be a boring game for the citizen, who will be in for the long haul - as the lake's and wood's card displays are very limited, it will take a long time to collect the necessary cards to gather enough victory points for winning the game.

This can be labelled as a degenerate strategy, something that, according to common opinion, is to be avoided in game design by all means. Games - especially Eurogames - are meant to be fair and balanced, offering all players an equal chance of winning.⁴ Degenerate strategies, argue Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 214), destroy "meaningful play": "In general, you want to avoid them like the plague".

Dispatch 5: But Salen and Zimmermann were not the first to dig out this concept of degenerative strategy in relation to play. If you read a bit through the lines of mathematical game theory, you come across a counter-degenerative strategy in classical mathematical game theory. There is a similarity between Eurogames and the Nash Equilibrium⁵ as an anti-capitalist concept, opposed to the usual and overrated zero-sum-game model prevalent in most classical games. The promising equilibrium concept of Nash introduces a social win for all members of a group, an equilibrium of win that gives some reward and social revenue to all players. In further developing *the ludic method* (Jahrmann 2024) as form of performative play we were always inspired by this idea. But, of course, Nash equilibrium is only achieved through ratio, through logics and not through game mechanics, as we suggest in the concept of multiperspectivity applied in the *TREEgame*. We suggest experiencing the simple change of point of view, of a role. The affect that is caused by the multiperspectivity in play results in an empathic shift of roles. It is very insightful to experience in first person what it really means to have a very comfortable "winning position" or, in contrast, a starting position where you have no capital at all.

One could, perhaps, make a point that, from a simulationist perspective, degenerate strategies can be part of the system that the game wants to depict, so they may have to be implemented in a certain way. For example, one reason why social inequality is reproduced is that degenerate strategies are institutionalised for social elites - if your parents were millionaires, you won't need to make many decisions to also end up as a millionaire. However, this is not what the degenerate strategy of our game does: it does not profit the industrialist, but the citizens. So, it's not only boring, but could also be criticised for being wrong from a simulation perspective.

In this aspect, we take up the critical approach to simulation recently advocated by Maurice Suckling, who makes a strong case for analogue games due to their power to simulate by simplification: "What defines the simulation's accuracy is that a metaphor or analogy of the process, or the perception of the process, is rendered faithfully." (Suckling 2025, 55). How faithfully the *TREEgame* manages this is, of course, open to discussion.

Dispatch 6: But sometimes boredom is absolutely necessary to provoke creativity. And creativity is part of the dynamic development of the gameboard, that also emotionally touches players. This is one reason why minimal game mechanics, as in low interaction games, are a growing field in casual video games (Wild 2021). Boredom in video games is for example applied in the genre of incremental games, games with little gameplay action and automated game progress, such as *Cookie Clicker* (Thiennot 2013) or the social idle game *Cow Clicker* by game theorist and designer Ian Bogost (2010).

While game theory offers interesting and useful insights, it does not necessarily reflect the way people actually play games. Not all people who play games, probably only a tiny fraction, behave as rational actors schooled by game theory - otherwise, the gambling industry wouldn't be profitable. So, let's look at how the *TREEgame* was played so far⁶.

The first observation is that so far, no player has used this strategy. There could be two reasons for that. First, that no one has realised this strategy. This is insofar possible as strategic planning is hindered by the role change mechanism, which might discourage investing too much cognitive effort into devising a winning strategy for one position, as the roles will change sooner or later anyway. And at the outset, it looks like the industrialist position is the one most likely to win. This impression gets especially strong once the investment scale hits a certain threshold, resulting in a rapid increase in revenue for the industrialist and a positive feedback loop for lake and woods, which are swamped by pollution they can no longer remove - which, in turn, reduces the cards available in their display, forcing the citizens to take cards from the industrialist, thereby giving them actions to increase or uphold the investment scale. Combined with the fact that the industrialist doesn't have many decisions points, this dynamic creates the impression that the game is rigged in favour of the industrialist position, with an easy game-winning strategy available to them.

The other reason why we haven't seen the degenerate strategy implemented might be that people have realised it but dismissed it as too boring. Again, role change may be a crucial factor here: First, it makes following a consistent strategy much more difficult, as successive players of the role would have to stick to the same plan. Second, it may also make players prone to go for the immediate gratification, to get a sense of achievement before the roles change again. In this case, citizens would grab the cards where they could get them, thereby potentially giving the industrialist actions and making it easier for them to increase the investment scale.

Dispatch 7: This is a good place to consider taking the metaphor of our game more literally. If the real-world citizens would use the “degenerate” strategy of the game, this would mean not to buy goods, but live from what nature, the trees and the lake in the game, have to offer. Such a “back to nature” strategy would inevitably disrupt any business, even that of the richest “industrialist”. If we all would stop consuming, capitalism would break down. Evidently, in the real world, this strategy is not used, except maybe by some indigenous tribes in the Amazonian jungle, who refuse to get in touch with the rest of the world. One reason, as in the game, certainly is the immediate gratification that prevents us from being in for the long haul. But what about the other reason, the role change? Didn't we just mention that role change might even be a necessary ingredient of democratic systems? Yes, and it is not that role change that keeps us from adopting the “degenerate” strategy as long road to success. It is the generational role

change. Take a farmer, who plants trees, which will be used by the grandchildren to repair the roof truss, or to be sold as beams. However, if the farmer's children decide to break with the tradition and sell the forest, because the "industrialist" makes an offer that cannot be refused, then the degenerate strategy fails, just like in the game.

However, this whole discussion touches only one aspect of the game: namely the conventional Eurogame-type game played by the citizen and industrialist. If we also consider lake and woods, which after all make up 50% of the players, the whole question of a degenerate strategy is turned upside down. Because for those player positions, what is a degenerate strategy for the others might be the most enjoyable strategy: first, because it makes the game take longer, giving them more opportunities to draw and express their creativity, and second, because it prevents pollution from taking over their areas of the board, thereby preventing the need to erase and destroy things they have created.

This is then another change of perspective the game enacts: A strategy that threatens to destroy "meaningful play" for the industrialist and citizen becomes a strategy that *creates* meaningful play for the lake and woods.

But what does it mean if you can win a game, but it will be boring for one player, frustrating for the second and exciting for the rest? It all depends on the perspective: from the perspective of citizen and industrialist, this is plainly a stupid design flaw. From their perspective, the lake and woods gameplay are only a nice but irrelevant supplement, an afterthought that contributes nothing to what is important to the play experience: strategizing, overcoming obstacles, winning. However, from the perspective of the lake and woods, the game the others play becomes a framework enabling or hindering their own activities. While its categories (optimising decisions, winning etc.) don't apply and are irrelevant for them, they still have a profound impact on their play experience, as the way citizen and industrialist play the game can make the experience of lake and wood enjoyable (enabling them to have many opportunities to draw) or frustrating (causing lots of pollution and making them destroy drawings).

Dispatch 8: This leads also to the reflections of Richard Sennett in *The Craftsman* (2008), where the parlour games of 19th century aristocrats were given as an example how the act of play helped to raise empathy for the position of working-class craftsman. In role-play costumes upper class people played to be a craftsman, for example a shoemaker or artisan in wood. Finally, this led to an empathy towards craftsmanship and the condition of working-class people. We also know this in German speaking carnival role-play, where the female co-author remembers well to be dressed up as a sweet "Schuster Bua" (cobbler's apprentice). However, with the taking of a role, empathy was established. Sennett takes up the idea of roleplay in his latest book *The Performer. Art, Life, Politics* (2024), where he speaks again about the importance of role play as a strategy of resistance to given roles and condition.

The *TREEgame* enables this change of perspectives with the mechanism of role change.

ROLE CHANGE

The regular but randomized change of roles is one of the core mechanisms of the *TREEgame*. It is something that is very rarely seen in games today, even in role-playing games that stress the narrative over winning. Perhaps this is because today, the agonal aspects of games have become prevalent, with the "winner's triumph" being considered to have "incontestable value" not only in games, but also in society (Callois 2001, 14). And the winner is always connected to an individual, either a single person or a group identity, be it a sports team or a nation. But if we remember our childhood, or observe children playing, we will discover role change in one of the most popular games, namely tag.

Dispatch 9: Card games are another type of game where role change happens, even though less obviously than in tag-like games.⁷ In most fast-paced trick-taking card games, many rounds are played successively until some final ending condition is met or the players decide that it's too late at night for another round. In several of those card games for three or four players, two of the players can form a team for the round to fight against the other one or two, but the team changes basically every round. This is a change of role: the player who was your enemy this round may be your friend and teammate next round, and the other way round. Your role in the game is decoupled from your identity as player. This card-game change of roles from opponent to teammate and vice versa strongly resembles that of democratic parties, at least in multi-party democratic systems, where changing coalitions help preventing a division of society as can be observed in the two-party democracy of the USA. Even tough trick-based card games with role change have been invented long before establishing multi-party democracy in the modern era, but the role change may as well have been a mirror of the changing coalitions of European countries over centuries.

Variants of tag have been played by children in many cultures throughout the ages. From the perspective of the game structure, all variants of tag are asymmetrical games: The catcher has a different goal than the other players. While the latter try to evade, the catcher's role is to touch the others. Touching is the event that triggers the rule stating that the chased becomes the chaser ("it", in the parlance of many children games). However, the fundamentally asymmetrical set-up of the game is counteracted by the change of player roles over time: over the course of several rounds, each player can potentially take on the role of the catcher as well as that of the evader. In this way, the game emphasises social interaction more than competition: "Most variations of Tag have no clear winners or losers [...]" (Hansen 2009, 699). The game also has no explicit ending condition and, due to the dynamics of continuous role-change, is self-perpetuating. In the words of a child, it is "an endless game" (Opie and Opie 1969, p. 62).⁸

Our game is neither as fast-paced nor as free-moving as tag. The *TREEgame* has an ending condition, which is determined by the game state (in the form of points accumulated) of the citizen and industrialist positions. It does not automatically do away with classical board-game mechanisms, structures and goals. There is nothing in the game that says that playing the lake or the woods is, or should, be more enjoyable than playing citizen and industrialist. Rather, the mechanism of role change opens a space for reflection and discussion. It encourages the players to consider and reflect about their experiences, to think about what they enjoyed, what they didn't and why.

DRAWING

Drawing has long had a place in play practices, harking back at least to the surrealist game of *cadavre exquis*. First played as a language game, it also was used as a collective drawing exercise in which each player would draw on a section of paper that was folded, so they could not see what the others had already drawn. The game mechanic was supposed to facilitate the manifestations of a collective unconscious. For the surrealists, such games were tools to liberate artistic expression from the constraint of a bourgeois individual (Flanagan 2013, 158). This was taken up in actual experimental arts games, as for example in the AI-supported drawing games *Tree[AI]d* (Jahrmann & Glasauer 2024), where drawings are generated as public play action by a single button press.

While *cadavre exquis* is still played as a game today (one of the authors played it as a youth without being aware of its pedigree), most often, drawing is found in contemporary party games. Probably originating with *Activity* (Catty 1990), such games use drawing as an "unnecessary obstacle" to be overcome in the process of playing, as the other players have to guess what is depicted by the picture created.⁹ For this reason, drawing in those games tends towards the figurative, and for many people a big aspect of the joy and fun derived from those games stems from watching the clumsy efforts of the drawers and the resulting inadequacy of their figurative representations.

In recent years, there has developed a third strand, namely the use of drawing as a game mechanic in collaborative world-building games, such as *The Quiet Year* (Alder 2013). There, the players create a map of the game world that also doubles as the game board during the play session. The images have mainly a symbolic function: in *The Quiet Year*, for example, they denote locations, projects the community works on, problems that must be solved and so on. Although the style of the drawings can influence the mood of the game, the drawings are not important in themselves, but rather in what they represent for the emerging narrative of the game. They are means to an end, the end being the creation of the story of how a community deals with different kinds of challenges and problems.

In our game, the drawings have no mechanical function. They are the result of a game mechanic, namely the instructions given to the lake or woods players when certain conditions (pollution below a threshold) are met. They do not, however, influence the further course of the game. The act of drawing might bring joy to the players occupying the lake or woods position at the moment, or it might delight or amuse the others to look at what they have drawn, but it is irrelevant for playing the game as citizens or industrialist. In a sense, they are works of art, to be appreciated on their own grounds.

Dispatch 10: At first, to allow the players of the tree and the lake to draw seemed like violating our intention of giving no agency to these roles. Now the players of the tree and the lake are allowed to do something that goes beyond rolling the dice and following the rules. However, for most players this was an interesting element of the game, even though it is not changing the course of the game at all, but only reinforces the player's feeling of being able to act. Consequently, allowing for this creative element, at least from the viewpoint of the core of the game, is also a dark pattern, because it strengthens the illusion of agency. Whether or not it is used positively here is a question of viewpoint. This aspect of ambiguity is interesting: we have various mechanisms, the rolling of the dice and the drawing, with which we can evoke a kind of empathy with the non-human elements

(precisely those who are not actors). And at the same time, these same mechanisms could also be misused to suggest to us, as members of a community, a capacity to act that we do not have at all.

What style of drawings have we observed in our games so far? The instructions on the lake and wood players' reference card simply state: "Add an element to the map". They do not state what elements to add and what style those elements should be in. Interestingly, almost all our players have opted for figurative, more or less naturalistic images of animals or plants. Few have ventured into the abstract and experimented with ornamental patterns, and none so far have added text.

One reason for this may be the deeply ingrained expectations of what a boardgame with a real-word theme is supposed to look like: namely to represent that theme not only (and most of the time, not even primarily) in its mechanics, but in its graphical features. Most people know that area control in *Monopoly* is indicated by tiny houses, as the theme of *Monopoly* is the real estate market, and that the modular game board of *Catan* depicts representations of craggy mountains, lush fields of grain and unspoiled woods, as the theme of *Catan* is colonising an island.

But do trees dream of squirrels? The *TREEgame* opens a space to question and challenge those conventions. We invite the players to experiment with different drawing styles and conventions and to investigate how those contribute to the emotional dimension, but also the epistemic concern of the game.

CONCLUSION

By proposing "ways of understanding larger cultural issues as well as the games themselves", the *TREEgame* contributes to a radical game design outlined by Mary Flanagan (Flanagan 2013, p. 2) in a twofold way of environmentally conscious artistic game mechanics as introduced in the *Ludic method* (Jahrmann 2024). First, we have critically examined conventions of contemporary board games and arts of drawing. By implementing elements and mechanisms such as the ongoing LIVE drawing of a gameboard from the scratch, starting with an empty sheet of paper in each play round, and a radically asymmetrical set-up, a periodical change of roles as macro-game-mechanic, we offer new ways of experimenting with play experiences. In this way, the *TREEgame* places itself alongside such board games like *Spirit Island* (R. Eric Reuss 2017), role-playing games like *Mörk Borg* (Pelle Nilsson 2019) or art games like *Play It by Trust* (Yoko Ono 1966/2011) or *Judgement Day for 1st Life Game Figures* (Ludic Society 2007), which offer comments and critical investigations of established gaming conventions and traditions. However, the *TREEgame* not only addresses the discourse of gaming, but it also aims at contributing to real-world discussions. This is the second aspect of our ludic experiment: By modelling, albeit extremely simply, real-world dynamics of consumerism and environmental burden, by linking game mechanics, such as role-change, to discussions about democracy, and by letting players get a glimpse of inhabiting the perspectives of a lake or a wood, our game offers a space for learning and empathy. Making space for such a experience is, we think, already a contribution towards a more democratic and equal society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank our friends, colleagues and students who participated in the playtesting of the *TREEgame*. Funded by Austrian Science Fund FWF-PEEK AR787.

REFERENCES

- Alder, A. 2013/2019. *The Quiet Year*. Role-playing game. Amiskwaciy-wâskahikan, USA: Buried Without Ceremony.
- Bafile, C. 2007. "Is This 'It' for Tag?" In *Education World*, 10 August 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20071014012846/http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin/admin498.shtml (accessed 10 Dec 2024).
- Bennett, J. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Bogost, I. 2010. *Cow Clicker*. Video game.
- Burggraf, M. et al. 1983. *Scotland Yard*. Board game. Ravensburger.
- Caillois, R. 2001: *Man, Play and Games*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Calleja, G. 2022. *Unboxed. Board Game Experience and Design*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press .
- Catty, U. et.al. 1990. *Activity*. Board game. Piatnik.
- Conway, B. G., Doom, S. and Truman M. D. 2021. *Root: The Role-Playing Game*. Leder Games.
- Darrow, Ch. and Magie, E. J. 1935. *Monopoly*. Board game. Parker Brothers.
- De Koven, Bernard. 2013. *The Well-Played Game. A Player's Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Eldridge, S. "Nash equilibrium". In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 4 Nov. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/science/Nash-equilibrium>.
- Flanagan, M. 2013. *Critical Play. Radical Game Design*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Glasauer, S. and Jahrman, M. 2024. *Tree[AI]d*. Exhibition Game. Reeperbahnfestival Hamburg.
- Hansen, G. A. 2009. "Tag." In *Encyclopedia of Play in Today's Society*, edited by R. P. Carlisle, p. 699-700. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jahrman, M. 2024. *KOPFGELD und andere LUDISCHE EXPERIMENTE*. Wien: Edition die Angewandte.
- Jahrman, M. 2024. *Ludic Neuro-Performances: An Approach Towards Playful Experiments*. In: [Live Performance and Video Games](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839471739-006), Inspirations, Appropriations and Mutual Transfers. Edited by R. Dreifuss, S. Hagemann and I. Pluta, 73 – 84. Bielefeld: Transcript. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839471739-006>
- Jahrman, M. , Brandstetter, T., Glasauer, S. 2024. *Kopfgeld. Dark play in an AI based individualized money game*. In: *Money | Games | Economies*. Edited by Koenig, N., Denk, N., Pfeiffer, A., Wernbacher, T., Wimmer, S., 171-189. Krems: University of Krems Press. <https://doi.org/10.48341/pwsk-m637>

- Keezboard. 2019. *Keezboard*. Board game. Uitgeest, The Netherlands: [self-published].
- Khan G. 2009. "Agency, nature and emergent properties: An interview with Jane Bennett". *Contemporary Political Theory* 8:90–105.
- Ludic-Society, 2007. *Judgement Day for 1st Life Game Figures*. Plymouth City Art Gallery, UK. <http://ludic-society.net/tagged/>
- Ono, Y. 1966/2011. *Play It by Trust*. Installation. Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.
- Opie, I. and Opie, P. 1969. *Children's Games in Street and Playground*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Parlett, D. 1991. *A History of Card Games*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nilsson, P. 2019. *Mörk Borg*. Role-playing game. Stockholm: Free League Publishing.
- Reuss, E. R. 2017. *Spirit Island*. Board game. Greater Than Games, LLC.
- Salen, K. and Zimmerman, E. 2004. *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Sennett, R. 2008. *The Craftsman*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sennett, R. 2024. *The Performer. Art, Life, Politics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Suckling, M. 2025. *Paper Time Machines. Critical Game Design and Historical Board Games*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Suits, B. 1978. *The Grasshopper. Games, Life and Utopia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Teuber, K. 1995/2013. *Catan*. Board Game. Rossdorf, Germany: Catan GmbH.
- Thiennot, J. 2013. *Cookie Clicker*. Video game. DashNet.
- Trammell, A. 2023. *Repairing Play. A Black Phenomenology*. Boston, MA: The MIT Press.
- Wehrle, C. 2018. *Root*. Board game. Leder Games.
- Wild, L. 2021. *LOW-INTERACTION GAMES. Wie geringe Interaktivität Spiele, Spielmechanik und Motivationsdesign prägt. Kategorien und Muster für Low-Interaction Games*. Master Thesis, ZHdK Zurich.
- Woods, S. 2012. *Eurogames. The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.

ENDNOTES

1 Elisabeth Noever-Ginthoer, opening Klimabiennale 2024.

2 Asymmetrical roles have sometimes been used in family games (e.g. *Scotland Yard*), but their most sophisticated implementation happened in wargames, especially in Volko Ruhnke's *COIN* series. *Root* (2018) is a direct descendant of this tradition, but due to its blending of Eurogame with wargame mechanisms and an

attractive, whimsical artwork, it has (despite its complexity) become widely popular outside of the wargaming community and attracted many different players, as can be seen by the fact that there not only exists a videogame adaptation but also a role-playing game (*Root: The Roleplaying Game* 2012). To play *Root* with roles changing during the game would require a group of players that have played each role for a whole game many times to be well-versed in the faction-specific rules and strategies - something that would take a considerable amount of time.

3 The term stems from game theory, where the word "degenerate" signifies that there is no decision necessary in choosing such a winning strategy, making such strategies uninteresting for the decision process. In game theory, the term has a more precise meaning than in game design, where it is sometimes extended to also mean strategies that go against the designer's intent and exploit flaws in the rules or mechanisms (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 241).

4 Wargames have traditionally been more willing to experiment with imbalance, as they simulate something that was rarely fair and balanced in the first place. However, even there it is considered good practice to give all players equal chances of winning, mostly by tweaking the victory conditions for the weaker side.

5 "Nash *equilibrium*, in game theory, an outcome in a noncooperative game for two or more players in which no player's expected outcome can be improved by changing one's own strategy." (Eldridge 2024).

6 The Psycholudic Research Group tested the *TREEgame* prototype with changing players from autumn 2023 to June 2024 in regular playtests, enacted through our weekly research Friday meetings at the University of Applied Arts Vienna.

7 For an overview on the history of card games, cf. Parlett (1991).

8 Of course, a balanced distribution of roles over time will only happen if the skills are equally distributed, which in children's games is rarely the case, as children tend to play in groups of mixed age and abilities. Due to this, as well as due to their physical nature, such games can easily get out of control and lead to actual violence, especially in contexts where social or cultural fault lines are already present. Usually such conflicts are resolved without violence, as children's games are very fluid activities, their rules depending in part on the inventiveness of the play community. Cf. Bafle (2007). For an in-depth look at involuntary play situations cf. Trammell (2023).

9 The term "unnecessary obstacle" comes from the definition of game given by Suits (1978, 41): "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles".