

Emotional Documents

A conversation about game, play and a virtual institution

INTRODUCTION

All players at the poker table finish the game at the same time when the dealer announces the winner. The audience observes this final moment – the announcement of the winner – when he or she gets the chips. In art, however, there can be no real winners; and insofar as there are, the audience cannot identify them with the naked eye. Critical and analytical penetration are required, but also commentary, assessment of artistic value, perspective. Tarot card games are built on similar principles, that is, concentrating less on results than the process. The same goes for the following document, which stems more from emotional than from logical strategies. I have invited two art professionals: *Jan Backlund* (artist) and *Ieva Steponaviciute* (game theorist) to analyze documents I have produced over the past year. In Tarots, as in the visual arts, nothing starts or ends with the mere representation of a visual object; constant reflection and discussion are required in order to have the rules fixed and confirmed.



Image 1 - www.trumas.lt/mycity

My research on emotional documents comes to the fore through the project *mycity*, a short film and a cross-media Internet project based on the relations between states of love and characters. The cardiogram of the narrative and the atmosphere of the film are created in a digital extension as a game. When they start playing, the audience follows the rhythm of the film. Guided by the main female character's voice (Gunde) they travel through digital time and space and unconsciously choose their love planet leaving the imprint of each traveled path. It is documented and sent to the players as their creative documentary, together with a commentary on their state of being in love, using one fragment from Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*.

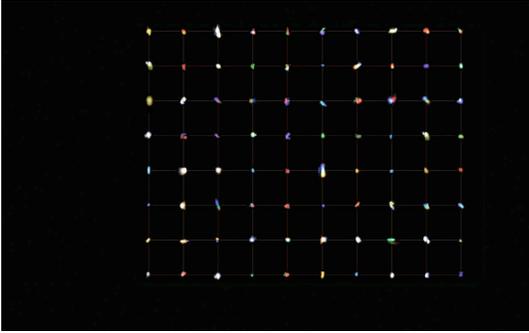


Image 2 - www.trumas.lt/mycity

The following text does not seek to explain the mentioned art pieces; rather, it aims at fusing the involvement of the audience with their comprehension trajectories. Art often consciously offers uncertainty and obscurity – no right answers, only parallel versions. Readers should read the following passages however they choose, horizontally, vertically, back and forth...

1. SPECULATION

JAN

Looking through your projects I found myself speculating on the relationship between three entities: 'a board', 'a bat' and 'a player'. A board in the sense of a chessboard, a football field, a running track, a hopscotch field... A bat in the sense of die, cards, balls, hopscotch pebbles... A player in the sense of an identity, a role, a model, a type... This probably does not cover all games, but immediately it seems to shed some light on most games and forms of play, even while hiding other aspects. For instance, in a game of dice, there does not appear to be any board, as the die (bats) can be cast anywhere; however, the point in such games seems to be that there is a difference between darkness (obscurity) and revelation (enlightenment) when the faces of the die pass from an invisible and superimposed state to a visible and determinate state, from the tumbler to the board. Sometimes they seem to be intertwined, as in many card games, where the cards can be seen as both boards *and* bats. Or identities can be mixed up with bats, as in games of catch, hide and seek, and so on. But this is just a short speculation.

JURGA

A short speculation is tempting – it has been my strategy from the very outset. This holds true for games of risk, as you've mentioned – poker comes immediately to my mind. But we could go much further: art games, political, social games; emotional or intellectual games. I would like to come back to your definitions: 'board' as a set of defined rules (institution), 'bat' as an instrument and 'player' as a human agent. The rules must be strictly followed in order to play; they have been engineered for reaching the result – to win or lose and to get pleasure from playing. Board, bat and player function here as technical parameters. The identity of ordinary players depends on their chosen paths, which leads to becoming winners or losers. When the technical parameters are assimilated and a person starts to speculate, the looser more indeterminate dimension of the game takes on importance. This dimension is inherently fixed in the rules of the game as an exception. Not just anyone can become a winner in poker; only those who know how to exceed the rules themselves, those able to surpass the technical parameters. Computers or institutions are inherently unable to achieve this.

IEVA

“Play” has been a catchword in art for quite some time now, but somehow it has not yet become a cliché. Perhaps this has to do with the very nature of the phenomenon of play – its ability to outgrow its own boundaries, its necessity for constant change (R. Rawdon Wilson illustrates this quality of play by drawing on the example of the short film *Square* by István Szabó, in which the camera follows children's play continually shifting into new movements, without any external interference). Though play is a 'to and fro' movement, as Gadamer puts it, it never repeats itself in exactly the same way, not even in a game, which is played according to the same rules, on the same field, and with the same players.

Your project appears to be an ongoing, playful process, at least from my standpoint as a bystander. It is forever taking new directions, or rather it keeps bifurcating into multiple directions and transforming the entire rhizome into new unstable configurations. One can, no doubt, be tempted to search for some internal connections which keep it together. One can speak of certain common strategies, as, for example, when you take objects (filmmakers and actresses, or the figures, themes or patterns of the tarot cards) out of their usual contexts and arrange them in new ones, which you create yourself. You make these objects and their functions your playthings, which you transform according to your own sensibility and imagination, while drawing freely from your cultural experience. However, there's something else, perhaps; something more ephemeral, which gives your rhizomatic project a unity. It is the underlying assumption that *playing is something worth doing*. Your project sends a whole array of metacommunicative signals (in Gregory Bateson's terms), by which it self-reflexively points towards its playful nature and invites the viewer to approach it from the perspective of play. These are, for example, the mention of play and games in your own metacommentary around the project, or the use of games as patterns to be transgressed and transformed. Your project reminds one that play is not only an activity, but equally an attitude of mind, a way of positioning oneself in the world. If one does not share it, if one doesn't have this “seek adventure” attitude, then one will probably consider play to be non-serious and gratuitous, a terrible waste of time. Therefore, it may be, after all, not surprising that studies focusing on play are still often met with certain distrust in the academia – notwithstanding that

play has been used as a theoretical concept by both Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, and a number of other “canonical” thinkers; or that much art today is created as play and exists only if played: it is performative, provocative, subversive, interactive and much more... On the other hand, there certainly are people who believe, with Schiller, that play is what makes man truly human, and that it only makes sense to play. For me, personally, play is synonymous with creativity; when playful, art (and I deal mostly with literature) is capable of free and fresh movement even within formal constraints, which transgress earlier schemes and patterns, and invite active responses.

2.FREE WILL

JAN

In *mycity* the game is clearly based on a board, a grid with nodes, with all its references to modernism (Mondrian) minimalism, Agnes Martin etc¹. It is a discreet place, where there are a precise number of locations (the nodes).

JURGA

Mondrian is an example of the fixed identity of modern artist. He believed that "it is possible that, through horizontal and vertical lines constructed with awareness, but not with calculation, led by high intuition, and brought to harmony and rhythm, basic forms of beauty, supplemented if necessary by other direct lines or curves, can become a work of art."² This reads like an architectural statement. When Mondrian coined the term "neoplasticism" to describe his ideas, did he become a theorist? The identity of the artist is in constant change. What kind of game was he playing? He believed that it is possible to attain a more profound knowledge of nature than that provided by empirical means. The line, the grid and the colours in *mycity* reference Mondrian, and act as artistic instruments employed to invite the audience to seek spiritual knowledge following a mathematical path. All audience members become players, creating their own path based on personal choices. Players are obliged to follow their own routes; they are required to make choices. I call this the production of *emotional documents*. Every step they take is based on their own sensations and logic; they follow the narrative while creating their own abstract emotional portrait. As a result, they become just ordinary media users represented by a node, allocated on the grid by the system.

mycity is always dual. It is a game in search of links between the logical and the alogical, utopia and distopia, sensations and mind, realism and opportunism. Is the players of this game truly choosing their identities? Or simply following the path laid out by the artist? Chaos and order in the game structure cannot be defined independently from one another. Identity is in constant crisis.

IEVA

Play is valued for the sake of doing it, it is fun, it gives us pleasure, albeit fun and pleasure mean different things to each of us. How can then play exist without the freewill? James Carse puts it very straightforwardly: Whoever must *play*, cannot *play*; freewill also occupies the central place in both Huizinga's and Caillois' definitions of play. The question of freedom brings to the fore, once again, the complexity of the relationship between play and game. We relate play to such notions as freedom, improvisation, fun, open-endedness, risk, change and even anarchy, while game is most often defined as a structure determined by rules, goals, stakes, spatial and temporary limits. It is obvious, however, that most games, although regulated and finite, allow space for play – improvisation and fun. In life, play and game are almost inseparable: play has the tendency to organise itself into a game, and game, with its formal restraints, gives a well-skilled player an opportunity to practice his or her creativity by doing more than the rules require. Games are supposed to be *played*, although it is possible to force someone into carrying out a game as a structure (I loathed, for example, having to play basketball at school, I, certainly, did not *play* it, though physically, I was participating).

Playful art possesses the same dynamics of freedom and constraint, and often we speak of art not only in terms of play, but in terms of game as well. This, however, can be problematic. The playfulness of the work of art, as I have noted earlier, often lies in its ability to find a free movement within a formal structure. This structure can be selfimposed (like the constrained writing techniques of the "Oulipo" group, or the principles of Mondrian's Plastic Art) or purposely imposed on another artist (as it is in the much discussed "The Five Obstructions"). Technically, this turns a work of art, or rather the creative process into a game played according to a set of pre-defined rules. However, at least in von Trier's project, the very setting of rules is improvisational. The whole emphasis of the project seems to be not so much on the importance of playing according to the rules, but on Leth's ability to play within the rules, and even with the rules, the function of the imposed restrictions being, in Leth's own words, to "produce sharpness of mind by encouraging a search for entirely new ways of production." Moreover, much of playful art does not

¹ cf. Rosalind Krauss' essay "Grids, logic, mathematics".

² Mondrian, Piet. In *Dictionary of Painters*, New York 1976

depend on any rules at all. One can speak of constraints in terms of conventions, but these do not have the same binding character as the rules of the game. Try to play with the rules in sports, and you will be mercilessly disqualified. Football is football and art is art, and those who win a match are not always those who have played the most beautiful game...

3.IMAGINATION

JAN

How do you differentiate between board and bat, or between the fixed part of the game and the looser part? A game is like a pulley: there is a fixed pulley and a loose pulley, the sky and the stars.

JURGA

In tarots, the board is the image on the card. The bat is the card itself. The set of rules (the institution) in tarots is always communicated through the player, meaning that the rules are not strictly fixed. The way the empirical and the magical intersect on the board leads us to the work of mathematician René Thom, which inspired *Theory and practice of Catastrophes*, which I produced this year in conjunction with Riccardo Giacconi. We produced a series of seven tarot cards (designed by artist Adrien Beau) in connection with the seven 'fundamental catastrophes' theorized by Thom as mathematical figures. The series is composed by figures complete in themselves (like formulae) that can be organized into different meanings, narratives and fields, yet never entirely translatable.

One of the seven catastrophe tarot cards is THE CUSP:

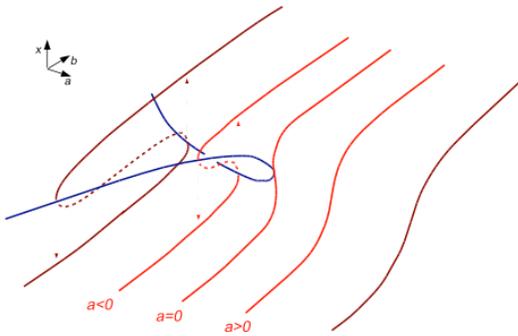


Image 3

If mathematics is magic and we are invited to play with it, tarots become empirical by providing a visual representation of mathematics.

IEVA

The problematic analogy between games and art does not deny the importance of the constraint, as a mechanism that can trigger the artist's imagination. The paradox of postmodern Western art is, however, that finding a constraint or some well-established pattern has become a luxury, while freedom has been completely naturalized. Nobody cares now about the boundaries of a genre or style; all the traditional artistic conventions have been subverted, all the earlier taboos broken; nobody seems to have the authority (except financial) to limit the artist's need for self-expression. To be imaginative is then very much about discovering what can still be transgressed, perhaps looking for objects and systems that lie outside the field of art. The Danish poet Morten Søndergaard, goes, for example, into the pharmaceuticals and packs different word groups inside typical medicine packages (together with the implication that language is both a cure, a drug, as well as a commodity). Your work goes into the quite restricted system of Tarot cards, drawing from that system, changing, reducing and multiplying it, teasing out implications and so on... Inscribing the Hierophant figure both into the context of catastrophe theory (the Swallowtail – one of the critical points of catastrophe geometry) and into the context of art history (Dali's *The Swallow's Tail*). Is intellect a way to catastrophe? And imagination a counterbalance?



Image 4

Let's cut out a piece of the picture – the mountain



Image 5

In tarots, symbols construct the meaning of past, present and future. The mountain looks like an obvious and very literal symbol. There are several options for reading it – it looks like a scoop of ice cream, a mountain (a final destination or a big task ahead, beyond which lies reward) or a mystery, or a volcano whose eruption signals risk. Players would normally think according to their own cliché. The cliché becomes a bat.

Magic only commences when players start linking potential meaning with their own realities. So in order to play this game it's very important to combine the board (direct image) and the bat (the card itself) in order to transform one bat (cliché) into another bat (imagination), and finally to combine the bat with one's own identity (reality) in order to loosen up the game structure.

JAN

How about the rules? Are they written, self-evident, or are they produced during play, like children games?

JURGA

Rules appear as an orientation towards a result or future outcome. Written rules are institutions with the power to repress – institutions are created by legislators. Power is a driving force. In tarots, each player is the judge; self-control and being controlled are the same. In the Cusp card, for example, a woman's hand holding the thread merely opens the process of playing. It must be connected with other symbols. But what happens when the rules are not followed properly? Form and function of the game are lost like the 'loose end' of the thread.

One further example: what kind of meaning would the Cusp card produce in a non-conventional reading, consciously avoiding clichés and following a different logic? That is, following the imagination and avoiding connections with the identity of the player (adaptation to reality)? Children may play adult games, but the converse is quite unusual – artists being the exception.

IEVA

Artist as a child at play. This evokes Nietzsche's image of the artist, as a child who builds towers of sand and tramples them down, starting, from time to time, his play anew. (The image, in its turn, goes back to the roots of the philosophical concept of *Weltspiel*, to Heraclitus and his idea of eternity, or life-time (*aeon*) being a child who plays, the kingdom belonging to this child). For Nietzsche, the artist shares with *aeon*, or the ever-living fire, this play of structuring and destroying. Art in his philosophy is not only creation, but also destruction, it is a Dionysiac power that destroys stagnated values, giving way to new perceptions of reality. At the same time, Nietzsche declares this play to be "beyond good and evil", "an innocent caprice", rejecting the possibility of judging art (as well as cosmic creation) by moral standards. Indeed, I cannot think of any playful artist who is also a moralist; play, with its inherent ambiguity, seems to be a good antidote both against banality and moralising. And yet, who will claim that Calvino, Nabokov or von Trier are immoral?

4. INSTITUTION

JAN

What sort of institution have you created through *mycity*?

JURGA

Creating an institution (as a game) is, for me, a way of maintaining a connection with a physical filmstrip and everyday film practice (whether shooting, producing or casting) while incorporating the content into the digital matrix to explore the connections and contradictions between digital and natural processes in film institutions.

My website is called Trumas. 'Trumas' means 'truffles' in Lithuanian. In *mycity*, the timeline is composed by mushrooms³.



Image 6 - www.trumas.it

Every border creates meaning: vertical is time, horizontal is space, the diagonal combines time and space into a closed structure. It also resembles a filmstrip. There are projects archived as documents inside those structures. I find it interesting to refer to C. Matson, who argued that all information put into a computer becomes a string of code; any digital input (sound or text) can become output in a completely different form (visual image). On the face of things, this transmutability of information in the digital world seems contrary to the ways in which humans experience the physical world. Neurological conditions however, such as synesthesia, allow us to realize that very often the human brain does, in fact, operate much like a computer.

JAN

Aren't we talking about a more leisurely form of gaming, more like musings, killing-time (I love the German word '*Kurzweilen*' – to shorten time)?

JURGA

Play by its very nature is leisurely – but another specter is waiting in the wings to make its reappearance: romanticism. Will this specter bring the homeopathic remedy we're expecting from leisurely gaming? An

IEVA

It would be naive to deny the existence of internal laws (one can even call them rules) in a work of art, in terms of structures or procedures, which the work takes over from the tradition (the institution), either adopting or transgressing them, or which it creates itself – in the most successful cases, bringing about certain changes within the institution. (I also fully agree that what is transgressed is also acted upon, or incorporated, although in a transformed or subverted way, into one's own aesthetic structure). However, these "rules" are of a different nature than those governing games. In real games (in which *ludus* prevails over *paideia*), the so-called constitutive rules both define the game and limit the player's means to achieve the desired outcome. Bernard Suits calls them 'unnecessary obstacles', which, nevertheless, are what makes the game possible: using a golf club is perhaps not the most efficient way of getting a small ball into a distant hole in a lawn, but if one did not follow this procedure, the outcome achieved would not count, and one would not be playing golf at all. Constitutive rules are thus inseparable from ends, but they are also inseparable from what Suits calls the players' 'lusory attitude', that is, their willingness to accept these 'unnecessary' although binding obstacles in order to play the game. Games and art often engage in mutual exchange: video games have both the narrative and the visual aspect of art, while art employs games as a motif or metaphor, and can even transpose the structures and internal logic of real games on its own canvas. Literature is rich in examples: Nabokov, Borges, Cortazar, Carroll, Fowles. It is very rewarding to analyze such texts in relation to the games that are played out on the level of the plot. The empirical games can tell a lot about the characters and their relations (agonistic or cooperative, vertiginous, mimetic, etc.), or to elucidate the ethical or philosophical aspects of the text. They can encode and help to explain the narrative structure, and in other respects serve as a handy tool to interpret the text.

There are also cases when art and gaming coincide. *mycity* has this potential. It is designed as a game with all the requisite structural ingredients. But just seeing the grids, with all their allusions to modernist art and their philosophical implications, one understands that this game is seeking integration in

³ Mushroom alludes to rhizomatic process – if a rhizome is separated into pieces, each piece may be able to give rise to a new plant.

audience can play romantic games in *mycity* – it is a virtual place for lovers to meet.

In this game, the information input becomes a string of code excerpted from Roland Barthes' *Fragments from a lover's discourse*. Anything that can be digitized (even emotion) can be output in a completely different form (visual image). It is thus that emotional documents take form.

JAN

And who are the judges?

JURGA

Pervasive grids and matrixes: the question is whether grids serve humans, offering tools of endless stabilizing and constructive potential, or alienate people, controlling and limiting their everyday perceptions. The judge is a player in the game – just as in tarot cards.

the institution of art, and simultaneously challenging that institution by poking into the neighboring domain of video games. Metaphorically, one might say that you have invented your "rugby." Whether you, as a game-writer, have succeeded in creating a good game can only be proved by those who are going to play it, and who will hardly judge it by aesthetic standards. But in bringing forward this problematic analogy between games and art what I want to stress was a considerably higher degree of freedom in art, as compared to games. Which is both a gift, and a problem.

EPILOGUE

JAN

I am personally quite intrigued by the massive reception of Aby Warburg's later works – The Mnemosyneproject and related notes – whereas the reception of his earlier, art-historical writings (from before 1912) are largely disregarded except when they can be used to shed light on his later work. I believe this is a symptom of a more generalized discomfort with the (linear) text as a medium of knowledge. I believe that the researcher, for Warburg, is essentially a *Sehertypus*, an augur – as is the artist. In his "Burckhardt-Übungen" he discusses Burckhardt and Nietzsche as the two radical poles the historian can assume, the two *Sehertypen*. This does not imply that the historian doesn't look backwards for dates and documents (on the contrary, this is exactly the cards or text strings Warburg collected), but it does imply that the historian's main concern isn't the interpretation of past events, but, on the contrary, that the historian's quest is the interpretation of the future.

JURGA

There is no history. Merely multiple, overlapping and interactive series of legitimate as opposed to excluded histories.

JAN

Here does Warburg's Atlas-project and his scattered notes present another form. It is furthermore no coincidence, I believe, that this use of Warburg corresponds to an interest in Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, the editions of such unfinishable works as Paul Valéry's *Testiculæ*, Pessoa's *Livro do Desassossego*, or the second book of Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. They are all made up of disparate text-material in envelopes, maps, or boxes, that somehow relate to a plot or a plan. This makes them similar to tarot cards on a board; cards which can be played in different ways and thus form different constellations.

I would ask this question to Aby Warburg, were I successful in summoning him up in a necromantic session, but in the meantime let me put it to you: What is the purpose of such games? What are we playing for? Is this prognostic reading too far off track? We know that all games, more or less explicitly, have something to do with the interpretation of a divine will (an extra-intentional instance) while, on the other hand, no game is devoid of this aspect of *Kurzweilen*. The compression of time (or, rather, of experienced time, duration) seems to be the most prominent feature of all play. What I am asking about is the dichotomy between divination on the one hand and distraction on the other.

JURGA

Any rationalist attempt to transform the world into their own image is only one more interpretation that cannot embrace a void between divine will and distraction. I think that it becomes possible only in the process of playing, that is, when 'flowing' time is felt (intuited rather than comprehended) not as linear but as cyclical, compressed, stretched. These 'deviations', these 'errors' are the preconditions of a game.