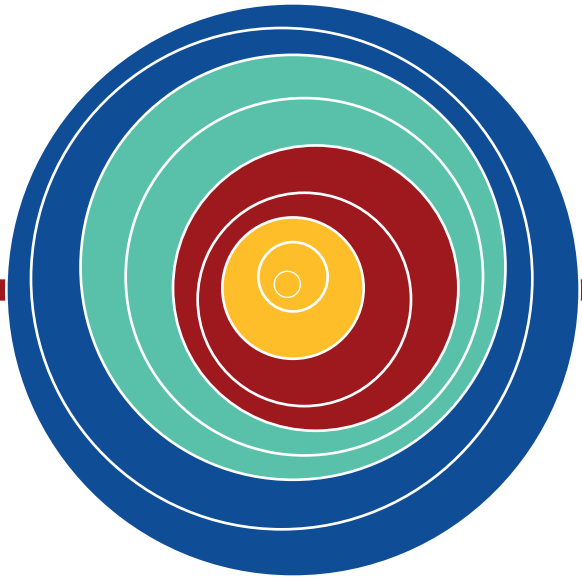
League Play Book



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League-Play-Book-2025.pdf

Germaine Koh gratefully acknowledges the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and The University of British Columbia.

Ttitle:	League Play Book
Publication date:	September 2025
Publisher:	Nanaimo Art Gallery
Editor:	Germaine Koh
Co-editor:	Simona Dolinská
ISBN (book):	
ISBN (PDF):	
Authors:	Jesse Birch, Simona Dolinská, Bruce Emmett, Lindsey A. Freeman, Meaghan Hackinen, Germaine Koh, James Long, Michael Love, Elizabeth Nijdam, Joseph Strohan, Ian Verchère, Eliot White-Hill—Kwulasultun
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Design:	Germaine Koh

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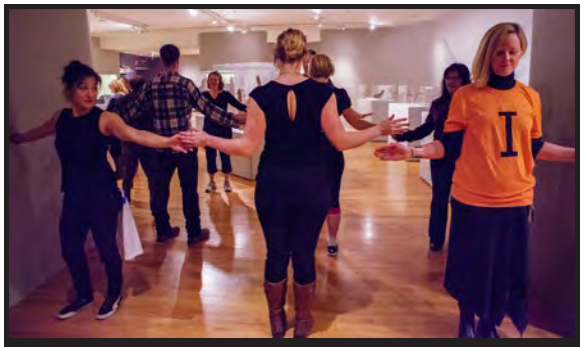
Acknowledgements

I thank curator Jesse Birch and the entire Nanaimo Art Gallery team for their enthusiastic development of the *League Nanaimo* project, which is the occasion for publishing this book.

My gratitude extends to my student assistants: Max Wu, who cheerfully produced many of the objects in *League Nanaimo* with me; Simona Dolinská, who co-edited this publication and helped on production; and Bel Chen, who assisted with research and facilitated their own set of gatherings. These students have contributed to the project important approaches to play.



Vancouver Art Gallery, November 2013
Photo: Ligia Brosch.

These students are the most recent of a long lineage of League contributors, collaborators, and participants, whose energy, focus, and willingness to improvise, are ultimately what has continued to make League an invigorating series of experiences/experiments. The corps of League regulars are far too many to name, but I will single out some of the folks who are mentioned and depicted in this book. Regular collaborator-participants and co-facilitators over much of the life of the project include Bruce Emmett, Jay White, Ian Verchère, Joseph Strohan, Meaghan Hackinen, Cedric Bomford, Michael Love, and Nic Miskin. I'd like to acknowledge others who've been involved, including Felicity Brammer, Allison Collins, Alisha Hackinen, Gillian Jerome, Verena Kaminiarz, Bianca Kodato, James Long, George Rahi, Toby Sheldon, Brendan Tang, Leah Weinstein, Vancouver Park Board coordinators Danita Noyes and Cyndy Chwelos, and much of the Verchere and Koh families—Bruce, Wyatt, Emmett, Graham, Toby, and Bernice.

To the authors who responded to my unusual request to allow readers into their creative processes and generously share your critical self-reflections: thank you Jesse Birch, Simona Dolinská, Bruce Emmett, Lindsey Freeman, Meaghan Hackinen, Germaine Koh, James Long, Michael Love, Elizabeth Nijdam, Joseph Strohan, Ian Verchère, and Eliot White-Hill—Kwulasultun.

Finally, I am grateful for the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and The University of British Columbia in realizing *League Nanaimo*.

—Germaine Koh

INTRODUCTION

League, play as creative practice

Germaine Koh

League is an initiative to exercise play as a form of creative practice: not to just talk or theorize about play or creativity in their myriad forms, but actually to experience and be attentive to the moments and mechanics of invention, development, and iteration that unfold in play. Mostly, the project has unfolded by producing occasions for people of diverse backgrounds and ages to gather for creative play of different sorts. Often we begin with a prompt or an exercise, and sometimes interesting things develop through the process. These "interesting" things might *seem* to appear spontaneously or fluidly, but they don't actually come out of nothing. Creativity doesn't appear in a vacuum; it arises from an infinitely variable combination of observation and reflection, mental agility, physical and sometimes technical skills, social and cultural fluency, setting generative conditions, and having a willingness to experiment and embrace uncertainty—all of which we can hone and practice to make ourselves more likely to produce interesting things.

League evolved from concept into a community-based project after I had unsuccessfully tried to convince museum curators on a couple of occasions to let me turn a contemporary art gallery space—usually large, airy, and geometrical—into a gymnasium, as an invitation to practice the fluid, sensual, quick-thinking, and critical aspects of play. I wanted to borrow the visual language of sport in order to emphasize that these elements are shared between athletics and creative practice. League launched in 2012, and the 2025 *League Nanaimo* exhibition at Nanaimo Art Gallery is the first time I have had an occasion to realize that initial vision of the project, so I thank curator Jesse Birch for bringing it into being with the same critical-yet-enthusiastic vibe with which it was conceived.

I did understand the reluctance of those museums to allow play into the hallowed walls of a museum; there are real risks that once people were drawn into play, those activities would overflow into the necessarily protected spaces that house precious objects. But at the same time, the skills that are trained by and in play are the very ones that have produced the expressions of culture that we see in museums.

The impetus behind my wanting to share an understanding of play as a tool for invention grew out of my own lived experience as not only a practicing artist, but also

a lifelong athlete and a coach-turned-teacher. In all these realms I have experienced how a capacity for self-reflection creates breakthroughs, how negotiation of difficult situations can produce unexpected results, how dedicated practice can allow you to 'level up' and discover new possibilities. At the same time, creativity is not a guarantee; there's no recipe to follow or algorithm you can apply to make art. A person could play scales or run drills for a lifetime without making anything novel. My lived understanding as a coach and teacher suggests there are certain mindsets (also trainable) related to criticality which make one much more likely to be an original thinker. These include flexibility and openness, a willingness to question conventions and rules, a tolerance for uncertainty and risk, self-reflection, and critical thought. And so it is this combination of critical and play skills that we practice at League.

This book hopes to serve not only to document the dozen-plus years of the League project to date, while delving into some theory about play and creativity, and ultimately serving as a kind of workbook that could inspire more creative process through play. It is arranged into three sections: Analysis, Plays, and Practice.

The short essays of the Analysis section are written by artists, athletes, scholars, game designers and players who have intimate, lived understanding of the processes of invention and discovery that can develop through play. They have shared aspects of their creative processes via their personal experiences of the anatomy and dynamics of ingenuity; the culturally radical potential of play; creative mindsets; psychological and cognitive processing; and the situations and settings for discovery. I have asked some to try to analyze the mechanics of how invention and decision-making happen in their fields. Others were asked to address how play works to create possibility by revising conventions.

Jesse Birch writes on learning through mimicry in skateboarding, I propose vulnerability and uncertainty as key elements. League collaborator Bruce Emmett shares his recollections of how innovation unfolded at our events in conversation with objects and places. Considering the production of artworks, James Long looks at virtuosic plays of implicit meaning, while Eliot White-Hill narrates his development of work in relation to the traditional forms of his Coast Salish heritage, and George Rahi considers improvisation in music. Revising social conventions, Simona Dolinská describes the potential of neurodivergent play; Matt Hern argues for the radical potential of sport; Elizabeth Nijdam considers critical play, and Tolulolpe Akinwole describes Black resistance through play. Focusing closely on decision-making, Ian Verchère analyzes the mechanics of progression in games and action sports, Lindsey Freeman writes on the mind games of distance running, and Meaghan Hackinen traces some decision-making in emergent sport. Annaliese Gumboc addresses storytelling around games.

The Plays section collects case studies written by participants, which outline the creative processes that produced some of League's events and products. These are not recipes, but they do try to identify the key ingredients, conditions and prompts that encouraged creative decisions.

The Practice section includes worksheets, rooms for notes, and space for you to record your own plays.

analysis

A01

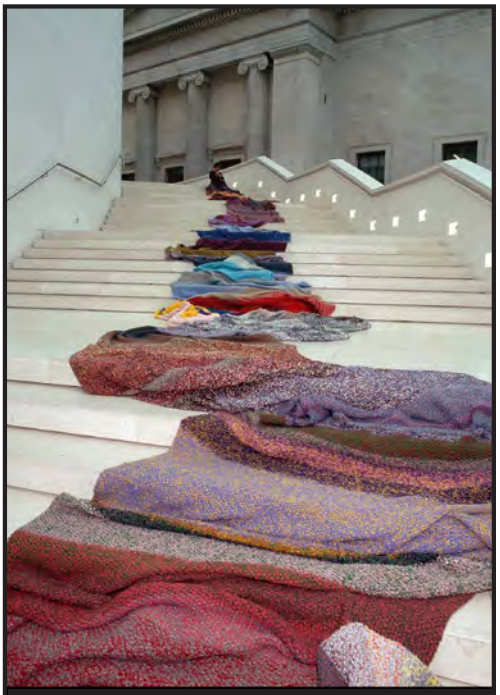
The unsettling space of process

Germaine Koh

I have played sports all my life, but I was never a good competitor. I never really had the drive to dominate, and the final games of tournaments always felt like let-downs rather than defining moments. I have underperformed when everything was on the line. However, I loved the entire process of getting to those points: training, learning, inventing and developing plays. I love falling into the zone when working on a skill, and then tracking my progress. I relish the process and never want it to end. I just want to keep playing.

In parallel, I have also coached and mentored, first as a high-school assistant coach for a younger volleyball team, and most recently for competitive roller derby teams. There, I loved seeing the development of athletes and experiencing the beautiful moments when skills 'click' or teamwork syncs.

Although I wanted to believe I would have pursued sport until my very limits, my lack of 'killer' instinct might always have been an impediment to my reaching the highest levels of achievement. Instead, I made a career as a visual artist—which is probably just as rare as being a pro athlete, but has more room to operate outside of social conventions. I've developed an art practice which, like my approach to sport, is more based in process than finished product. I make work that is based in open-ended experimentation. Some projects are conceived as life-long works, in which one can trace an evolution of decisions made: for example, I unravel old garments and re-knit their yarn into a blanket-like object which continues to grow as a kind of measure of effort, time, everyday material, and decisions made. This piece, *Knitwork*, has many ugly sections and mistakes that I regret, but my commitment to the cumulative process means I have to accept them. I have also launched a number of projects that gather people to make and learn together, such as the League project focused on play as a creative process—the subject of this book. I have crafted a living as an artist who rarely completes work and mostly gets to keep playing. And by making this kind of work, I argue for the critical value of unsettled conditions.



Germaine Koh with *Knitwork* (begun 1992) at the British Museum, 2002

Gradually, I came to be sought out as a teacher. Although I come from a family of schoolteachers, the role of Instructor felt uncomfortable to me for some time, I think because I could never inhabit the role of expert that I assumed was necessary. I felt I was really a chronic experimenter who had never mastered anything—mis-cast in a leading role when, really, I was meant to be behind the scenes (in high school theatre productions, I did lighting, literally putting the spotlight on others, and playing roller derby I used the pseudonym PLAYER 1—denoting the most generic sort of video game player). Teaching finally clicked when I realized I could understand it in terms of coaching: instead of delivering a body of expertise, I could view my role as helping others to learn how to learn, develop, and self-regulate as part of continuing processes.

The only certainty I have about teaching art is that grading *sucks*. Distributing scores and quantifying work that should be striving to remake the world seems wrong-headed and irrelevant. In my observation, there is no correlation between being concerned about grades and producing interesting artwork. I might even suggest that a focus on results or on conventional markers of success could impede the likelihood of developing subtle work that is rich in meaning, because it is likely to foreclose many possibilities in order to give the appearance of confidence and certitude.

In contrast, I'd like to propose that uncertainty is a more productive, and profound, state. I would like to talk through how embracing process and ambiguity is equally important to creative endeavours, sport, and experimental domains, and how play is one of its crucial mechanisms.

Uncertainty and risk

Werner Heisenberg's 1927 uncertainty principle, a key element of quantum theory, posited that one can never accurately observe a particle's position and its momentum at the same time.[1] It's a physics thought experiment, but I see that we also experience it poetically in the everyday: when we're in process, we're focused on progression, and only when we come to a standstill can we take account of what happened. Either we know where we are, or we sense how we're going. Fixity is antithetical to process.

Now, some believe that the point of human endeavour is to minimize uncertainty. The psychological principle called 'uncertainty reduction theory' assumes we are opposed to uncertainty because it creates cognitive stress and hampers efficient communication aimed at predictable behaviour. In contrast to this assumption that we should be afraid of the unknown and averse to risk could be Daniel Kahneman's characterization of two different human cognitive systems: a quick and intuitive mode of decision-making, and a slower, more analytic one.[2] That slower mode draws out decision-making and has potential to see details that aren't obvious. Maybe we could describe it as being compatible with complexity and ambiguity.

I would suggest that another response to uncertainty is to learn to appreciate the uneasy states of play, negotiation, and change. One reason we play is to develop skills to negotiate problems and to cope with real-world challenges. In a paper outlining the Canadian Paediatric Society's position on the value of risky outdoor play for children (though I wager it applies to adults too), the authors begin by summarizing the benefits

of play to personal development, such as "building social and executive functioning skills that are critical for school readiness and lifelong achievement."[3] They describe benefits specifically of risky play, "defined by thrilling and exciting forms of free play that involve uncertainty of outcome and a possibility of physical injury." Beyond improved physical health, physical literacy (functional movement skills), and associated risk-assessment skills, risky play also supports social-emotional development. It helps build resilience, strengthens conflict-resolution and problem-solving skills, and increases the ability to take on challenge, to communicate, to cooperate, and to compromise. They get granular, specifying different types of risky play, such as rough-and-tumble play, play involving tools, and play with risk of disappearing or getting lost. Importantly, they also speak in terms of a new approach that focuses on keeping children "as safe as necessary" relative to the benefits of this kind of play, calling for nuanced assessments that look at the would-be player's development, ability, and social context. In other words, they call for the very judgement skills and ability to negotiate difficulty that play helps to develop.

Ambiguity and process

Tolerance or embrace of risk isn't the same thing as surrendering to chance, or abdicating responsibility for taking care and working towards meaning. Rather, there's delight to be found in the process of sense-making within uncertain conditions. Another of the many meanings of the word play relates to looseness and unfixity: machinery might have play, as do schedules; and words and artworks create plays of meaning and association. This kind of play asks us to be mentally flexible and open to ambiguity, allowing for multiple possibilities. To relish the unfixedness of an allusive turn of phrase is to savour its multiplication of meaning. Most of my best artworks (by which I mean most versatile, nimble, and layered with meaning) are ones that draw together—and put into playful relationship—disparate systems and references which echo each other within deceptively simple forms—like when I transplanted an empty lot into a gallery space, let it grow, and observed it develop into a space for contemplation and for discussion about the value of land, development, and productiveness.

Experimentation, too, is a dance with the unknown. I experience this often in my works that are conceived as experiments with uncertain endings—which again, are not a free-for-all but rather crafted with consideration of the possible outcomes based on the elements that are brought into play. For example, I once realized a project, *Erratic*, that was premised on sourcing a granite boulder from the ancient geology of the Canadian Shield, and rolling it southward over a work-week and one overnight, to add it to the engineered waterfront of Toronto, as a way of absurdly referring to slow, overlooked manual processes of city-building. This was the most unpleasant art-making experience I've ever had. Drunken bar patrons jumped on me and my team and tried to impede our progress, infuriated either by the apparent senselessness of our endeavour, or by our daring to do

Germaine Koh, Erratic, 2011

an unconventional thing. We finally delivered our rock to the waterfront, battered and sore, and not exactly triumphant but satisfied for having experienced and provisionally figured out how to do the thing. It was grueling, but also one of the most meaningful projects I've done, because its experimental, albeit open-ended, character allowed us to observe real social dynamics in action and to test endurance, persistence, negotiation skills, and possibility.

Further to the value of experimentation, in his Nobel Prize lecture, physicist Andre Geim described the thinking process for his experiments that unfolded to the side of his primary research, including the one using magnetism to levitate a live frog, for which he received an Ig Nobel Prize (for seemingly trivial but finally consequential research). His narration revels in the agony of the process and the unsettling state of not-knowing:

> The levitation experience was both interesting and addictive. It taught me the important lesson that poking in directions far away from my immediate area of expertise could lead to interesting results, even if the initial ideas were extremely basic. This in turn influenced my research style, as I started making similar exploratory detours that somehow acquired the name 'Friday night experiments'. The term is of course inaccurate. No serious work can be accomplished in just one night. It usually requires many months of lateral thinking and digging through irrelevant literature without any clear idea in sight. Eventually, you get a feeling—rather than an idea—about what could be interesting to explore. Next, you give it a try, and normally you fail. Then, you may or may not try again. In any case, at some moment you must decide (and this is the most difficult part) whether to continue further efforts or cut losses and start thinking of another experiment. All this happens against the backdrop of your main research and occupies only a small part of your time and brain.[4]

Geim's talk about feeling his way towards an idea echoes Albert Einstein, who described his mental processing as being based in "rather vague play" with non-linguistic signs that are not only visual but also "muscular." For Einstein, "combinatory play seems to be the essential feature in productive thought—before there is any connection with logical construction in words or other kinds of signs which can be communicated."[5]

Rule-bending and problem-making

These thinkers' accounts of their creative process emphasize that uncertainty and ambiguity pervades their methods. But how is this type of uneasy play of ideas and associations productive, as I suggested? How do you move from associative play to breakthrough? This is key to creativity, but it doesn't happen by chance or innate skill but rather cultivating the processes and mindsets that set you up eventually, possibly, hopefully, to produce unique and novel results.

Scientific experimentation, creative pursuits, and athletic play all often arise in relation to existing conventions. As much as it is a system of conventions, scientific method acknowledges a fundamental uncertainty: theories are only ever disproven, so they are ultimately provisional and open to being replaced by incrementally improved ones—or sometimes radical breakthroughs. Thomas Kuhn described the anatomy of revolution-

ary ideas, for which he coined the term "paradigm shifts." In his history of scientific revolution—which assumes that science is a creative domain—Kuhn suggested that while *normal science* progresses through accepted procedures and accumulation of knowledge, *scientific revolution* involves pursuing anomalies which eventually prove to be game-changing. He described them in terms of play with an attention to the unknown and a particular attunement to the unexpected: "Produced inadvertently by a game played under one set of rules, their assimilation requires the elaboration of another set" of ground rules.[6]

When Kuhn describes normal science, he is referring to problem-solving: working within established structures albeit with uncertain results. The same could be said for playing games or advancing in sports using known strategies, or mastering a craft and its customs. What Kuhn pinpoints in scientific revolution is a move *beyond* established rules and norms to create new propositions: not problem-solving but problem-*making*. Although progression, advancement, and mastery do unfold through dedicated practice, creative breakthroughs are ultimately based in positing new problems and critical questions that exceed what is already known and established. People who riskily probe the limits, rules, and norms of their domains are more likely to be the ones who endanger entire belief systems and worldviews. Psychologists Jacob Getzels and Mihály Csíkszentmihályi found in their studies of the mechanics of creativity that this desire to problematize—to discover and create new problems—is the mark of creative people. "This concern with discovery set apart those who were interested in formulating and solving new artistic problems from those who were content merely to apply their technical skill to familiar problems."[7]

Still, as Geim relates, there is no guarantee that any line of exploration will land on something worthy, so perhaps in addition to the mindset of looking for anomalies and problems, there is something in the willingness of the searcher to persist in a vulnerable state of uncertainty and not-knowing, that makes them most likely eventually to uncover something extra-ordinary.

We practice this ability to make problems within the League project by challenging participants to invent new games and sports. Again, it's a calculated experimental proposition. The request to make something new creates an unsettled condition that neutralizes conventionally specialized skills, and using the forum of play 'lightens' the emotional stakes—and yet, we end up exercising the same kinds of mental, social and emotional skills that are associated with creative people: flexibility, versatility, mental agility, observation, self-reflection, negotiation, judgement, and ability to function in the admittedly vulnerable state of uncertainty. Sometimes we come up with interesting new games (new problems), but the main point of the project is to create the conditions for people to play with making sense together. This is why the case studies of League activities in this book focus more on the dynamics and mechanics of the creative process than on end results—like my own approach to sports.

Unsettling possibilities

Uncertainty can be a poetic state in which multiple meanings are held in play and possibility—and through those, also worlds and futures. Viewed this way, and combined

with its tendency to suspend conventions, play can also create critical space: room for negotiation and expansion of what we can imagine. We live in a world ruled by polarities and divisions and zero-sum calculations with only winners and losers, and yet we surely feel that there are other possible solutions, even if conventions will not admit nuance and complexity. Multiple intersecting voices may not make for quick and efficient communication, but we can learn to expand our capacity to listen and act within incertitude.

Sometimes those voices are in conflict in untenable ways that cannot have neat zero-sum solutions. For example, where I live, the entire dominant 'settler' culture was founded in the displacement, dispossession, and genocide of once-thriving Indigenous cultures, which are now resurgent in face of all the forces that tried to eradicate them. This *unsettled* situation undermines the certainty desired by risk-averse systems and doctrines, and any 'elegant' solution—used in the mathematical sense of simple—seems unlikely, given the profusion of competing interests. Can we learn anything from play that could be relevant to situations like this (for surely there are others)? Perhaps it's in the capacity and *will* to exist in a space of uncertainty, in which we might collectively have the courage and vulnerability to reimagine the possibilities.

Notes

1 "February 1927: Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle." *APS News*. 17(2). American Physics Society, February 2008. Accessed at https://www.aps.org/archives/publications/apsnews/200802/physicshistory.cfm.
2 Daniel Kahneman. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2013.
3 Emilie Beaulieu, Suzanne Beno. "Healthy childhood development through outdoor risky play: Navigating the balance with injury prevention," *Paediatrics & Child Health*, Volume 29, Issue 4, July 2024, Pages 255–261, https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/pxae016.
4 Andre Geim. "Random Walk to Graphene." Nobel Lecture, 8 Dec 2010.
5 Albert Einstein. "A Mathematician's Mind", 1945. Reprinted in *Ideas and Opinions*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1954, 25-26.
6 Thomas Kuhn. "Anomaly and the Emergence of Scientific Discoveries." *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Original 1962. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012.
7 Jacob Getzels and Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi. "The Creative Artist as Explorer" in J. McVicker Hunt, ed. *Human Intelligence* (Routledge, 1972): 182-192.

League initiator **Germaine Koh** is an artist, organizer, teacher, and lifelong athlete. Her artwork ranges widely across media, adapting familiar objects, everyday actions, and common spaces to create situations that look at the significance of communal experiences and the connections between people, technology, and natural systems. A 2023 laureate of the Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts, since 2024 she has been Assistant Professor in Visual Art at University of British Columbia.

Partial Recall: Practicing League

Bruce Emmett

LEAGUE – THE LOST YEARS (2012-2025)

I don't know what League is. If you've ever participated in a League event, you know what I mean. Even the term "event" is a bit much when it comes to League. Maybe League is more of a "Happening," or a Fluxus accident, or a Situationist "detournement" (de tournament, if you prefer). Participants wouldn't use such art jargon, even though League is the brainchild of an artist, and rests comfortably (albeit a little damp) under the duct-tape-repaired umbrella of Contemporary Art.

Now, to be clear, League is not quite art, but more a tangential collection of fragments and non-sequiturs. Leading League(rs) is Germaine Koh—this is her project, after all. Germaine appeared in my life during the first year of an MAA [Master of Applied Arts], where I was admitted as a painter and never painted. I was ready for a shift in practice. Assigned to one another as mentor and mentee (G to me), Germaine was a signpost for artistic possibility. League came along post-grad: she invited, I accepted. And what initially started as a mentorship morphed into an unofficial internship, and now a friendship.

This decade-plus-long frentorship has led to my participation in no less than 30 League events, making me the most decorated League participant in League history. (To be clear, there is no such record.) So, what is the attraction to this action? What has led to this (what-feels-like-a) lifetime interest in League?

WHAT'S THE GAME, HERE?

In *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977), critic Rosalind Krauss addresses "(…) the nature of the work in the term 'work of art'," and posits "that the making of art might, therefore, be reconsidered as taking a perfectly legitimate form in the speculative act of posing questions."

League is an interesting question.

A play day, or a planning day, or an event begins with a tacit acceptance of not-knowing and a willingness to embrace (and run with) the "wrong" answer. Games are usually joined with a material and a prompt. A good game is never overly determined, overly prescriptive, or overly directed. The notion of "good", whether a League game (or event, or happening) is successful or not – much like making art – is subjective. For League play to work, one needs to suppress that desire for a game to feel like all games before: energetic, skillful, fun. I'm not saying that League isn't all of those

things, but sometimes it can also be a challenge. "Good" gameplay requires patience.

League exposes a sort of tension between the triviality of game play and a sophistication of thought. Intelligence is required to create a game, to engage in play, to (re)invent and dismantle rules and systems. League gameplay does not necessarily require a person to be intimately familiar with sports and games; rather they need to free themselves for the not-knowing, the mistake-making, and a process of asking questions that may just lead to further questions.

THE PRODUCTION OF PLAY

The explosion of "-isms" in the 20th Century shifted the role of the artist and the function of art, unleashing found objects into museum and gallery space. Contemporary artists love the Ready and the Found, but so do everyday-lifers who just like to play. Many League actions begin with the introduction of objects that—in the spirit of Marcel Duchamp—we may call "Readymades". Artists know about objects and experimentation, and are familiar with interpreting an object's alternate use and function. It is here that League's not-quite-art-ness brushes up against the conventions of art, yet remains accessible to anyone who wishes to engage.

The following is a collection of episodes, vignettes, and partial recollections that focus on some of the objects and materials (and spaces) that have led to League play.

READYMADE & READYPLAY: LEAGUE PRACTICE

Couch.
My Liverpudlian mum uses the term "chesterfield rugby" to refer to the domestic sporting activities practiced by amorous teenagers in Merseyside and beyond. On the inaugural League play day back in 2012, a chesterfield was transformed into a field of play of sorts, where hacky sacks were tossed into cushion cracks for points. All you need is a couch and some balls. (Mum would have something to say about that.) Any game designed by inebriated art students has potential, in my opinion. This was one of them. [Ed.: see "Couchie" in Plays.]

Gin. Limes. Found sculpture.
Some of the same guys who invented "Couchie" were behind the production of bathtub gin that we bootlegged one night at another League event. We met on bicycles in the dead of night (maybe 7:30pm?) at the secret warehouse studio of Couchie co-creator Cedric Bomford. Our mission: courier gin distilled by fellow art gang, The Everything Co., to locations around the city, while being tracked using some neat software. I was a gin mule, didn't get paid, and the bootlegging beneficiaries did not tip upon delivery. That's okay, I came to get drunk and get some exercise.

Upon return from delivery, back at improvised League HQ, I had a fermented, fevered battle of "Gin Pong" with a member of The Everything Co. The absence of ping pong balls (a rarity for ping-pong-ball-heavy League) led to us lobbing recycled lime wedges from the top of Bomford's giant wood construction 20 feet down into highball glasses below. We played for hours. I left the next day and dragged me and my bike home 40 blocks. [Ed.: see "League Easy" in Plays.]

Elm Park, October 2012

Bruce and Mike at League Easy, May 2013

East Vancouver block party, October 2013

Cardboard tubes. Ping pong balls.
Growing up, the Hot Wheels track with its gravity fed drops and loops was a revelation: delivering a vehicle across distances at great speed, the sound of its travels, the movement along its plastic path. Then! The vehicle now a projectile, the delight of its flight, an epic crash.

Materials can send a clear message in terms of function and purpose. Cardboard shipping tubes and ping pong balls have a certain inevitability: a rolling ball, a mode for travel, an opportunity for collaborative effort. Initially a game of pass where one tuber sends the ball to the next, creating a "Subway," it quickly morphed into the next iteration, where the ball was thrown (requiring some skill, a deft flick of the wrist) and then caught in the narrow entrance of an opposing tube. It had a bit of spectacle, an explosive moment. The excitement of its emergence, the pleasure of its traverse through air and space, the thrill of the capture on the receiving end.

When a new subdivision was being built in my suburban neighbourhood in the early 80s, facilities engineers covered over a section of our beloved Ditch, and installed a small-diameter culvert. It was some preteen genius's idea for us to dust off our 70s skateboards and go coffin-skating through the tiny narrow tube to the next street downhill. Our own private subway, rolling in the dark for a hundred metres, listening to the traffic above.

The pointless, pure joy of play.

Doormats.
Now if there's anything I do know about League, it's that the players can make a whole lot out of very little. On one such occasion, the *objet provocateur* was the humble doormat—a dozen or so of them, in fact. Collaborative game design led to a

"Floor is Lava" scenario, passing the mats overhead, around the back, and through the legs in a life-or-death race. (Dubious protection, unless those doormats were made with asbestos or some other fire-and-heat retardant material.) A classic League format: everyday materials, a trouble-making prompt, a convoluted set of suggestions, team-building-and-working skills, communication of a shared understanding, and some engaging (at times, frantic) action. [Ed.: see "Walkshopping" in Plays.]

SPORTS!
Sometimes real sports equipment is used. Sometimes we wore real sports jerseys and sometimes (okay, one time) those jerseys read "WARRIORS" in an athletic slab-serif typeface. Sometimes it feels like we're going to play some real sports. But then we don't. Someone's twisted series of oblique strategies will ultimately fuck it up and we end up playing a field game that's a cross between Blind Man's Bluff, Jenga, and Operation.

Physiotherapy and Jesus.
One lovely sunny day, the League Team appeared at Western Front to do a performative play-build as part of the artist-run centre's anniversary art-party. Using leftover materials from WF's storage, League came ready with tools and making in mind—and an exercise plan: construct a set of (impractical, of course) physical and therapeutic objects and structures. Many of the Leaguers were at home here: a space for art, materials ready and found, making things. Giant teeters, balance beams, and a wonky staircase that held a single snow cone for a brave climber. Given that it was Sunday, we even left room for Jesus, with a towable crucifix on skateboard wheels. [Ed.: see "Play Building" in Plays.]

Field marking spray paint.
Looking back, I can't think of a League Playday when we weren't drawing lines with field marking paint. League put on an event called PushupKucha [Ed.: see Plays] where partic-

Elm Park, February 2013

Elm Park, Vancouver, November 2012
(Bruce left)

Western Front, Vancouver, June 2013

PushupKucha, Elm Park, April 2014

ECUAD Culture + Community symposium site, Vancouver, October 2013

grunt gallery, Vancouver, December 2013

ipants offered aspects of their practice for others to experience. Contributors educated and entertained and reminded us of the existential threat of death and sing-a-longs. For my part, it was competitive cartography meets suburban archaeology as Leaguers spray-painted life-size maps of Canada's first skateboard park, now buried in West Vancouver. The last time a group of people traced out the park was during my grad studies, when I hired a geophysics company to scan the park using Ground Penetrating Radar and advanced image-generating software. The resulting image was a detailed scan of non-descript rock and clay with a computer-generated line drawing of a crooked phallus. On this day, in the hands of Leaguers, penises were drawn with great gusto.

Construction site.
Now, let's open the territory a bit here. Somehow the League team got access to the construction site of the new Emily Carr University of Art + Design campus and all the detritus lying about. Not exactly a Philly junkyard, but like Albert, Mushmouth, Weird Harold and the rest, League players responded to the site, made do and made play. The bricoleurs among us had a field day with fun stuff, like a pile of gravel to climb, or a precarious staircase/balance beam assembled from lumber scraps. Then intensity grew with a physical game of soccer played between two shipping containers, and another game where opposing teams joined battle like a scene from Braveheart, racing towards one another, narrowly avoiding pulled hamstrings. It's possible the proximity to ECUAD (my alma mater) fueled this aggro atmosphere with past memories of critiques gone wrong releasing feelings long buried. [Ed.: see "Site-responsive play" in Plays.]

The Moon.
For League, the sky's the limit. One winter solstice, grunt gallery was packed and the moon was full. On the shortest day of the

year, light played a key role as a massive projection of the moon became the focal point of multiple games, the most memorable being "Moon Landing," where a full-arm-throw was required to propel a bouncy-ball off the opposite wall to land on the moon. There was no sea of tranquility in this chaotic space. Things mellowed out a bit when a cluster of white-helmeted planetoids started orbiting one another in a strange elliptical dance. League can be pretty far out. [Ed.: see "Solstice play" in Plays.]

REFLECTION: THROUGH THE LENS OF LEAGUE

The Brown Cube.
When I was in 4th year of my BFA, I painted with a mix of oils and Tremclad rust paint. Paint crackled and flaked and looked wonderful. Jars of thinner developed colourful layers of chemical strata like a Gobstopper. I'd walk out of a painting session stoned on fumes. The studio was well-used, abused even: brushes jammed handle-first into the paint-spattered walls, tubes and tubs and jars of paint lying over here and way over there, reference materials scattered on the floor. Not quite Francis Bacon's infamous South Kensington studio, but it was on its way. When the program concluded, a command came from the top brass for us to repaint the studio—a threat of non-matriculation for non-action. We mixed the leftover primers and proceeded to roll over the studio, wall to wall, floor to ceiling... immersed in a sea of baby-shit brown. The administration didn't like it. "You painted it brown!" Us, innocent: "You never specified what colour."

Through a Leaguey lens, I've learned something about creating space for play, recognizing value in the peripheral, the unintended outcome. I can appreciate that maybe the best—or most evocative (and provocative)—work I've done in the past hasn't been the art that was made, but the space and the stories created in the process of making.

Work Cited

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Artist, educator, skateboarder, and regular contributor to League activities, **Bruce Emmett** has been involved in many of the projects' decisive moments and breakthroughs. His own artistic practice responds to everyday materials, forms, and spaces, and ranges into suburban archaeology with his ongoing campaign to unearth the first skateboard park in Canada, buried in West Vancouver. Emmett received his BFA at UBC, and completed a Master of Applied Arts at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. He teaches art in an International Baccalaureate program.

Playing in the Implicit

James Long

A basic tenet in the theories of play, and certainly my own experiences as both a performance maker and sport enthusiast, is that firm structures provide the necessary conditions for unhindered and occasionally virtuosic exploration. This is the paradoxical zone I aim to further explore in the following piece—that the most creative spaces in game or performance emerge at the intersection of clearly defined operational and constitutive rules and their more ambiguous, context-dependent cousin: the implicit rules.

Operational rules are the basic rules that drive play in a game. In soccer, for example, you use your feet—not your hands—to move the ball, and you score goals by kicking it into a net. Connectedly but more arbitrary, the constitutive rules define the larger structure of the game itself: that the match is divided into two 45-minute halves, and that you win by scoring more goals than the other team—rather than 50-minute halves and playing keep-away.

And then there are implicit rules: social, behavioural, context-dependent, and often unwritten—such as not tickling opponents or licking the soccer ball at the start of the game. These rules occupy the grey areas in sport—the things constitutive rules may address in future seasons: limits on the curve of a hockey stick, or how artfully an opposing player can 'accidentally on purpose' bump into a goalie without being called for interference.

In creative processes, this concept of greyness can extend into measures of propriety or socially accepted behaviour, language, and form. What can an artist do, say, or depict at any given moment? Does anything shift when it's done exceptionally well? When, how or why do these rules become dated or change? The rules depend on the connections made from a chosen source material and naturally extend back to a shifting allowability of the source material itself. The implicit is elusive and in perpetual flux and this makes it the most interesting space to play, write, or create within.

> We discovered the performance (*game*) by making (*playing*) it.
> — Goat Island's Lin Hixson (parentheses and italics mine)

"Fuck Art Lets Dance"

On May 18, 2025, Oklahoma City Thunder player Jalen Williams wore a T-shirt to a post–NBA playoff game interview that read: "Fuck Art, Let's Dance." The shirt originated with the UK '80s ska-ish band Madness—who, unless you were deep into the 1980s scene, you might remember for their song "Our House."

Williams broke a rule with this shirt—not a T-shirt-specific operational rule attached to the professional basketball, but an implicit NBA rule about what one should wear in a public context. Particularly when representing a pro team that operates under the NBA's ultimate constitutive rule of making as much money for the team-owners as possible. Williams may have unconsciously broken another kind of implicit rule, since, in the 1980s, Madness was briefly accused of being sympathetic to the UK's National Front for not condemning the skinheads who frequented their shows. It was a fleeting controversy, but for those with the time and energy for some light internet digging, it's there.

Another implicit area to consider here is who gets noticed—and fined—for these small acts of deviant fashion: the stars with massive salaries, or the lesser-paid younger players like Williams? And should language propriety be enforced on ESPN (or whichever sports channel), when you can flip over to any streaming platform and consume a vast spectrum of sex, language, or violence in any genre you please? In the end, Williams was fined $25,000 for the word on the shirt and scored a career high (34) in playoff points the next night. I've heard of no backlash from the culture at large.

Art Sport/Sport Art

I've been making various forms of contemporary performance and touring internationally for about twenty years. I'm also a sports dad—the father of a swimmer girl and a hockey boy. I myself play hockey two to three times a week, can hit a three-pointer, and throw a football thirty yards with some accuracy.

Even though I teach full-time at a contemporary art school, I can still name more players on most NHL teams than I can cultural theorists. My hockey bro / art school code-switch is a game in itself. I wear hockey caps, but only esoteric ones from Finnish leagues or my son's tournaments. That said, I've yet to wear my academia-chic thick-rimmed glasses behind the bench when coaching. I'm more comfortable confusing my art colleagues than kids' parents.

While sporty contemporary art makers are rare, the intersection of game and performance-making is not new territory. I can point to any number of practitioners who have directly influenced my own practice, and I continue to teach—from John Cage to the Nature Theater of Oklahoma, Forced Entertainment, and Richard Schechner—all of whom invited game and chance in their processes. Add to that, Inuit throat singing, Hindustani classical music, rap battles, contact improvisation, and so on—each with their own unique sets of operational, constitutive, and shifting implicit rules and approaches. And I would suggest that the more compelling the art, the more likely the artists were disrupting tradition, social norms, and accepted formal methods—the implicit rules—in their work. Navigating new territory demands a virtuosity. John Cage composed the unintentional. Tanya Tagaq brought in beats.

To borrow and tweak a thought from cultural theorist Erin Manning: when building or executing art, the most exciting and memorable work comes from working *inside* a technique rather than following a known method. Method suggests a certain kind of fixing or stability that can stifle true play. It relies on the operational and constitutive

rules of an activity. Method players are the role players on a team. They start on the bench in basketball or play on the third or fourth lines in hockey. They only make three million dollars a year in the NHL instead of thirteen. Technique, on the other hand, opens space to deftly stumble around and innovate within an ever-shifting context of culture and play. Think Serena Williams and Roger Federer in tennis; Diego Maradona and Christine Sinclair in soccer; Marina Abramović and Yoko Ono in performance. Technique rather than method is the ideal creative space—one in which there are just enough rules to keep the result unknown until it starts happening.

Lauren

As an example, I will call back to a game I participated in some years ago called *Lauren*, devised by two three-year-old girls, one being my daughter and the other, her cousin. The game supported a scenario wherein my daughter, whose real name is Nora, would be called "Lauren," and her cousin, whose real name is Hazel, would be called "Sweetie." My role was of a bumbling ogre type named "Bobo" who dutifully supported their random wishes. For two and a half hours, we wandered along a forest trail on BC's Cortes Island, engaged in a kind of extended improvisational flow.

The game of *Lauren* demanded a unique virtuosity—one rooted in the toddlers' uncensored innocence and an early-fatherhood, vacation-mode willingness to follow any kid impulse. It's not vastly different, I think, than what you see in a high-level sport where virtuosity is cultivated over many years of practice and manifests in ten-second bursts of exceptional play. In both cases—whether you're a three-and-a-half-year-old kid or a thirty-year-old athlete—the ingenuity lies in exploring and negotiating uncertainty while working within an accepted set of rules.

The only constitutive rule of *Lauren* was that we played until we got bored of it. At the operational level, there were two: the rule of using the names Lauren, Sweetie, and Bobo; and the rule that we had to keep making up new rules as we went along. This simple set-up made room for the implicit rules of cousinhood quibbling and parental obliging to develop unimpeded. It also made space for the random stops along the path to pick at berry bushes, poke at some moss growing out of a log, and at one point, encounter another hiker on the path who offered the little ones some water.[1] This collection of rules, unspoken and then refined through hyper-present play, were so perfect in that moment, so unquestioned, that they couldn't be repeated the next day when I tried to restart the game.

Winners and Losers

I'll point to a more traditional creative process—another game-as-performance-as-game—that relied on a similarly minimal set of operational and constitutive rules to create a space for sustained engagement and virtuosic play. *Winners and Losers* is a performance I developed with playwright and actor Marcus Youssef in 2011–12 and toured internationally until 2017. The work began as a query into the nature of competition, particularly between two men who—while similar in age, love of sport, and career path—differed in race and class origins. To be as reductionist as the game often appeared, I am white (W.A.S.P.) and of working-class origins; Marcus is brown (Egyp-

tian/Scottish), the son of an Egyptian immigrant who made a great deal of money in investment management. We can also, it turns out, talk shit fast.

Aligning competition and game-based creation processes, we entered a studio intent on developing a set of operational rules to create inside of. After quite a bit of messing about we landed on:

- Player One names a person, place or thing.
- Person Two declares this person, place or thing a "winner" or a "loser" and offers an argument in support of that position.
- Player One argues the opposite side regardless of how they actually feel about it.

Process-wise, the original constitutive rule was to generate a body of text for future editing. We thought we were writing something else, and as is often the case when working in the unknown, you don't know where you are until you look back and see what you've made. As our capacity to speak fast, cruel, and funny grew and a viable game-as-performance began to materialise, the constitutive rules shifted—from collaboratively developing a tourable version of the emerging work to individually winning an audience's favour—something that only became clear once we began performing the material in public

Unsurprisingly, the new public facing aspect of the project, in combination with this developing capacity, demanded an additional set of constitutive rules to help us avoid the accumulation of emotional injury:

- If either player uses a personal story to argue a point, they may not lie.
- A player could not involve the other's family members unless agreed upon in advance.
- The players banter until the topic exhausts itself or, the other player dings a small bell to concede or acknowledge a clever point by his opponent.
- We would participate in a collective hunker at the end of the show and acknowledge any deeper wounds we felt needed voicing.

What made the work exciting to perform was how the implicit rules would not settle, which in turn demanded a certain virtuosity and hyper-awareness of us as performers. As a zero-sum endeavor played by two close friends representing differing classes and races but similar political positions; friends who had given each other permission to attack at will using any material they felt might gain points in front of any given audience; and friends performing archetypes of themselves; the game constantly flirted with propriety. We would debate the "winner or loser-ness" of Swiss cheese as willingly as Sylvia Plath or Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. The longer we performed the piece the more conscious (and mostly adept) we were of inhabiting the grey implicit areas implied by the audience and city we played in, and what dominant class, race, or permissiveness to conflict they may have carried. As examples, a five-week run in Washington, D.C. in the fall of 2015 (the rise of Trump and a policy wonk audience) leaned toward the politically savvy Marcus and required different tactics than Dublin in 2013, a city and country experiencing an unprecedented economic surge following centuries of being Western Europe's underdog, which naturally aligned with my own bootstraps narrative. Basically, we were getting slick at dancing the dance and saying the right things to keep the game close and exciting.

James Long (left) and Marcus Youssef in *Winners and Losers*. Photos: Simon Hayter

That said, there was a performance in 2014, during our five-week run at Soho Rep in Manhattan, that stood out as particularly surprising with respect to the implicit,, primarily due to our own assumptions. Our forty-or-so shows at Soho were attended by a primarily white (my team), creative class (shared team) set of folks. They were a liberal-arts college crowd (Marcus') that might be financially strapped (mine) from living in New York while also relying on significant parental safety nets (Marcus'). The playing field felt relatively even. We were a hundred shows into the extended life of a very respected show, and both felt immensely capable in successfully negotiating the implicit rules for staying present in the work.

Halfway through our run, as part of a Soho Rep audience development initiative, we learned that that night's audience would be a mostly Black and Hispanic group of women from Queens. Class-wise, I assumed they were working class and generally sup-

portive of my logic and arguments that poked at Marcus's posh upbringing—but race-wise, as critical of my white privilege position, an argument Marcus astutely leveraged night after night. Almost immediately after we started the show, several presumed and practiced word choices specific to race and class fell flat, while other quips emerged as winners. The audience was more vocal than we were used to, fingers were snapped in appreciation (a new thing for us in 2014). A well-rehearsed classist, ableist or equally racist statement[2] made by either of us did not elicit the assumed reaction, often the opposite in fact, and many of the set moments for high drama shifted when we started searching for our constitutive audience approval. We found ourselves out of an understood context, unbalanced and forced to employ the earlier techniques of heightened presence and vulnerability we had set aside for an easier method of repetition. In this place of unknowing, the liveness increased, as did the quality of the gameplay, and resulted in one of our better performances.

New Rules

We stopped performing *Winners and Losers* in the spring of 2017 after a short run in Portland, Oregon. It was a few months into Trump's first term as president, and it felt like the implicit—at least in this city—was shifting from grey into stiffer notions of right or wrong. Portland, for all its self-branding of weirdness and inclusivity, has long histories and equally immediate realities of inequity, with some groups winning and others really losing. The city, like many, always feels ripe for fracture.

In the lobby following our second of three shows, as Marcus and I spoke with audience members who had stuck around, each of us was struck by how clearly demarcated our "teams" had become in this city and moment. I had a distinctly unsettling encounter with one individual who, through a series of nods, winks, and a few choice words, let me know he was on "my side" in the conversation around race and class. Unnerved, I went to find Marcus and saw him deep in conversation with a pair of audience members. They fell silent as soon as I joined the circle so I excused myself. Later, Marcus told me they had been warning him about the "gaslighting" (a term gaining traction in 2017) they felt I was enacting in the performance—and that he shouldn't trust it, or me. In Portland in 2017, the grey dialogic space in which the game had once been so successfully constructed had been drained from the performance.

Marcus and I had knowingly built and performed a game that revealed a bankruptcy of binary thinking—but now, that same game found itself trapped within it. A range of positions that had once felt complex and negotiable only months earlier had narrowed into strict oppositions: white or brown, rich or poor, right or wrong. The implicit rules that had once allowed for genuine moments of virtuosity had hardened into constitutive ones. The balance of firm boundaries and the place to play was off, and we—cast as we were—were unable (and probably unwilling) to work on the new techniques we needed to keep playing.

The Shifting Implicit

The operational rules—whether it's in the materials, performance space, net, ball, or boundary line—provide the necessary containers for play. The constitutive rules—scor-

ing more baskets, or in the case of *Winners and Losers*, using dialogue to negotiate difference—define the broader goals. The implicit rules, working in relationship to those guidelines, define the unknown spaces where boundaries can be pushed, form can be broken, failure embraced, and discoveries made. It's where the game, players, and the spectators evolve—and where the opportunity for the virtuosic resides.

That said, the social, personal, and creative conditions surrounding any work must also align for this virtuosic potential to emerge. Cortes Island is a beautiful place to wander around with a couple of kids, but not everyone gets that opportunity. With *Winners and Losers*, a unique collaboration, organizational stability, and a political context that welcomed conversation, provided the conditions for virtuosity. Like Lauren over its two and a half hours, the improvisational structure of *Winners and Losers* allowed it to adapt to shifting contexts and environments across five years of performance; it didn't date as quickly as other works can—until it did.

Playing in the implicit seeks to disrupt and, ideally, to advance a conversation—but it also has to remain in relation to the broader set of rules in which it operates.

We did what we did when we did it.

Notes

1. Okay, I did not pack any water for the excursion; or snacks, which was the ultimate collapse of *Lauren*. I still forget to follow these constitutive rules of kid care. In my defence, I can't remember ever drinking water as a kid. There were some gross, poorly pressured drinking fountains in my different schools but no one—unless we were playing a sport—ever had a water bottle.
2. By classist and racist I mean language primarily directed at each other but occasionally others too. Topics and statements, originally said in private and now being performed in public that had us "stepping out of our own lanes" to make personal or political points.

James Long is a director, performer, writer, and teacher whose practice centres on collaboration, play, and the wider potential of live performance. A founding Artistic Director of Theatre Replacement (2003–2022), his work bridges interdisciplinary forms, community-engaged practice, and public art. His projects—including the rule-based works *Weetube*, *Town Criers*, T*hree Lectures on the North*, and *Winners and Losers*—have been presented across North America, Europe, and Asia. In 2019, he and collaborator Maiko Yamamoto received Canada's largest prize for theatre, the Siminovitch, recognising their collaboration that focused on working within and across difference. Long graduated from Simon Fraser University's Theatre program in 2000 and earned a Master's degree in Urban Studies in 2018. He serves on the board of Vancouver's Russian Hall, a multi-purpose performance and gathering space, and is an Assistant Professor in Theatre and Performance at Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts.

Huwalum (Play): uwu te’ stetulnamut, ta’ultstuxw ch (not knowing, figuring it out)

Eliot White-Hill, Kwulasultun

As a relatively new artist, much of my practice—and especially my material process—has felt like both a process of both damage control and problem solving.

I started making art after the passing of my great-grandmother, Dr. Ellen White, Kwulasulwut. She was a truly incredible person: a midwife, healer, storyteller, linguist, educator, activist, and much more. She committed her life to working for our people, to sharing and passing down our teachings. When she passed, I realized how spoiled I’d been being able to go and sit with her whenever I wanted, and how much knowledge went with her. I realized how much more I must do to be the kind of person she was, and to continue her work. So, I started researching Coast Salish culture in all ways that I could: I took language classes and studied Hul’q’umi’num’, I spoke to family and elders in my community, and I read all the books I could find. As I read more and more academic books and ethnographic texts, it became apparent how many barriers exist in the way of us as Indigenous peoples accessing knowledge about ourselves. Colonization and colonialism led to the erasure and suppression of Indigenous knowledge, the dispossession of our cultural materials, and the treatment of that knowledge as a resource to be extracted rather than respected or preserved. These barriers must be broken down, and that happens when we make deeper connections and share the knowledge with others. So much of the documentation of our culture and identity has been done by non-Indigenous people and through a Western lens. It dawned on me that if you want to really learn about who we are as Indigenous peoples, you must go to our own forms of self-expression: our art, our stories, and our languages. To control the damage done by colonization is to reclaim the narrative and guide the conversation in our own way.

So that’s exactly what I worked towards. I had always been told that Coast Salish art was kind of its own thing within Northwest Coast Indigenous art, but as I looked and learned, I became totally enthralled. It is a unique style compared to others from the Pacific Northwest, but that uniqueness has not always been recognized, creating a history of disrespect and erasure. Many people within Coast Salish territories didn’t (and still don’t) know what Coast Salish art really was. I spent months looking at the forms, at ancestral instances of our art like stone carving, stuff in museum collections, the work of past and present generations of Coast Salish artists. There is a strictness to Coast Salish art, and it lies within the grammar and the flow of it as a visual language. I got to a point where I knew how a salmon should look, how the shapes and form of a salmon in Coast Salish style should be. From there I started doodling, despite not being an

artist at all for most of my life and not knowing how to draw, how perspective, colour theory, anatomy, or any of the things artists tend to practice, work. Having no technical skills to speak of, I went into this strict box that Coast Salish art presented and reveled in it. I saw in the patterns and in the shapes the continuation of our culture. Each of the shapes are beings that emerge from a moment and can only have been made in that moment by the artist who made them; you can learn so much about an artist from their shapes and lines, and how they use them. When you look at the oldest instances of Coast Salish art, you see an obvious and immediate connection to the work of our people today across hundreds and thousands of years.

As I worked, I tried not to focus on what I didn't know, and instead on what I did. I drew the shapes of our art, I thought about composition, and I practiced over and over again. These were the first instances of problem solving in my art practice and they were the starting point from which my practice emerged. I was very focused on the basics of Coast Salish art and as I became more familiar, I gave myself permission to play with them: it is important to learn the rules before you break them.

My next steps were in block printing, as it was a great way to practice design and drawing, relief carving, and at the end, I had a print I could gift or sell. Block printing has informed my style and approach with much of my art. But it was when I got an iPad and began with digital art that art became a new outlet to express what I had learned about Coast Salish culture, who we are, and how to tell our stories. It was a way to use my voice, and through digital art I found ways to make it sing. Instead of working in only one colour, I now had access to the full range, and I dived deep on different brushes and textures that could be used. I actually ended up doing digital art that had a very analogue feel—like a block print on mulberry paper might. Ironically, I missed out on an RFP [Request for Proposals] bid where they were looking for a large-scale artwork that could be produced from a digital design. The review committee rejected me because they felt that my "small scale paper works" would not be scalable to digital, when my entire submitted portfolio was digital art. There was a tension working with the iPad and it's because I didn't have a clue about the origins of the materials in the device. Despite that, I always tried to open myself and connect with the energy that is the origin of our art. We call this "uy shqwaluwun" (to be of good mind) and it's when you focus on keeping good energy and intentions, and to allow the work to come in a good way—I will speak about this more later.

After about a year of practice and a stretch of manic making during the beginning of the pandemic, I applied to a Master's of Fine Arts program. I had no idea at the time what an MFA actually was, but I knew that I didn't want to do another Bachelor's degree, and I foolishly assumed that it would teach me about how to make art. I got into said program, showed up, learned that an MFA was not what I thought it would be and again, I worked through it.

All that to say, this is how I got to the point where this huwalum (play) begins. Throughout grad school I grappled violently with the archive to access knowledge about myself and my culture. I was also told that my practice was in relation to some artists whom I had heard of and some who I hadn't, and I was fascinated by this relationality. It is inevitable that by participating in what the western world calls "art," we are consumed

by the being called "art history" and become inextricably linked and intertwined (or something like that). Anyway, I did know that a lot of famous modern artists had stolen from Indigenous peoples around the world; for instance, Picasso was known to have Northwest Coast masks in his studio in Paris. This extraction by Western artists was much the same as that done by anthropologists, who by writing down what was said by knowledge keepers or often-unnamed "informants," were then awarded degrees and honours and clout. Cultural knowledge, sacred objects, and other artefacts all came to be seen as a resource to be extracted.

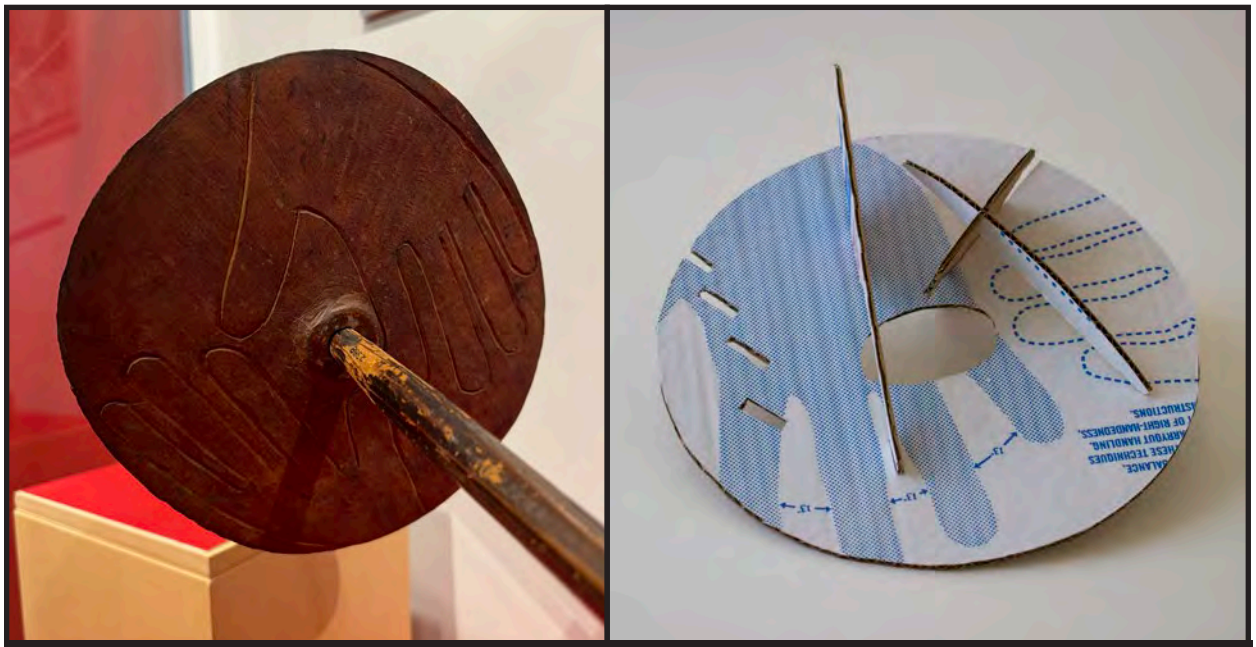
There was a story that I felt compelled to tell. I focused on the abstract sculpture of modern artists and a text about an archaeological dig that took place in my community in Snuneymuxw, at the village site of Tle:ltxw, on Gabriola Island. The document was published in 1989, outlining what had been found in this dig, trying to ascribe value and meaning to these things with a brief description of Snuneymuxw culture that was cited secondhand from another non-Indigenous academic. What I found striking in this document was that not a single Snuneymuxw person was asked what any of it all meant. This was in an era when elders were very active in Snuneymuxw, we had many fluent speakers, the river flowed strong with teachings; there was a beautiful opportunity to ask our elders about what they knew about these things, and no one did. In the mind of the anthropologist, there was a disconnect between the material culture dug up at the village site and the people who once lived there but had been moved to the reserve nearby. The cost of this ignorance was that nothing of actual meaning was shared in the document.

I started making abstract sculptures responding to the forms of objects uncovered in that dig, focusing on a beetle pendant that is perhaps one of my favourite instances of Coast Salish art. I was particularly inspired by the work of Isamu Noguchi and his sculptures in sheet metal and their maquettes in cardboard. I admire Noguchi because he was responding to ancestral forms of his own as a Japanese American, while still working within the context of "modern abstract art" at the time. I was making maquettes in cardboard for hypothetical larger sculptures. I needed cardboard to use, and I ordered some sheets from the art supply store Opus (my first mistake). I think I spent like thirty or forty dollars on this cardboard and when I got it, I was so mad at myself. What the hell was I thinking? It was just plain cardboard. I didn't even want to use it after that. I spoke to my classmate Jenie Gao about it, and they offered me some, saying: "I have a lot of recycling at home, I'll bring some cardboard for you." When they said that a jolt ran through me: how could I forget my own pile of cardboard at home? As grad students do, I'd been eating a lot of pizza. In fact, at that time, there was a deal on Tuesdays where pizzas were 50% off, so I'd get two or three and eat them all week. I had a leaning tower of pizza boxes in the corner of my living room which I brought to my studio the next day.

When I started playing with these pizza boxes, a new life was breathed into my work. The sculptures did not feel like artworks in their own right prior to that, they felt more like placeholders for art that was to be. The pizza boxes were artefacts of my own life as a xwulmuxw (Coast Salish) person today. This element of myself imbued into the work tied everything that I was talking about together, and it introduced new aspects into the work: the commodification aspect and a statement on the impacts of colonization

on what we eat. I felt cheekily that this was very traditional too, as I was using every part of the pizza as our ancestors taught us. I came up with a routine for processing the pizza boxes, the different cuts of cardboard I could get off them. My great-grandmother always told me that when we work with materials we should speak to them. You introduce yourself; you tell them what you're making, how they will be used. This is all part of opening yourself and connecting with the energy of the world around you. The energy and emotions that we carry as we work become imbued in the work, for better or worse. She always told me it's important to open yourself and that when you do, good things will come to you and help will be there. I was learning to trust the fullness of the process.

It was really hammered home to me that I was on the right path when something synchronicitous took place. When I would cut the pizza boxes into shapes I always cut on the unprinted side, because I didn't want to make things too contrived, and just let it happen. The pizza boxes I was using had playfully printed graphics on the underside demonstrating how to properly hold one's hands on the box, right down to marked degrees of separation between the fingers. It was very campy. I had a spindle whorl sculpture in mind. The spindle whorl is a tool used in the spinning of wool and fibres into yarn, and in Coast Salish culture they are also beautiful instances of carvings with intricate designs etched into their surfaces. The decorated disc of the spindle whorl has turned into an art object for modern Coast Salish artists. I cut the disc out of the pizza box and flipped it over and I saw two hands positioned facing each other. It immediately reminded me of an ancestral spindle whorl from Snuneymuxw, one of my favourites where two hands are loosely carved into it, facing each other. To me, this whorl represents our Ancestors' hands and the work they have passed down to us. It was nearly identical.



Ancestral Snuneymuxw spindle whorl (left) and work by Eliot White-Hill, Kwulasultun (right).
Images courtesy of Eliot White-Hill, Kwulasultun.

Coinciding with my master's degree, I was also curating an exhibit at the Nanaimo Museum on the revitalization of Coast Salish art, the same subject as my thesis work. This ancestral Snuneymuxw spindle whorl sat in the collection at the Royal BC Museum, and had for over a hundred years. It ended up being one of the objects offered by the museum on loan for my exhibit and I insisted that we bring it home. We worked with Snuneymuxw government and elders, and had a welcome ceremony for the belongings that came from the museum for the exhibit. We spoke to them in our language and drummed them into the space, the speaker apologized to them that we allowed them to be taken from us, and that they were away from home for so long. It was a profound and moving moment. In our culture, these are not just objects, they are living things. My relative Darren Good spoke and said, "You can see our Ancestors' hands in these spindles, their blood, sweat, and tears. You can see the imprints of their hands worn on the wood from how they were used. How many blankets must have been made with wool spun by these? I hope that one day a Snuneymuxw weaver will spin wool with these tools again." By the time the exhibit had ended, these spindles were repatriated to Snuneymuxw and will never be taken from our community again.

The subject of play is important for this publication, and I want to close on that subject. Play is part of the practical and cultural use of these objects; for us, they weren't just made to be art or as artistic expression, they were made to be used. I've spoken extensively about problem solving and damage control in my practice, and even writing this I feel a little bit stressed out by each episode, but I want to emphasize that problem solving and overcoming adversity is part of play. Through play we push ourselves, we use our bodies and minds, and we work to achieve something. Each of these moments was playful, and I enjoyed it. I am learning to think outside the (pizza) box, be uninhibited by circumstance, and allow the work and the art to flow. The process will guide us.

Eliot White-Hill, Kwulasultun (he/they) is an artist and storyteller from the Snuneymuxw First Nation in Nanaimo, BC. His family roots are in Penelakut and in Hupacasath in the Nuu-chah-nulth world. His interdisciplinary art practice is rooted in honouring and celebrating the stories and teachings passed down by his family, community, and culture. He works across a range of mediums, including digital art, sculpture, painting, printmaking, installation, creative writing, and curation. He has worked extensively with the Nanaimo Art Gallery dating back to 2021 as an educator, exhibiting artist, and contributor. Eliot currently resides on the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

Critical Play: Playing Truth to Power

Elizabeth Nijdam

Play has always been a defining characteristic of human nature. Throughout time and place, we have played. Miguel Sicart has even argued that it's "what we do *when* we are human."[1] Like our primal instincts, play predates the cultures and societies in which we continue to play. [2] Human behaviour has traditionally been categorized into serving either survival or preservation through propagation,[3] but play has never fit neatly into either category. Instead, the act of play could be seen as contributing to both. At the same time, however, Johan Huizinga proposed that play also emerges as a third thing—with its own mechanisms and motivations, coexisting with but also independent of physiological phenomena and psychological reflexes.[4] In this text I will examine how some of those motivations emerge as critical play and thereby position play as capable of doing critical work.

Despite humanity's longtime engagement with the act of play, its definition and function are notoriously difficult to pin down. As a phenomenon, play "both is and is not what it appears to be" (Brian Sutton-Smith).[5] While many might characterize the non-serious and whimsical nature of play as embodied meaninglessness, it is, according to Huizinga's seminal text on play itself, *Homo Ludens* (1938), the opposite: play "imparts meaning to the action."[6] To play is thus neither superfluous nor incidental; instead, it is an act of meaning-making.[7] In short: "All play means something."[8]

What play means, however, is contested and continually shifts based on who is considering it and what frameworks they bring. Theorists preoccupied by inherited models of play[9] emphasize biological and psychological explanations[10] that, on the one hand, position play as an outlet for individuals to release steam so they can continue to adhere to social norms or, on the other, facilitate socially normative behaviour. In this context, Huizinga suggests that some characterize play as the "discharge of superabundant vital energy" or, alternatively, a restorer of energy wasted, while others position play as satisfying some "imitative instinct" or responding to the human "need" for relaxation. At the same time, research on early childhood and adolescence see play as a form of training and socialization for youth, an endeavour that prepares them for the serious work of life to come.These definitions serve to explain a myriad of social phenomena—sometimes even in contradiction, where play is positioned as both a necessary exercise in restraint or an outlet for harmful impulses, as well as satisfying an innate urge, to enact wish-fulfilment or exercise the desire to dominate or compete.[11] Ultimately, however, despite the diversity of opinions, research tends to agree that play has a positive impact on our socialization and positions play in terms of the well-being of individuals[12] in service to society.

But play is also disruptive. On a temporal level, the ephemeral nature of play removes players from lived reality to construct and immerse participants in temporary worlds. But it's more than that. Play is subversive. Play disrupts our social, political, and economic conceptions of the world and how we exist in relationship to these power structures. Through play's capacity to "interrupt conventional ways of acting,"[13] play is carnivalesque: "Play appropriates events, structures, and institutions to mock them and trivialize them, or make them deadly serious."[14] Here, play allows one to engage with various realities that are interrelated and bound by dominant culture, in order to reinterpret them through the playful lens of the carnivalesque. As "a way to approach and perhaps untangle these cultural structures,"[15] play thereby becomes a critical mode.

This is Critical Play.

Like the nature of play itself, the conceptualization of critical play seems, as Mary Flanagan notes, "to embody a deep contradiction": "To be critical does not seem whimsical or playful: it implies analysis. To play implies a certain fantasy or whimsy that criticality most certainly lacks." As an axiom, critical play thus appears oxymoronic. Yet, it is the very tension between criticality and playfulness that gives critical play its power. So, in order to define the term, Flanagan turned to the dictionary for assistance, applying the many meanings of criticality as she re-imagined the work of play, while outlining its many interventions. She writes, "a game could just be critical in the literal sense—make disapproving comments, or reach a negative conclusion about something." At the same time, however, she notes how play's criticality also references our capacity "to analyze the merits and faults of a work such as a film, or a game, to scrutinize it in the sense of 'critical' acclaim or critics' trashing of a new body of work." Finally, Flanagan's third definition offers a concrete alignment with academic enterprise, in which she notes how the language of criticality is use to "offer a detailed and scholarly analysis and commentary." At the nexus of these three definitions, a view of critical play emerges that situates play as a tool for facilitating and fostering criticality—"a playful type of critical thinking."[16]

While Flanagan's theorization of critical play turns specifically to video games as her lens through which to understand critical play, her definition of the concept—play as tool for critical thinking—resonates with the broader conception of play under examination here. While play, according to Sicart, is framed neutrally as "a way of being in the world,"[17] through Flanagan, critical play is re-positioned as a productive enterprise and generative activity by way of its capacity to reflect and engage the world through the lens of criticality. Flanagan's theory of play thereby expands on Sicart's framing of "play as a portable tool for being"[18] by going on to specify its functionality: play as a portable tool for critical thinking, as "the means for creative expression, the instruments for conceptual thinking, and the tools to help examine social issues."[19]

Play's capacity to engage a non-serious to view to revisit and reinterpret the everyday differently is exactly why play and games have become rich sites of inquiry for contemporary artists and critics, as David Getsy relates. Flirtation, mock fighting, imitation, and parody have the power to fundamentally reorder the social relations that are otherwise seen as intimately engaged with. For example, play and games that thematize real existing social relations from the past or present provide critical reflection on actual

events and situations both as they occurred or are occurring as well as how they might have. Moreover, writes Getsy, play and games that look into the future provide platforms for the radical reimaging of social relations, interrogating the problems of the present while imaginings their future-oriented solutions. Ultimately, play's capacity for diversion is twofold. It offers both "the sense of a light distraction from the mundane as well as a skewed push away from it," activating a potential for subversion and critique the moment playfulness is enacted.[20] Critical play is thereby the daily practice of [Mikhail] Bakhtin's practice of the carnivalesque as a mode of upending social norms. And this is how critical play speaks truth to power.

Speaking Truth to Power

The phrase "speaking truth to power" originates from Anita Hill's 1997 memoir by the same title, which examined the 1991 Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearing before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee. [21] Intimately connected to the politics of this specific moment in time, "speaking truth to power" has historically been used to describe the power inequities, marginalization, and silencing of Black American voices and the experiences of other members of the BIPOC community. Yet, as a concept, the phrase "speaking truth to power" can be used to understand resistance to all problematic power dynamics that seek to stifle and silence marginalized lived experience, mounted with the goal of mobilizing public action against problematic hierarchies. Ultimately, if we understand democracy as a pre-existing political condition comprised of equal parts political goals and social process,[22] then it follows that speaking truth to power might manifest in modalities as varied as activism itself. Today, this includes all speech acts and actions that strive "to maintain the truthfulness … in the face of a powerful and potentially hostile audience."[23] Critical play is thereby also a way to speak—or rather, play—truth to power.

Playing Truth to Power

While most scholars define only certain kinds of play as subversive,[24] critical play suggests that all play is political. It is grounded in the contention that "[all] games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics."[25] Game mechanics often map onto social conventions and normative patterns of political, economic, or historic behaviour. Playing with and against these systems is thus always a radical gesture. After all, "subversive play worlds do not destroy hierarchy, authority, and order; they depend on it."[26] Critical play thus approaches the "truths" of these mechanics playfully, taking them neither seriously (as constituting lived reality in the moment of game play) nor as all-encompassing (as the only way to play the game). Here, players might change their roles or cheat; they might negotiate with their competitors or pause the game to attend to other things; they might manipulate the rules or fill in gaps in game play and worldbuilding by creating new rules and new narratives. However, even when *choosing* to play by the rules of the game, the player in a critical game is also revealing how participation in these discourses of power is a choice. And revealing our culpability and participation in the systems that oppress us is always an important lesson.

Ultimately, to perform the work of critical play is to exist "in the borderlands between the normative systems and the edges" by opening up opportunities for reflection on

"an issue, thought or concept in a new and creative way."[27] In other words, critical play asks us to consider power differently. It offers participants opportunities to explore ideas and roles outside of their social norms and lived realities [28] and thereby cultivates the conditions for palpable tension to emerge—friction that can sometimes only be experienced through game play—when the "rules" of society critically intersect with the rules of the game.

The work of play has always been critical, so let's invite play into our critical work.

Biz Nijdam with stash of outdated tabletop games to be reworked in her critical board game class

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A06

Matt Hern

A07

Tolulope Akinwole

A08

George Rahi

A14

Annaliese Gumboc

Playing Otherwise

Simona Dolinská

For neurodivergent people like myself, play does not always look the way textbooks say it should. More often than not, it is solitary, quiet, and nearly imperceptible—worlds away from the fast-paced, goal-driven, collaborative sports designed for and by neurotypical bodies. For neurodivergents, play is not just about recreation or creating neutral metaphor-spaces for real-world problem-solving; but rather a way of relating to the world and adapting to it on our own terms. Generally, neurodivergence (ND) refers to natural variations in how people sense, think, and relate. It includes autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other conditions that differ from neurotypical (NT) expectations. Neurotypical norms prioritize shared language, linear reasoning, and visibly legible behavior. Moreover, neurotypical play assumes that everyone can interpret social cues, follow group rules, and pursue common goals. But neurodivergent players often process the world in nonlinear, relational, or multisensory ways—and these differences don't always fit into the molds neurotypical games were built for. These different types of play can look like fidgeting with loose objects, pressing against a satisfying texture, or repeating a gesture that helps re-anchor us to reality when everything starts to spiral. These are not distractions or annoying time-wasting gestures that have been seen and described as useless or socially disruptive. When loud sounds, scratchy clothes, or social confusion trigger internal chaos, our bodies turn to small, repetitive movements (what many call stimming) as a way to recalibrate. Whether we are spinning a ring, rocking in place, or tracing a shape with our fingers; we are trying to return to a state where we can think, feel, and function again. What looks to others like misbehavior may actually be our most engaged, present state. That state, of the generative site of the *minor gesture*, is what I wish to explore further in this essay.

Make + Play cohort convened by Bel Chen at University of British Columbia, March 2025. Photo: Simona Dolinská

Erin Manning, a Canadian philosopher and cultural theorist, gives language to the kinds of movements and sensations that often pass beneath the radar of structured play. In her book *The Minor Gesture*, she writes about how perception forms not in finished actions or visible outcomes, but in the small, almost-imperceptible movements that shape

how a body moves through the world. These are the gestures that happen before a decision (in the in-between state of conscious and unconscious movements); like the flick of a wrist, the shift of weight, or the turn of attention just slightly off the expected path. Manning's book is animated by a desire to show how this kind of movement and variation resist the dominant structures that try to contain them, and to highlight and stress that autistic perception is not exclusive to autistic people. She proposes this shift to sensorial perception could be generative even for NTs, a tendency one might usually disregard for taking up too much time. For many neurodivergent people, these small movements and sensorial knowledge-making are the form everyday play takes on: a way of staying close to the body's own sense of rhythm, its own way of making time when the world moves too fast.

This constant calibration (the embodied negotiation of overwhelm, rhythm, and legibility) bears resemblance to what Mihály Csíkszentmihályi calls *flow*. In his book titled *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, he describes the state as being so completely immersed in an activity, that everything else dissipates behind the pure joy of the experience. Though he writes from a different context, Csíkszentmihályi's concept of *optimal experience* speaks to the same undercurrent Manning names as *carrying*: the process of staying with perception as it unfolds, moment by moment, against the grain of normative pacing. Carrying, like flow, is not necessarily expressive or performative. It's emergent. It's how experience holds itself together long enough to be livable. Though commonly associated with creativity or high performance, Csíkszentmihályi insists flow is less about outcome and more about attunement: a person becomes so engaged with their environment that external rewards lose their grip. The pleasure comes not from approval or applause, but from the body's capacity to navigate complexity with immediacy and grace. In this state, "power returns to the person," he writes, "when rewards are no longer relegated to outside forces." What's striking, though, is that flow, much like the minor gesture *carrying* experience, disrupts external expectations; it is intrinsically motivated, resistant to reward structures, and sustained by the logic of experience itself.

I first felt this most intensely on a volleyball court. When a sound disrupts a neurodivergent person, imagine it as an invisible punch in the gut. One usually physically feels the sensation of the sound passing through the ear, like a scratch, until it hits the brain and leaves an indent. All of this is invisible, fast, and ends with near-incapacitation. Thankfully, neurodivergent people have found mechanisms and the capacity to see and limit their triggers after some time and adaptation to the environment. I, for one, quickly learned that to see any real skill progress, I would have to create conditions for myself where I would be able to fully concentrate on the physicality of the sport, not its sensations. The squeaky sharp echo of shoes shrieking on gym floors, the whistle bursts, coaches shouting instructions, the balls smacking the floor all the time did not have to be debilitating and I slowly learned to cope by establishing micro-routines: tracing the court's perimeter with my left foot during laps, touching the net after every rotation, planting my hand on the ground before each opponent's serve, or dribbling the ball in a fixed sequence of threes before my own. For a long time I justified these behaviours as superstitions, not as ways to regulate an otherwise unmanageable flood of input. I thought everyone was bothered by the rush of the sport and dealt with it on their own

terms, in their own time. Facial expressions and masking were, too, hard to maintain when my nervous system was in overload. If a neurodivergent person loses grip of the expression they have on their face, we are more likely to express the inside discomfort and dissociation outwardly. I think that was the most mayhem my expressionless face caused—I was accused of looking like I did not care about the game, like I did not not want to be there, until the team dynamics went shambles… I knew what was true to me and that volleyball, its rules, rhythms, could also calm me down with their regularity as much as stimming did. Playing volleyball, while needing certain imperceptible amounts of microplay to just 'stay in the game', was in itself a way of regulating my body. What I didn't realize then was that I didn't need to justify myself through words or fights with teammates; I proved my dedication through action, when we won the all-college tournament two years in a row.

So, while a neurotypical athlete might be 'getting in the zone' or a state of flow to better themselves at their chosen activity, what I was doing wasn't 'getting in the zone' the same way that's often discussed in sports psychology. It was more like what Manning calls *architecting experience*: building livable pathways in environments not built for me. My movements didn't always look like focus from the outside. But they did arrange sensation, mitigate overwhelm, and allowed my desired hobbies and actions to continue. Where neurotypical athletes may experience flow as a moment of excellence, neurodivergent athletes often use flow to access function. This neurodivergent-oriented play can be as small as rearranging a group of objects according to color, size, or taste… My fridge gets reorganized once a week because the sensation of ordering food according to freshness calms me down and helps me meal-prep better. For neurodivergents, the 'optimal experience' is not about transcending limitations, but about finding ways of enduring within them no matter how mundane or high-level they are. Stims, fidgeting, and overall 'minor' physical play carried me through collective sports and boring high school classes when I was younger. Exactly like they now carry me through social interactions, college, and everyday life.

Make + Play cohort convened by Bel Chen at University of British Columbia, March 2025. Photos: Simona Dolinská

This is why I've centered on neurodivergent flow. I propose that it is not

just a niche experience, but can be potentially seen as a challenge to how we define play, attention, and presence. In a world that treats play as recreation, a leisure activity added after work, neurodivergent play insists on something else. For us, it is not optional. It is a way of staying functional, grounded, and alive. Moreover, these small, strange, often invisible gestures propose alternate logics of time, relation, and thought. They resist linear progress, reject productivity as value, and decenter goal-orientation. They offer something the dominant world desperately needs: a way to slow down.

If it seems like there are more neurodivergent people now, it's not because we suddenly appeared—it's because the world got faster. The accelerating tempo of late capitalism has made it harder to adapt, harder to cope without diagnoses, harder to pass as normal. Neurodivergent perception doesn't move at the speed of optimized output. It lingers, it loops, it freezes time or stretches it. And if the world once felt more bearable for us (causing us not to require so many diagnoses), it's because it once moved slower too. This is why I think shifting focus away from objective-based games—ones that prioritize winning, resolution, or finality—could be a way forward for everyone. Neurodivergent play privileges sensation over outcome, duration over direction, and possibility over finality. So perhaps what looks to the outside like idiosyncratic, self-directed play is actually something else entirely: a speculative blueprint for how we might all learn to be in the world differently. Not necessarily more efficiently, just more *presently*.

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Photo: Alison Boulier

CONTINUE OR QUIT?

Ian Verchère

If play is instinctive, it follows that it must offer an evolutionary advantage to both animals and humans. Ethologists, who study animal behaviour, often describe play as practice: a safe rehearsal for the serious business of wild animal life. For humans, cultural theorists see play as a foundational impulse—one that gives rise to core social structures. Johan Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens*, argued that ritual, law, politics—even language—emerge from play. Huizinga saw play not as diversion, but as a cultural substrate — a structured, voluntary domain where rules and repetition begin transforming instinct into institution. Through play, competition, mimicry, or improvisation become formalized into rituals, laws, and social conventions.

Semioticians like Roland Barthes were more concerned with how form becomes meaning. For Barthes, repetition is what confers meaning. In his collection of short essays *Mythologies*, he uses professional wrestling to show how spectacle and structure produce shared cultural signs—where play becomes stylized through repetition, until gestures like a raised arm or climbing the ropes become instantly legible. Pain, triumph, betrayal: all are encoded in the movement. If these cultural signifiers are the outcome, then the starting point is what Barthes calls *degree zero*—a raw expressive state before ideology intervenes, before meaning is fixed.

Play begins there: in a state of potential. It emerges as a spontaneous negotiation of space, generating sensation, feedback, and form. Like pro wrestlers repeating and stylizing their gestures, animals at play develop a shared vocabulary of movement. Kittens do this instinctively. Their sparring starts as improvisation but quickly becomes choreographed—a pantomime of attack and surrender. Through repetition (and sensation), they learn to hold their bites and pull their claws, practicing the difference between doing harm and simulating it.

Our now-domesticated cat, rescued as a feral kitten, illustrates this viscerally. Having

spent formative weeks alone, he never learned to mediate the force of his bite or retract his claws during our interactions. The restraint that would have emerged through play with siblings—bite inhibition, social calibration—never developed. Without that early feedback loop, there's no way for instinct to find its edge.

In pro wrestling terms, then, playing with my cat is not a *work*, but a *shoot*. A *work* is a scripted performance—a match with agreed-upon outcomes and exaggerated gestures meant to entertain. A *shoot*, by contrast, is unscripted and real, often chaotic or unexpected. What I'm saying is: there's nothing performative about his claws—in the absence of play, there is no measure ("Ouch!")—and *measure* is what begins to turn play into a game.

The moment any constraint or boundary is introduced—when the first rule is created—play becomes a game. This is no trivial transformation. It's not the end of play, but the birth of form: the formalization of play. The moment an action becomes measurable, trackable, repeatable, or encoded in some way, it becomes something that can be refined.

And that's where progression begins.

Progression is an aesthetic form—shaped by constraints and sculpted through a system's response to pressure and feedback. By aesthetic, I mean that progression toward mastery enables expressive qualities: rhythm, style, even a signature—all shaped by how constraints are designed and how athletes or players respond to them.

My perspective on this is somewhat unique, as both a former professional athlete and a current video game designer. In this context, constraint doesn't just mean a rule. It can be physical, mechanical, spatial, or procedural.

In a video game: jump height, input timing, collision detection. In sport: terrain, equipment, physics. A constraint is any structured condition that shapes possibility—the iterative refinement of instinct within boundaries that are either designed in advance or consensually developed in the moment.

Constraints fall along a spectrum, and understanding their types helps us understand how progression works. Some are *external limitations*—conditions imposed by the environment, by other people, or by the design of the system itself. A time limit. The slope of a mountain. The placement of a gap. These boundaries are visible and often fixed. Others are *internal limitations*—the physiological and cognitive thresholds of the player. Your reflexes, stamina, or perception. You can press a controller button faster, but only incrementally, chasing ever smaller improvements. Eventually, returns diminish, and it becomes more efficient to adapt the system itself—to find new lines, new approaches, new definitions of success.

And then there are *volitional constraints*—self-imposed boundaries that aren't required by the system but are invented by the player. No-damage runs. Chainless descents. Style codes enforced by nothing but community consensus and personal pride. These constraints are elective, but they often mark the shift from mastery into artistry—where expression emerges not from breaking the system, but from shaping one's relationship to it.

FLOW: The Progression of Freeride Mountain Biking in North Vanouver, exhibition curated by Ian Verchère at Presentation House Gallery, 2009. Rideable structure by Ian Verchère, Todd Fiander, Jerry Willows

What both the virtual and real-world domains have in common are recursive feedback loops. To put it simply: attempt, evaluate, adjust, and reattempt. Every repetition builds on the last, shaped by limits and conditions that demand adaptation. In both contexts, learning takes place through friction: by physics and terrain (*external limitations*), by strength, stamina, and reflexes (*internal limitations*), and by will, imagination, or risk tolerance (*volitional constraints*). In return, a skateboarder, a freeride mountain biker, or a video game player is rewarded with a sense of agency and, ideally, increasing fluency. From the game designer's perspective, where the real-world stakes are virtually without consequence, it is finding the balance between reward and challenge. For an action-sports athlete, the balance of reward and challenge is also measured, but the price of failure may be existential.

This process isn't confined to individual skill development. Scaling all this up, the same recursive feedback loop that shapes individual learning also plays out across regions, communities, and cultures. Not just within an individual athlete or gamer, but within a discipline or game genre itself. Freeride mountain biking wasn't invented in a moment; it emerged over time, shaped by specific material and environmental conditions. And that same loop also drives technological advancement—material failure or limitations lead to innovation and experimentation in gear and equipment. A contemporary full-suspension, carbon-frame mountain bike is as far removed from its steel-framed rigid ancestor as that ancestor was from a pennyfarthing.

The same dynamics apply in video games. In *Halo*, players discovered that timed grenade explosions beneath a vehicle—the now-famous "Warthog Jump"—could launch it across entire maps. What initially began as a physics exploit became a community phenomenon: shared, refined, ritualized. A game emerged from within a game, and in spite of the efforts of the original designers to treat this as a 'bug' that needed fixing. In *Super Metroid*, players discovered and then formalized speedrunning routes that required frame-perfect inputs and sequence-breaking. This demanded a kind of architectural fluency that bent the game's internal logic into a medium for invention—one where players defined their own criteria for mastery. These weren't developer-designed pathways, they were found through iteration, defied attempts at correction, and then refined collectively. What begins as instinctive experimentation becomes a kind of language: glitch becomes grammar.

While mastery through completion or achievement remains a valid trajectory, it's not the only logic of progression. Fluency, experimentation, and deviation are equally

powerful endpoints—or continuations. Progression isn't just a loop of practice and reward—it's a form-making engine, a structure generated through repetition. In classical design, form often precedes function—a structure cast before anything can take shape. But in play, form is something that emerges: not imposed in advance, but built through repetition, resistance, and feedback. In both action sports and games, progression gives shape to expression. Not just fluency or mastery, but style. Constraint is no longer just a limitation—it becomes the very material the player shapes. In this way, progression belongs to the same aesthetic territory as trail-building or level design: practices that materialize constraint through iteration. Each new build or feature on the trail, every new level or lavishly rendered boss monster reflects the technology, fluency, and mindset of its moment; a snapshot or screen-grab of progression made visible.

So to summarize, progression is much more than linear improvement. It is the aesthetic shape of repetition under constraint, a form that emerges not from completion but from the ongoing experience of agency, where actions are instantly and meaningfully reinforced through feedback. Whether expressed culturally or systematically, progression draws us a map that defines a space between instinct and design. It begins in a condition of degree zero, when play is not yet a game, and evolves through sensation and feedback into something repeatable, legible, and shareable.

The athlete and designer halves of me have learned to nurture and invite progression, to follow its lead, and to proactively shape conditions where fluency, agency, and invention can emerge. The difference, of course, is that while both halves are learning, one half experiences significantly more bites, bruises and broken bones along the way.

Ian Verchère is a Vancouver-based writer, artist, and game designer whose work explores the intersection of play, media, and movement. A former professional athlete, he has led design on genre-defining video games including *SSX Tricky* and *Bike Unchained*, sold an original screenplay to Disney, and authored *V0N 1B0*, a collection of short essays about Whistler published by Douglas & McIntyre. His creative and design practice is informed by a lifelong engagement with the arts and with sport, in both real life and virtual spaces, and by a deep interest in how landscapes are mediated by technology.

mind games

Lindsey A. Freeman

In the first kilometers of a marathon, I lose myself in synesthesia-kinesthesia. My body feels circumambient and I don't know where I end and the pack with which I am running begins. I experience what William James called "withness."[1] I am with thousands of others pressing down the pavement with running shoes, hoping for a return of energy.

When I run like this among so many others, I think of Elizabeth Freeman's "sense-methods," which she describes as "foregrounding time itself as a visceral, haptic, proprioceptive mode of apprehension—a way of feeling and organizing the world through and with the individual body, often in concert with other bodies."[2] I know I will face my ego later, so I try to hang on to this method for as long as I can.

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As the kilometres wear on and the pack thins out, I become distinct to myself again, and intensely aware of how long I have been running. I start to lose some of my withness. Inevitably, things get tough and I let a loop of words circle in my head, as a kind of mantra: "I came here to suffer." The intensity of the phrase lightens my mood. This, too, is a kind of play. Thinking like this helps to ward off a collapse in meaning between discomfort and danger.

When the mantra is no longer enough, I move into visualizations. I think of the Norwegian ice diver Johanna Nordblad, holding her breath and slipping into a perfect triangle cut into the ice so that she can swim under the frozen barrier that separates the elements of the world. I imagine dropping into a triangle carved into the pavement, a cool dark shape under the surface of the road, an isosceles just for me. In this imaginary space I move, I keep my pace, I struggle, but it is manageable.

Increasingly, I feel. My singlet, shorts, socks, and shoes become "envelopes of sensing," attuning me to my body, the road, the weather.[3] I play with carbon plates, endorphins, and nitrogen-infused foam; turn my feet into "atmospheric things,"[4] all in an attempt to let my racing shoes mini-trampoline me forward the best that brand designers, laws of physics, and my training block will allow.

In the later stages of the race, when the legs start to go, I turn to thinking about myself as "a large boulder in the shape of a small boulder," more than what I might seem. This is a magic phrase for me that makes me feel formidable, but also makes me laugh, loosens me up. It comes from a mistake, a typo, from the San Miguel Sheriff's Office in Colorado, where a warning tweet meant to signal that there was a 'a large boulder in the shape of a small car' blocking a mountain road, came out wrong.

Research graphic by Lindsey Freeman

I try not to think of my own mistakes, the hard things, or the real suffering. I avoid problem solving about work stuff. I push out my brother's recent diagnosis of colon cancer. I avoid ruminating on the difficulties of living between and across borders, relationships, and the challenges of having a body that might not be capable of delivering on what the heart desires. Those are the things of everyday endurance; they are for tomorrow and the next days.

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One of the best things about running a marathon is that it allows for a temporary abandoning of difficult problems and tedious tasks outside of the small sphere of experience that is the race itself. A race bib is an out-of-office automatic reply. On race day, I am granted permission to put it all aside for the runner's lunatic duty: to carry on in shorts and blister-resistant socks while performing a passion for kilometres in the moving microclimates of the race. But the lunacy is not only for runners. A marathon creates a temporary atmosphere of affective contagion that goes viral, even among those not running, activating the symptom of shared and heightened feeling that Émile Durkheim called "collective effervescence."[5] Spectators line the course, lose their minds yelling for runners. They collectively dream of personal bests not of their own making. They hold up home-made signs promising brunch or wine or kisses.

If I'm lucky, friends and loved ones are there to follow me on the course. Sometimes, the digital tracker will lose me or glitch. Sense methods on the fritz might send those following me into a small panic. Wondering did my Achilles tendon explode, like I feared it might? Did my questionable knee give up the ghost? When I appear again, my people are relieved. No one would be disappointed if I quit, but I would.

Even with all this good feeling and encouragement, there's always a point in the marathon when I question my life choices. With all this publicness, all this collective feeling, there can be a gathering of pressure, knowing that there is a stigma from registering a DNF, "Did Not Finish." Still, I believe the clarity of knowing what you can or cannot do on any given day is another kind of gift. Sometimes the desire to quit is a temporary wave, sometimes it is an enduring tsunami. The irony is that I only find out if I keep going. That this sounds like an inspirational poster, doesn't make it any less true.

After forty-two kilometers of pavement, the marathon is over. The last 200 meters is an almost obscene pleasure. The finish line is the ritual threshold to cross, but there is no liminality: I am running and then I am not running. Finishing a marathon leads "to neither oblivion nor resurrection," but something like research and an invitation for writing.[6] This, too, is a mind game, a kind of play.

Notes

1 William James, "A World of Pure Experience," *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, vol 1. No. 20., 1904: 535.
2 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010: 8.
3 Derek McCormack, Atmosp*heric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018: 7.
4 Derek McCormack, *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment*.
5 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Trans. Karen E. Fields, New York: Free Press, 1995.
6 Roland Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill & Wang, 2010: 217.

Lindsey A. Freeman is a writer, sociologist, and runner. Originally from atomic Appalachia, she now teaches sociology on top of a mountain at Simon Fraser University. Freeman is author of *Running* (Duke University Press), *This Atom Bomb in Me* (Redwood/Stanford Press), and *Longing for the Bomb* (UNC Press). Her work has appeared in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Lit Hub*, and *Public Seminar*. As of 2025 she is working on a book about professional women's soccer, kissing, queer joy, and how hard it is to care about things.

Between Peaks and Pressure: Decisions that Defined the Hellenic Mountain Race

Meaghan Hackinen

I reach Forest Prison around midnight. The gravel road ends abruptly, forcing a dismount as I search the deadend with my front bike light for navigational clues. After fifteen hours of near continuous pedalling, my processing time lags. Mist lingers from an earlier downpour, further obscuring my vision. But then I see it—a narrow trail entrance concealed behind the thicket, just wide enough to squeeze my handlebars through. I force an earlier bear print sighting out of mind and activate my headlamp to improve wayfinding.

Let's do this, I think, shoring up courage as I clip back into the pedals.

The trail twists over rocks and roots as branches claw at my spokes. I'd been forewarned about Forest Prison, a confounding section where previous Hellenic Mountain Race participants had lost hours in search of the track. My eyes dart between the slippery, uneven trail surface and my handlebar-mounted navigation unit, where a chevroned line indicates the correct way forward.

Then, just as suddenly as the gravel ended, so too does the trail. My disc brakes squeal to a halt as Skittle-sized raindrops collide with my rain jacket. I spin around, looking for a gap. Nothing.

I stuff a handful of Haribo gummies into my mouth before I grab a hold of my bike frame and punch through the branches. Hours later—after a few wrong turns—I emerge onto smooth pavement. The air hangs still. After an initial burst of gratitude for navigating the maze, my mind empties, gathering strength for the gauntlet ahead.

Bikepack Racing: A Competitive Unsupported Ultra-Distance Adventure

If pushing one's bicycle through a forest in the middle of the night—in the remote mountains of Greece—sounds bizarre, let me introduce you to the competitive sport of bikepack racing: an unsupported, ultra-distance adventure race where participants navigate a route carrying all their necessary equipment, utilizing only commercially available resources. On multi-day events venturing into challenging terrain, participants are tested not only physically, but mentally: self-reliance, decision-making, and creative problem solving on the go are just a few valuable qualities.

An emerging sport, the rules of bikepack racing are continually evolving, as are competitive strategies. Innovations in lighting and navigation, training methodologies, as well as packing and gear, transform the playing field from year to year. Yet unlike sports where changes are universally adopted—for instance pro hockey players using carbon

sticks—there are fewer across-the-board consistencies in bikepack racing. A defining feature is therefore its emphasis on individual creativity.

I have spent hundreds of thousands of hours on a bicycle. As a front-runner in the growing sport of bikepack racing, I will explore the themes of innovation and progression by using my recent experience at the 2025 Hellenic Mountain Race, where I placed first in women's division and 9th overall, as a case study.

Getting There

Just getting to the startline of a bikepacking race requires commitment and courage. In the case of the Hellenic Mountain Race—878 kilometres through the Pindus Mountains featuring steep climbs and technical descents on a network of unpaved roads, tarmac, ancient stone pathways, and singletrack—choices regarding bike selection, travel logistics, and training prove far from cut-and-dry. The route's staggering 27,800 metres of elevation, infrequent resupply opportunities, and unpredictable spring weather also factor in.

Previous editions have seen attempts on everything from rigid gravel to full-suspension mountain rigs. I adapted my Salsa Cutthroat for the rugged profile by adding a suspension fork, swapping my drop bars for flat bars, and adding a suspension seatpost. With these changes (and more), I allocated an entire month to fine tuning.

Because I experience pre-race anxiety, I opted to fly to Athens and ride the remaining 400 kilometres to the startline in Meteora. The slower transition boosted my confidence, while simultaneously providing insight into local culture and resupply options options.

Day One: Pacing

The first morning sets the tone: after a singletrack loop of Meteora's dramatic rock-perched monasteries, we charged into the mountains on a 1,400 m ascent.

As I grind uphill, I run through the top female competitors. Though women's participation hovers around 10%, I'm excited to see the roster stacked with heavy hitters, including winners of other bikepacking races and a recently retired pro/former Olympian.

Pavement gives way to gravel as we enter the mountains: green peaks laced with gravel roads and red-roofed villages nestled into distant hillsides. I grin. This is what I'm here for—the Greece you don't see in postcards.

Pacing an event that spans several days is a challenge. Moving time trumps speed, which can vary wildly. I eschew common metrics like a heart rate monitor or power meter on races as well, preferring the simplicity of Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE). Through experience, I've gained an understanding of what my body can do—*if* I keep myself fed, hydrated, and out of the red. Self-care, from preventing saddle sores to regulating internal temperature with cold creeks and the occasional ice cream, is paramount.

To Sleep or Not to Sleep?

Cloud cover builds throughout the day and evening showers come as no surprise. Time becomes slippery. So does the road, which turns to mud. After Forest Prison, I cross a series of ancient stone bridges before losing the track once again in a meadow, where I pick my way down a rock-strewn slope. My speed ticks up once the route returns to pavement, but sleep is on my mind.

Rest is vital for recovery. Yet knowing how much and when to take it is a puzzle. In earlier races, I often miscalculated. Seeking to gain an advantage (and perhaps mimicking prominent racers known for their ability to ride without rest), I had cut sleep until the point of incompetency, then compensated by snoozing my alarm. Now, I tune into my body. And when my eyes grow heavy at 3:00 am, I don't fight the urge to recharge the battery.

Meaghan Hackinen in Hellenic Mountain Race 2025. Photo: Nils Laengner.

My minimalist sleep kit consists of an emergency bivouac bag, tiny homemade mat, down jacket, and pajama shorts. To save weight on the climbs, I left my sleeping bag at home. A risky move for a mountain race—one that means I'll have to scout for protected places to bed down.

I pull under the sheltered enclosure of a small church and unpack my kit with practiced precision. Unfortunately, I find my sleeping mat is no longer affixed to my seat post bag. Without missing a beat, I lay out my rain jacket as insulation against the cold cement, then change into dry socks and shorts before setting an alarm for two hours.

Hiking Adventures

I reach Mount Smolikas the next morning. Tall timbers glisten under a steady drizzle. Like Forest Prison, this segment's reputation precedes it: a steep bike push up a hiking trail accesses the highest point on the course, to which riders (of advanced skill

level) are rewarded with a seven kilometre mountain bike singletrack descent into the first of three checkpoints.

"But why," you might wonder, "would the race traverse such difficult terrain? Isn't there an easier way?"

Certainly. If the point was simply to travel from start to finish—A to B—there are far more straightforward routes than narrow hiking trails, forgotten stone bridges, and little-used mountain roads. But where's the adventure in that?

Despite my recent emphasis on downhill skills, the singletrack descent proves too demanding, and I dismount to trek downhill. Staying safe means riding within my shifting limits—impacted by fatigue and visibility, among others. But when a photographer springs from the bushes, I unwisely attempt to ride. Not thirty seconds later, I crash hard. So, it's back to hiking.

Into the Wild

After a longer sleep and quick clean up in a hotel room, I pedal back into the Pindus Range. I never think farther than the next checkpoint, and this morning I'm focused on reaching checkpoint two: Melissourgi. As if to announce the route's departure from civilization, I startle a bear with the beam of my bike light. The pre-dawn sky pales toward indigo just as I summit the first climb, and I pause to layer up in preparation for the freezing descent.

I reach the checkpoint around noon and stop for lunch. Consuming so many quick-releasing carbohydrates in the form of candy and gels is rotting my gut, and I hope that real food might remedy my twisted insides. I attend to bike maintenance while waiting for my hot meal: washing the frame, swapping out brake pads, and oiling the chain. Even stopped, every minute counts.

From checkpoint two, the route climbs higher. Above the trees, the landscape opens into high alpine; rocky peaks bare the last vestiges of snow. No houses, just mountains upon mountains, bluing into the distance. I pinch myself—this feels like a dream. But then a hissing puncture breaks the spell.

Innovations in tubeless tires have been a game-changer in off-road cycling. For small holes caused by sharp rocks, sticks, or thorns, tire sealant simply self-seals. A tire plug, affectionately known as a bacon strip, is used to fix larger holes. I thread my bacon strip onto the tire plug and attack the puncture. Within seconds, the sticky material of the plug fuses with the tire and sealant closes the remaining gaps. Of course, it's not always this simple—sometimes minor surgery with a needle and thread is required, or in the worst-case scenario, inserting a tube.

Addressing a mechanical issue, even a minor one, serves as a reminder of how much rests on my shoulders. Despite the 200 other riders on the course, I've mostly been alone. Riding alone means that I have to trust my own assessments for pacing, as well as handle any issues that come up. Outside of emergency circumstances, it's against race rules to ask (or offer) assistance to another rider anyway. Though solo travel

Meaghan Hackinen in Hellenic Mountain Race 2025. Photo: Nils Laengner.

incurs certain risks, the payoff, in my mind, is worth it: few joys compare to the enduring satisfaction of moving through a beautiful yet challenging landscape alone.

No Free Miles

The final 190 kilometres from checkpoint three to the finish prove to be the most challenging yet. From Karpenisi, riders climb 6,300 m over several mountain passes to reach the finish in the Venetian port town of Nafpaktos.

After several days of minimal sleep, exhaustion sets in. My pace diminishes, emotions penduluming wildly. The heartbreaking transience of my current surroundings—tortoises, buzzing insects, colourful bee boxes—brings me close to tears.

A massive electrical storm rolls in as I ascend the final climb before the route drops down to the sea. I seek protection from the hail under a shrub, and discover my rain jacket missing—forgotten where I last slept because I'd been using it as insulation to replace my lost sleeping pad. I layer up with arm warmers and a vest and then strike out once I sense the storm waning. Unfortunately, the hail intensifies as I come over the top, then turns to lashing rain. A roll of thunder confirms I've made a bad decision. But without shelter, the only option is forward. Eventually, the curtains of rain part just enough to faintly glimpse the sea.

Adapt Instead of Fight

A small crowd awaits my finish under patio umbrellas. As the first woman across the line, I receive special attention. In most bikepacking races, you're lucky if you have the person who arrived before you wait around to hand you a beer, so I appreciate this opportunity to swap stories and connect with other riders.

The rain continues to pour as I'm ushered under a covered restaurant patio to begin replenishing my caloric deficit. I feel relieved to be safely down the mountain, but at the same time overwhelmed by the noise and attention: after being alone on the route for so long, it's difficult to pump the brakes and settle in.

With myriad uncertainties and factors beyond one's control, crossing the finish line of a bikepacking race is no guarantee. It takes perseverance, grit, physical fitness, inventiveness, wise decision-making and a little bit of luck. To compete at the pointy end of this sport, racers must remain efficient as well—trusting their decision-making process, even if that means slowing pace to correct a mistake, or pushing on in inclement weather. For me, learning to appreciate the beauty of a landscape in motion, rather than stopped, is part of the solution.

It can be tempting to frame an ultra-cycling journey as a battle: against opponents, weather, terrain, and the ticking clock. Yet from my experience, a more productive mindset is one of alignment: how can I adapt to the constantly changing circumstances?

By navigating the challenges instead of fighting them, I've found success and created deeper experiences that feel more in-tune with the environment.

Meaghan Hackinen is a Kelowna-based ultra-cyclist and writer whose two-wheeled adventures have taken her from Haida Gwaii to Mexico's high plateaus, across Canada and the United States, and from North Cape to Tarifa along some of Europe's highest paved roads. Meaghan's background in sport includes rugby, snowboarding, and roller derby. A multi-faceted rider with more than a dozen wins and several course records, Meaghan's 2025 sights are set on completing the Mountain Race Series: the Atlas Mountain Race in Morocco, Hellenic Mountain Race in Greece, and Silk Road Mountain Race in Kyrgyzstan—with the goal of contributing to the dynamic and growing women's field in bikepack racing. She has an MFA in Writing and is the author of *South Away: The Pacific Coast on Two Wheels*, a Kobo Emerging Writing Prize finalist; and *Shifting Gears: Coast to Coast on the Trans Am Bike Race* (NeWest Press).

Rolling Away: On Skateboarding and Mimesis

Jesse Birch

My strongest memory of organized sports involves both wonder and embarrassment. When I was about ten, my soccer team was playing a game in the pouring rain. I was playing defence, the position always given to the players least likely to score. The ball was at the other end of the field and I was miserable, soaking wet and freezing cold. I found some solace in the sunken worlds I imagined in the puddles that surrounded me. I only looked up when I heard my name and saw the ball speeding in my direction, followed by a wall of players from the opposing team. I couldn't see anyone on my team who was open, so in a moment of panicked improvisation I decided to pass the ball back to the goal keeper. Unfortunately I did not inform the keeper, nor did I kick straight, and ended up scoring an own goal.

At the time, I chalked it up to my general lack of coordination and not being "good at sports," but looking back, I realize that I was simply unable to integrate my imaginary worlds with the norms of organized athletics. While this particular moment was laden with shame, it is likely that it had a role in leading me towards pursuits where parallel play, cooperation, and experimentation were the norm. A fulsome understanding that creativity and sport could be seamlessly integrated, however, only became apparent when in 1986, at the age of thirteen, I became acquainted with skateboarding.

I was introduced to skateboarding through my friend, Dave, who not only had a professional quality skateboard, but also a skate video collection and rare and coveted early copies of *Thrasher* magazine. I was enamoured by the dynamic cast of professional skaters and the beauty of the objects themselves with their different shapes, colours, and graphics. But this was only part of the allure. In its most basic form, the act of skateboarding itself is largely removed from these characteristics. I cobbled together a board from hand-me-down parts, and from then on, I was a skateboarder. Riding a skateboard did not come naturally to me, but it pulled me deep into its world. For a kid who struggled with rules, structures, and coordination, skating provided a sense of freedom, a way for my body and my imagination to work in tandem, and a kind of autonomy that allowed me to take risks and make mistakes, on my own field, and my own terms.

But getting to this field didn't come easy. Learning to skateboard is like learning the violin would be if it smacked you in the head every time you played badly. When I began skating it took me many months of battered shins to achieve a decent ollie. This trick, which involves jumping and bringing the board into the air using only your feet, is fundamental to modern skating, and yet when broken down, it is highly complex. To ollie, one cannot think through the steps and do it; you have to test the movements

again and again until the parts become a whole, until there is no more thought, until it's as natural as breathing. Smack tail, jump, slide foot, jump, smack tail, slide foot, fall, smack tail, jump, slide foot–and then a breakthrough. After trying again and again, I managed to ollie up a curb and roll away. It felt like magic. All of the failures it took to get there disappeared, and a whole world of possibility opened up.

Thanks to observation, daily practice, and repetition, I was beginning to feel at one with my skateboard, and with that ollie, I became initiated into a poetics of urban play. Ollieing takes skateboarding from being confined to a single field, the road, and opens up whole new constellations of activity. I came to understand that street skateboarding was not simply about tricks and transportation, but also a means to know my limits in relation to my environment. Concrete curbs, ledges and barriers, asphalt banks, sets of stairs, and handrails became objects of possibility in a near-limitless arena of urban play. As I explored the potential of these obstacles, they became embedded in both my memory, and my body. Through skateboarding—and falling—I came to know these structures with a kind of understanding that can only come from a repetitive testing of the physics of things.

Skateboarding is a mimetic activity, in the sense that mimesis can be an act of copying someone or something else. In skateboarding, this appears in a number of ways. As beginners, most skaters ape the styles, moves, and clothes of other skaters, and through skate media and peer groups they adapt in relation to the subculture's collective consciousness. Due to the highly technical nature of skateboarding this kind of copying extends to a kind of micro analysis of other skaters' body positions, foot placements, speed, and timing. This is often a key part of skaters' progression, but here's the rub: Not all skaters are represented equally. Women and LGBTQIA2S+ skaters, for example, have been making important contributions to skateboarding since its inception, but they have been sorely underrepresented in skate media and undersupported by the skate industry. While to an extent all skaters can look at each other for inspiration, it's most rewarding to watch another skater who you identify with. Until recently, for women and LGBTQIA2S+ skaters, there were relatively few visible role models.

There is another kind of mimicry, however, that involves relations, not with other people, but with things and environments. Skateboarding is an embodied experience that often involves practicing until you, the board, and the obstacles you are interacting with, become one proprioceptive unit. In his essay "On the Mimetic Faculty," cultural critic Walter Benjamin argues that mimesis is not just something that happens from person to person, but also between people and objects, and even more startling is his assertion that it is not just an act of copying, but rather *becoming* other. "The gift of seeing resemblances," writes Benjamin, "is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like *something* else."[1] He goes on to emphasise this as a foundational experience: "The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill or a train."[2] But skaters don't simply act like the built environment, they become part of the city in an intimate and tactile way.

French intellectual, Roger Caillois is known for his classic play theory, in which he separated play into distinct categories including competition, gambling, mimicry, and thrill

seeking.[3] Caillois, however, first emerged in the milieu of the surrealists, and the foundations of his concept of mimesis are, well, otherworldly. In an article titled "Mimicry and Legendary Psychaesthenia" written for the Surrealist journal *Minotaure*, Caillois drew from studies of animal camouflage to suggest that mimesis is not only about imitating or becoming other, but also becoming space itself: "…the body separates itself from thought. The individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space…"[4]

Applying this psychedelic take on mimicry to skateboarding might seem extreme, but it aligns with qualitative findings of field researchers. In their essay "Intrinsic Motivation and Flow in Skateboarding: An Ethnographic Study", Tim Seifert and C. Hedderson report: "For many skateboarders, the subjective experience of skateboarding moved beyond euphoria, emancipation, or efficacy to become a transcendental experience. They reported feeling disconnected from their surroundings, or being transported to another place"[5] or as one skater they interviewed put it: "It's not like you are in this world at all. You just feel away. You feel far away from everything and everyone else… you are so carried away with the skateboarding [A.]"[6]

In my experience, this feeling of being beyond one's body occurs most acutely when attempting something that pushes at the boundaries of one's ability, when the skateboard and the obstacle seem to fall away. This kind of skating is a form of *edgework*: "a gamble, a deep play that takes on a skilled body-centric focus, a means for spatial appropriation of otherwise hostile terrain for purposes of self-mastery and mastery of an environment, a 'sensation-centric locomotor play'."[7] In its most basic form, edgework is simply risk taking, but when activated in the flow of play, and informed by years of practice, a mimetic experience beyond language, thought, or even a sense of self, surfaces.

Jesse Birch skating, 2025. Photo: Dylan Doubt

On a summer night in Vancouver, around 1993, I was with a large group of skaters riding down the street from spot to spot. I noticed up ahead that a panel of the sidewalk was missing. In a split second, I cut from the road up onto the sidewalk, pushed for speed as hard as I could, ollied, kicked my heel out, the board flipped in the air, I caught it with my feet, landed on the other side of the gap, and

kept rolling. A heelflip that big was at the edge of my abilities at the time, but it felt completely organic. I felt both present and absent, as if in a dream. In this kind of state, it is common for skaters to report a kind of blackout, during which they have no memory of having landed the trick they were attempting, but found themselves rolling away nevertheless.

Rayssa Leal, a seventeen-year-old skateboarder from Brazil, has been activating mimetic types of play in her skating since she was six years old. She first captured the world's attention at seven, when she appeared on Instagram heelflipping down a crusty set of stairs wearing a blue dress and fairy wings. This is mimetic activity at its most basic: she played a fairy and she flew. She had dressed up for the Brazilian Independence Day parade, and she noticed some other skaters doing tricks down the stairs. Rather than going home to get changed, she just grabbed her board and joined them. She has since gone on to become a highly accomplished professional skateboarder, winning five world championships and medaling in both 2020 and 2024 Olympic games. However, she still gets the most joy through the mimetic play of actual street skating.[8]

At fourteen, she announced her newly minted status as a professional skateboarder by releasing a video clip of a backside lipslide down down "Hollywood 16," an infamously challenging sixteen-stair-long handrail at Hollywood high school. This trick involves ollieing over and onto the rail, and sliding down it on the centre of the board with one's back to the landing. In order to feel ready for the attempt, Leal warmed up by attempting a number of challenging tricks, including a backside lipslide on a smaller twelve-star rail nearby, and then a simpler board slide down the sixteen rail. Jumping, sliding, bailing; jumping, sliding, falling; jumping, sliding, landing, falling. She was simultaneously testing the conditions, her abilities, and loosening her sense of fear. She fell on the big rail five times before finally getting it, each attempt hovering at the edge of possibility. When she finally rode away she immediately held her head in her hands with the euphoria and disbelief felt by any skater who has pushed past their limits and rolled away.

Leal is pushing both her own limits and the very limits of skateboarding, but if you watch videos of skaters learning foundational tricks like ollies or kickflips, or even rolling on a skateboard for the first time, they express a similar kind of euphoria. I'm certain that if there was video footage of my first ollie up a curb, you would have seen it on my face as well. What this tells me is that while mimetic edgework might be more intense in higher risk situations, it isn't only the domain of top pros like Leal. It is activated on a continuum relative to each skater, where they are at. Skateboarding has long been a space where neurodivergent and underprivileged youth have found space to thrive outside of normative structured sports, and in recent years there have been cultural shifts that include greater visibility and support for women and LGBTQIA2S+ skaters, and also a robust adaptive skateboarding community. Largely skater led, these movements push to make sure all skaters have the opportunity to find their edges.[9]

Notes

1 Benjamin, Walter, E. F. N. Jephcott, Peter Demetz, and Leon Wieseltier. "On The Mimetic Faculty." Essay. In *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007.
2 Ibid.
3 Roger Caillois and Meyer Barash, *Man, Play, and Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
4 Quoted in Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 2018). p.34.
5 T. Seifert and C. Hedderson, "Intrinsic Motivation and Flow in Skateboarding: An Ethnographic Study," J*ournal of Happiness Studies* 11, no. 3 (March 19, 2009): 277–292, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-009-9140-y.
6 Ibid.
7 Glenney, Brian, Isaac Bjorke, and Andrea Buchetti. "Skateboarding and the Surplus Value of City Play." *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* 6 (November 1, 2024).
8 See: Out There: Rayssa Leal (*Thrasher Magazine*, n.d.), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMKLYIbJ8ao.
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In addition to being Nanaimo Art Gallery's Curator and curator of the League Nanaimo exhibition project, **Jesse Birch** is a writer, educator, artist, and avid skateboarder. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (Photography) from Emily Carr University, a Master of Arts degree in Art History (Critical and Curatorial Studies) from the University of British Columbia, and he is an alumnus of the Curatorial Program at De Appel Arts Centre in Amsterdam. He sees curating as both a profession and a collaborative practice that brings artists and artworks into relation with people, places, and histories. Birch has published in numerous exhibition catalogues, art magazines, and journals. He received the 2013 Art Writing Award from Ontario Association of Art Galleries.


PLAYS

Field Pong

September 2013
The n Games
Elm Park

Like Pong but with with running people as the "balls."
Make a field with two end lines.
Pairs of people on the end lines hold the ends of a stick and can move back and forth along the end line.
The runners score if they cross the opposite end line, but if they are touched by one of the opposite sticks, they have to change direction and head back to their own end line before making another run.

“Bring a stick”

B01

A vague prompt opening a play of ideas

Who / where / when

Collective League play at Elm Park, November 2012.
Report by Germaine Koh.

Key ingredients

- An ambiguous prompt that encourages ideation
- Sticks of all sorts

“Bring a stick” was one of the best prompts ever: specific enough to be evocative, vague enough to generate ideas. This kind of open prompt is a mechanism for kickstarting creative play in all kinds of fields besides games.

Of course, this being Canada, there were many hockey sticks, but we also saw a broom stick, chopsticks, a bamboo stick, a USB stick.

Play arose around the different characteristics of the various sticks, but since sticks are good for whacking things, this was also inflected with risk. Maybe this is why one of the games that emerged, Sonic Pick Up Sticks, in which a blindfolded person was surrounded by sticks being picked up around them, felt quite improper: the possibility of violence was translated into vulnerability on the part of the person in the middle.

A similar prompt used a few months later was “BYOBocce,” but probably because that one was more specific, play stayed in the realm of tossing objects, with strategy arising from the different character of the objects.

Sonic Pick Up Sticks

A blindfolded person stood in the middle of a pile of sticks. The people around them took turns picking up a stick, but if the person was able to point to the person taking the stick, they had to become the person in the centre.

Field Pong

Brought by me, the idea was to make a human Pong game with running people as the “balls.” A field was designated with two end lines. Pairs of people on the end lines hold the ends of a stick and move back and forth along the end line. The runners score if they cross the opposite end line, but if they are touched by one of the opposite sticks, they have to change direction and head back to their own end line before making another run.

Rain or Shine

June 2024
Hadden Park fieldhouse

The promt: bring an umbrella

BY0Bocce

May 2013
Elm Park

The invitation was to Bring Your Own Bocce: bring all manner of chuckable objects. Strategy emerges from the materials.

League Home Edition

March 2025
with University of British Columbia Wargamers

League Home Edition

B02

In Praise of Boredom

Who / where / when

Kit of parts developed by Ian Verchère. Report by Ian.

Key ingredients

- Generic board game pieces and miscellaneous items
- Boredom

I firmly believe that boredom is not a failure state, but a generative state. We should welcome it, as too much interaction design is overdetermined and procedurally intended to fill any void or gap with content. Properly situated, boredom is an invitation for improvisation and exploration.

League Home Edition owes its genesis to game jams, a common and communal event in indie video and computer game development. I made it by filling a large tackle box filled with a couple of hoochies (a fishing lure endemic to the Salish Sea), and all manner of dice from D4s to D20s, generic game tokens, various toys like action figures and Hot Wheels, plastic fauna for model train enthusiasts, an hourglass, blank hex tiles, rubber stamps, Sharpies, and pens. Each element was chosen as much for its ambiguity as its ready availability at both craft shops and big box stores.

The idea that things have an inherent purpose or goal (philosophers would call this teleological) is important in game design, so consciously or not, many of the items that ended up in the League Home Edition (the hourglass is a great example) were chosen for their capacity to suggest purposeful teleological structures, such as the passage of time, or to simulate real-world systems like social structures or economic models. Importantly, what is NOT in the League Home Edition are instructions of any kind, and that is kind of the point: what might you play or invent, if nothing was telling you how?

League thrives in outdoor environments, but external or logistical constraints such as weather or field availability potentially limit its full expression as a project encouraging creative play and invention. Yes, games can still emerge from bad weather: one only has to experience sitting in the bleachers of a baseball stadium when a downpour starts, a tarp is rolled over the infield, and the game is delayed. At some point, one of the groundskeepers will sprint and dive headfirst onto the soaking tarp, sliding as far as they can on their belly. Another groundskeeper will attempt to beat that, followed inevitably by the mascot. A game has emerged, and it is the intent of the League Home Edition to transpose this dynamic into a domestic or institutional interior. It is the antithesis of screens and social media—instead, it is a rain-delay engine of creativity.

League Home Edition asks participants to invent structures, define parameters, negotiate goals. By engaging this way, they're playing with ideas and knowledge—showing us that boredom isn't just an empty, meaningless state; rather, a space where people choose to create their own meaning.

whatsinthebag
as played by Nanaimo Art Gallery staff
May 2025

Combatants pull an object from their bags. Debate ensues. Winner keeps the object and continues as defending champion. Procedures open to negotiation.

whatsinthebag

B03

Changing just one rule opens up endless negotiation

Who / where / when

First developed by a group of students and play researchers at University of British Columbia, September 2024. Report by Simona Dolinská.

Keys

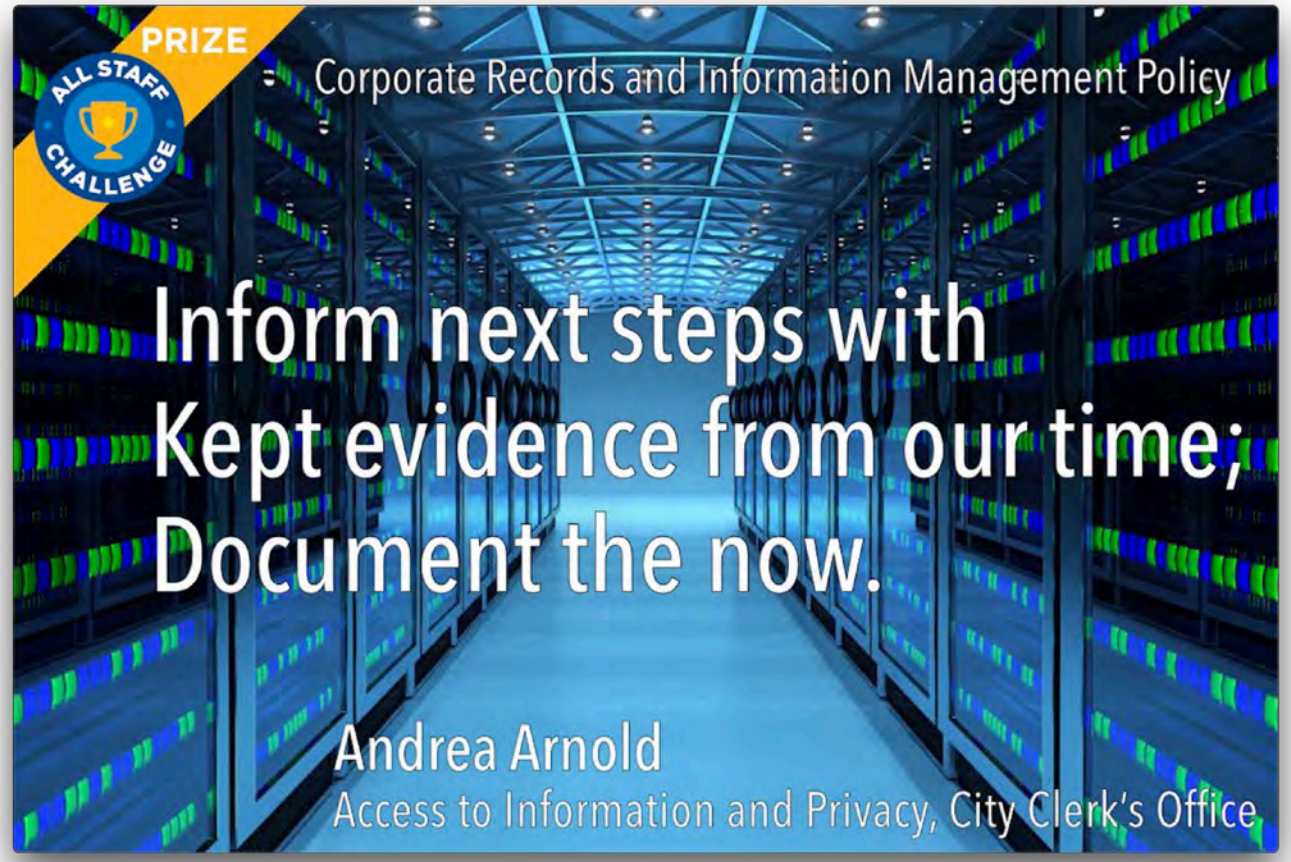
- Found objects, bags
- Performance, negotiation, adaptation

The premise of whatsinthebag is pulling palm-sized trinkets from the environment and putting them into a bag for play. Two or more people with bags containing an undefined number of items face off in a circle. It is up to the group to decide which people compete first. We opted to go by age the first time we played it and the second time, people decided for themselves. After the duellants are chosen, they pick a random object from their loot bag to present for debate.

This is the point in the game where it can evolve into many things. The premise is so ambiguous that it depends on the group of people who play it to decide how. The main objective of whatsinthebag is utilizing the environment for personal entertainment and play. That is what I found most interesting when playing this game more and more—it could adapt to any environment in many ways; and I think the final version did not even have bags anymore—participants were just choosing objects to enact or debate from around them.

First test play: participants were game researchers. The first version of whatsinthe bag was a debate adaptation of Rock Paper Scissors that was opened up to endless outcomes. Participants filled their bags with whatever found objects and palm-sized trinkets could fit. Negotiation was endless in that rules were changed almost every turn. And with every turn, the negotiation happened by incorporating negative feedback to prolong the criteria of the debated object. We would battle spiky light-up balls with plastic lemons, chocolate bars with colorful ribbons until Sesame Snaps dominated all found objects that day.

Second test play: Participants were prone to play more than invent. They tried playing the game with the previous whatsinthebag rules but quickly realized the pace of the first version was not suitable for them. Like the first group, they made minor shifts in rules during every turn: first they stopped the communal voting, then stopped debating altogether—they found performing the objects hidden in their bags was easier than debating their visual criteria. Adding the performing aspect transformed this game from being a game of endless negotiation based on Rock Paper Scissors to a performative charades-like guessing game.



All-Staff Challenges
June 2020 workplace challenges
City of Vancouver
Here: Haiku Howto challenge

All-Staff Challenges

B04

Friendly competition prompted creativity and connection

Who / where / when

Set of challenges developed by Germaine Koh as Engineering Artist in Residence, City of Vancouver, May-June 2020. Report by Germaine.

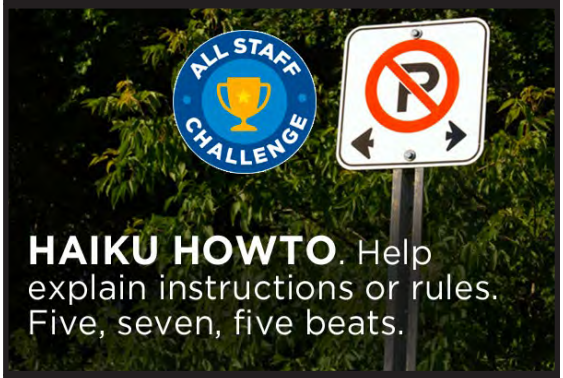
Key ingredients

- Existing work team
- Workplace culture
- Challenges framed vaguely enough to elicit novel responses

Towards the end of my term as Artist in Residence within the City of Vancouver's Engineering department, I had been working with one of their teams to develop a set of activities we were referring to as the Engineering Games, when the COVID-19 pandemic arose and all non-essential projects were cancelled or put on hold. To wrap up my time there, we decided to adapt the idea as a series of All-Staff Challenges for city workers who were largely confined to working from home.

Four challenges were issued, realized and shared online, with prizes being recognition and workplace bragging rights. Challenges were calculated to be framed vaguely enough that they would elicit novel responses, and there was enthusiastic participation.

The idea for the challenges was palatable within this workplace in which people are highly conscious of being answerable to the public, not only because it addressed the stresses related to the pandemic and isolation felt during lockdown, but also because the principles of the challenge series related to several principles used in management. One is "process improvement" or "continual improvement," terms used in manufacturing and workplace management to refer to incremental running improvements to operational systems. That relates to concepts of "agile" or "lean" management, aimed at optimizing production flows, and used in "just-in-time" manufacturing that sees reduced material backlogs. It's hard for me not to see gamification at play here. But to frame it in management terms, play is critical because it trains skills of agility, adaptation, responsiveness, creative thinking, and the idea that workers (not just managers) actively contribute to workplace culture.



Team meeting in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, by Viviane Schwarz

Couchie

Invented by Michael Love and Cedric Bomford
Depicted: May 2013 at League Easy event

Points are based on the difficulty of landing the ball in each location.
The game will adjust based on the objects and space.

Couchie

B05

Expanding our habitual interactions with objects

Who / where / when

Developed by Michael Love and Cedric Bomford, East Vancouver, circa 2002. First played at League October 2012. Report by Michael.

Key ingredients

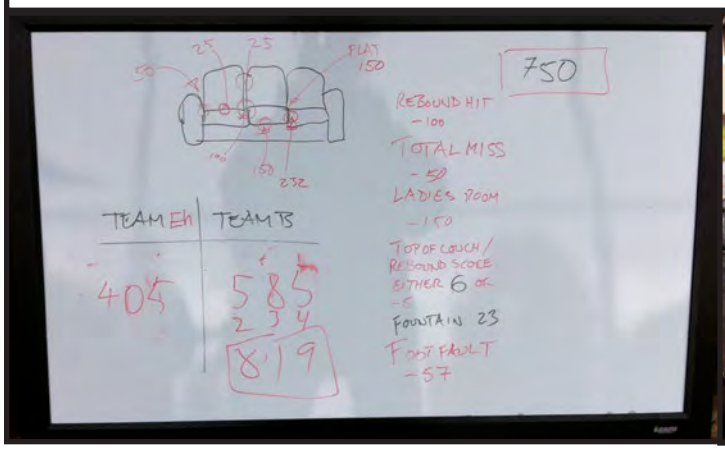
- Couch, things to throw
- Social improvisation
- Adjustments based on characteristics of the space

Couchie is a game that found its origins late at night in a run-down apartment on the corner of East Hastings and Nanaimo in Vancouver, when a juggling ball was thrown at an overstuffed couch and was wedged between two cushions. Cedric Bomford (my roommate at the time) and I soon realized we could routinely throw and lodge juggling balls in the crevasses between the cushions, and it quickly developed into a 'competitive' sport.

A points system developed based on where the balls were lodged; it is more difficult to make the balls stick in the vertical seams than the horizontal seams, so the vertical seams are given a higher point value. The intersection of vertical and horizontal seams require the most accuracy and are awarded the highest value. At the beginning of each game, the players determine how many points are needed to win. The game is played in rounds. Each player starts with three balls, and during each round players take turns throwing their balls at the couch. Points are tallied at the end of the rounds based on the number of balls and their positions in the seams. If a player's ball is dislodged during the round, the points for that ball are forfeited. The game ends when the first player reaches the number of points needed for the game.

Couchie is a social game, which requires a minimum of two players, but given enough juggling balls, could accommodate any number of players. In its simplicity and accessibility, the game is flexible in its structure, with the points system and rules often fluctuating during or between games based on player negotiation. Couchie does away with the rigid rulebooks, specialty equipment, coaches and referees that define most competitive sports, and instead embraces a non-serious approach to competition.

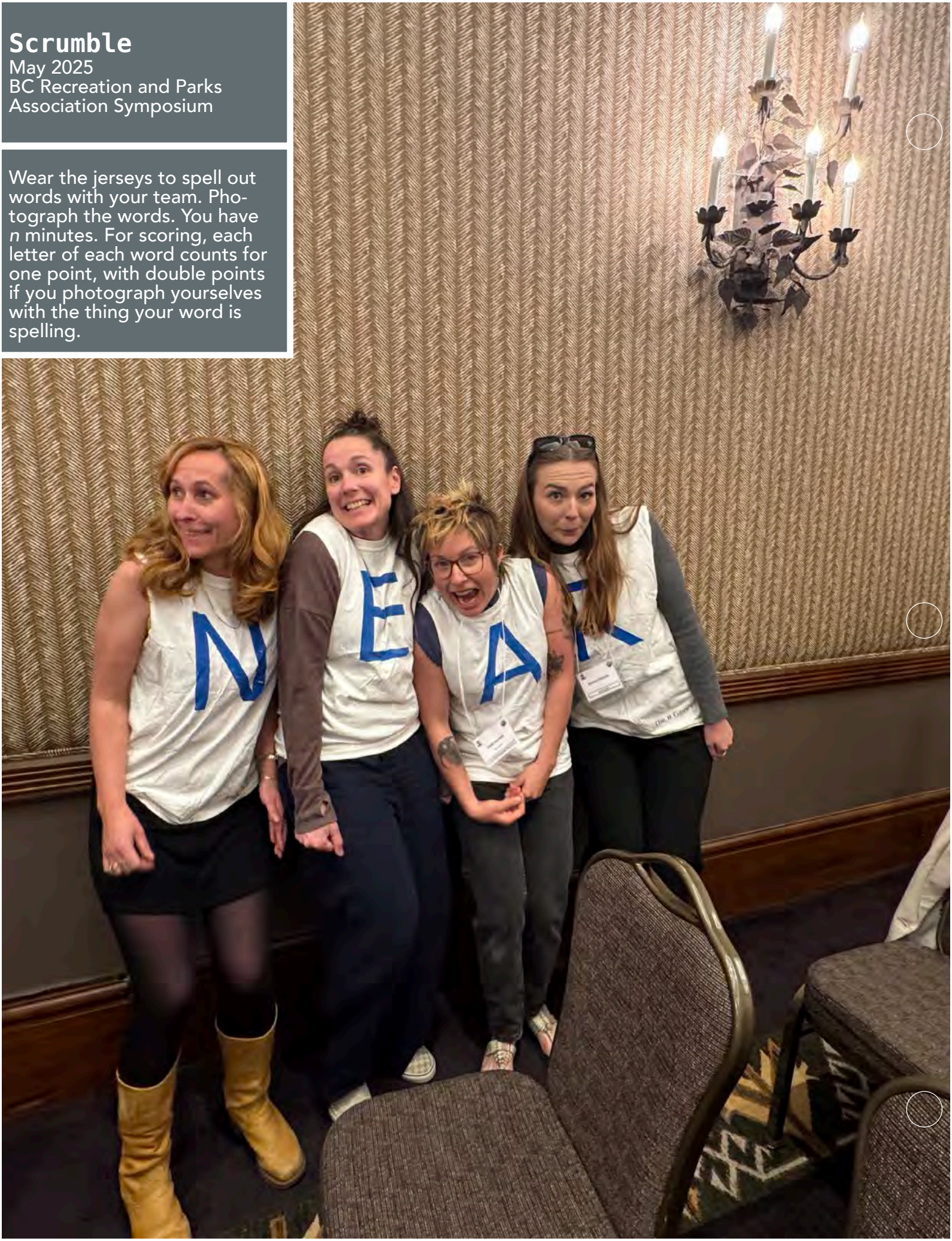
Couchie shifts the use-value of both the couch and juggling balls, inviting creative play by expanding our habitual interactions with everyday objects. Space is created (and wedged) for exploration, creativity, ingenuity, and for social encounters that would otherwise be impossible.



Scrumble

May 2025
BC Recreation and Parks Association Symposium

Wear the jerseys to spell out words with your team. Photograph the words. You have *n* minutes. For scoring, each letter of each word counts for one point, with double points if you photograph yourselves with the thing your word is spelling.



Scrumble

B06

Play dissolves inhibition; strategy emerges

Who / where / when

Game and first editions of shirts made by Germaine Koh, 2013. New edition of customized collegiate-style jerseys produced by Germaine with Max Wu and Simona Dolinská, 2025. Report by Germaine.

Key ingredients

- Shirts with big letters on front and back
- A group of people, not necessarily an existing team or friend group
- Loss of inhibition in Huizinga's "magic circle" of play
- Emergent strategy and intra-team roles

How to play

Scrumble is like Scrabble, but with humans wearing shirts that have big letters on the front and back. The instructions are exact enough to make it a game suitable for competition, but deliberately vague enough to promote creative responses:

Wear the jerseys to spell out words with your team. Photograph the words. You have *n* minutes. For scoring, each letter of each word counts for one point, with double points if you photograph yourselves with the thing you are spelling.

FUSE, Vancouver Art Gallery, November 2013

Observations

The most interesting thing for me about Scrumble is how effectively and quickly it produces what play theorist Johan Huizinga called a 'magic circle' of play, where you feel like you are acting in a protected space, and the world outside the game has fallen away. We see people quickly lose inhibition as they are drawn into play and absorbed by the time-limited challenge. We see teammates physically interacting, moving, and spinning each other around to reposition themselves. We also see real-world hierarchies drop away in the heat of play.

I believe there are some key details that make this game work so well. The largeness of the letters is important. Firstly that reinforces that this game requires whole-body action, and there's evidence that physical activity promotes novel, but appropriate, responses to a prompt (Oppezzo & Schwartz). Secondly, it makes it obvious that you are putting on a costume/uniform to be part of an action, which helps to make you feel like you are playing a part in something. We have emphasized that further with

the 2025 edition of collegiate-style jerseys, which mash up that form with other kinds of costume conventions, blending the languages of theatre and sport, as well as gendered costume forms.

Scrumble has emerged as a good League warm-up game, also for a few reasons. One is how quickly it draws people into a playful state. Two is that it gets to the League goal of practicing creative process by posing a problem with some vagueness, which invites not only creative responses to the problem itself, but also strategizing and improvisation. We see people inviting strangers in, negotiating with the other team, finding ways to use the same shirt twice or wear more than one shirt, turning letters into other letters, turning people upside-down, etc. During this strategizing, we often see multiple people taking a lead, and these are often not the designated leaders of existing groups. Many people treat the scoring as incidental to the challenge and the pure joy that arises in this game, but some people take it very seriously. These are other ways in which it tends to reveal what kind of players people are.

References

- Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture*, 1955 — the original characterization of the 'magic circle' of play.
- Marily Oppezzo and Daniel L. Schwartz. "Give Your Ideas Some Legs: The Positive Effect of Walking on Creative Thinking" in *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2014, pp. 1142–1152 — a.k.a. the Stanford experiments, which attempted to quantify the boost in creative thought related to a physical activity.

2025 version in progress

Stuffie Wars
February 2013 "Little League" activities with Bruce Emmett's class
Elm Park

Game developed by Bruce Emmett's International Baccalaureate students. Stuffie Wars is like dodgeball, but with stuffed animals. When you get hit, you have to become the animal that hit you.

B07 Little League

Committing to a starting-point provokes solutions

Who / where / when

Bruce Emmett's International Baccalaureate Visual Arts class at Elm Park, February 2013, assisted by Isaac Vanderhorst. Report by Bruce.

Key ingredients

- Buy-in from the students
- A decision to choose one type of object and make it work

I brought my IB [International Baccalaureate] Visual Arts class on a field trip to the field house. We called it Little League.

We were all taking a risk here: teachers & students, both. Teenagers are tough customers on any given day. Here we were, introducing to young people art beyond the sketchbook, canvas, art studio, or art gallery, inviting them to explore play through the lens of art, or art through the lens of play... I guess it depends which end of the lens you're looking through.

The notion of art as play situated itself well with these young artists, receptive to League's M.O. The students impressed us: involved, participatory, invested – they were into it. Then again, maybe they all knew this was part of their coursework and just wanted a good grade.

Not sure where the stuffies came from, but they became the provocative objects for our art games. And a great game was generated on this day: STUFFIE WARS, zoomorphic performative sport. Stuffie Wars was played on a tennis court, beanied beasties wedged into the net, opposing teams on either end, awaiting the startup call from the umpire: "1, 2, 3 - STUFFIES!" The students' creative thinking and their willingness to engage led to a game that blended dodgeball, charades, and improv. The rules went something like this: players who were struck by a beanie bear were not mauled or permanently disabled, but like Hermione Granger drinking cat-fur-laced Polyjuice Potion, the students made a phantasmagorical transformation into the creature that struck them. The end of the game, I believe, was precipitated by the transformation of all players into animals, left to make their way back to the suburban forest.

There were other games played, including STUFFIE DILEMMA, based on the PRISONER'S DILEMMA.

Stuffie Dilemma

February 2013
"Little League"
at Elm Park
with
Bruce Emmett's
International
Baccalaureate
class

High school students' version of Prisoner's Dilemma using stuffies.

Prisoner's Dilemma is a classic game theory exercise in which two 'rational' people are each offered a chance to either cooperate or betray the other. The protoypical situation: two gang members are arrested and kept separated. There is not enough evidence to convict them on the main charge without one of them confessing, but they can both be convicted on a lesser charge. If one confesses, he will be set free and the other convicted for the maximum sentence. If both confess, they will both be convicted, but serve fewer years. If neither defects, they both serve less time on the lesser charge.

Walkshopping day

February 2013, Elm Park

League play day proposed as an exploration of walking. Here: working with materials brought by Leah Weinstein. Described by Bruce Emmett as "Doormat relay. Maybe a sort of 'floor is lava' scenario, but some kind of complicated complilation prevented you from following a sensible response pattern. A classic League format: everyday materials, a complicating prompt, team-building-and-working skills, communication of a shared understanding."

Walkshopping

Mind + body = embodied cognition

B08

Who / where / when

February 2013, Elm Park and Kerrisdale, Vancouver. Mostly League regulars. Report by Germaine Koh.

Keys

- A group willing to experiment
- Equipment related to walking: doormats and surveyor's tape

The day was proposed as an exploration of walking. The people in attendance were an intergenerational mix, mostly of seasoned League regulars. Some people brought walking-related materials to experiment with: Leah Weinstein brought doormats, and Ian Verchère brought surveyor's flagging tape. I believe Leah also had at least a rough idea of using the floormats as some kind of lilypad-like place to land, and we played with those on the tennis court in various formations (including a sort of conveyor-belt relay). To use the surveyor's tape we decided to split into teams with different colours of tape, and used that to flag different points of interest in the neighbourhood. One team ended up composing a kind of story with snippets of text, while the other created little bits of concrete poetry in response to the neighbourhood details.

This day might serve as an example of the phenomenon studied at Stanford University, where they ran a series of experiments in which they attempted to quantify the increase in creativity associated with physical activity, specifically measuring the number of novel responses to a given cue that the experiment's participants were able to generate after walking, compared to a control group who didn't have physical activity (Oppezzo & Schwartz).

Reference

Oppezzo, Marily and Daniel L. Schwartz. "Give Your Ideas Some Legs: The Positive Effect of Walking on Creative Thinking." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 40, No. 4 (2014): 1142–1152.

Workshop
October 2014
City of Port Coquitlam

Workshop
February 2024
Simon Fraser University School for the Contemporary Arts.
Photo: Bianca Kodato

B09 Workshopping

Iterative development integrates theory + practice

Who / where / when

Many workshops delivered by Germaine Koh, for municipalities, community groups, and work teams up to as many as 60 people. Usually 1.5 to 3 hours. Report by Germaine.

Keys

- Include theory, game-development practice, observation and feedback, self-reflection
- Effective coaching/feedback responds to actual activity, not theory
- Iteration

Format

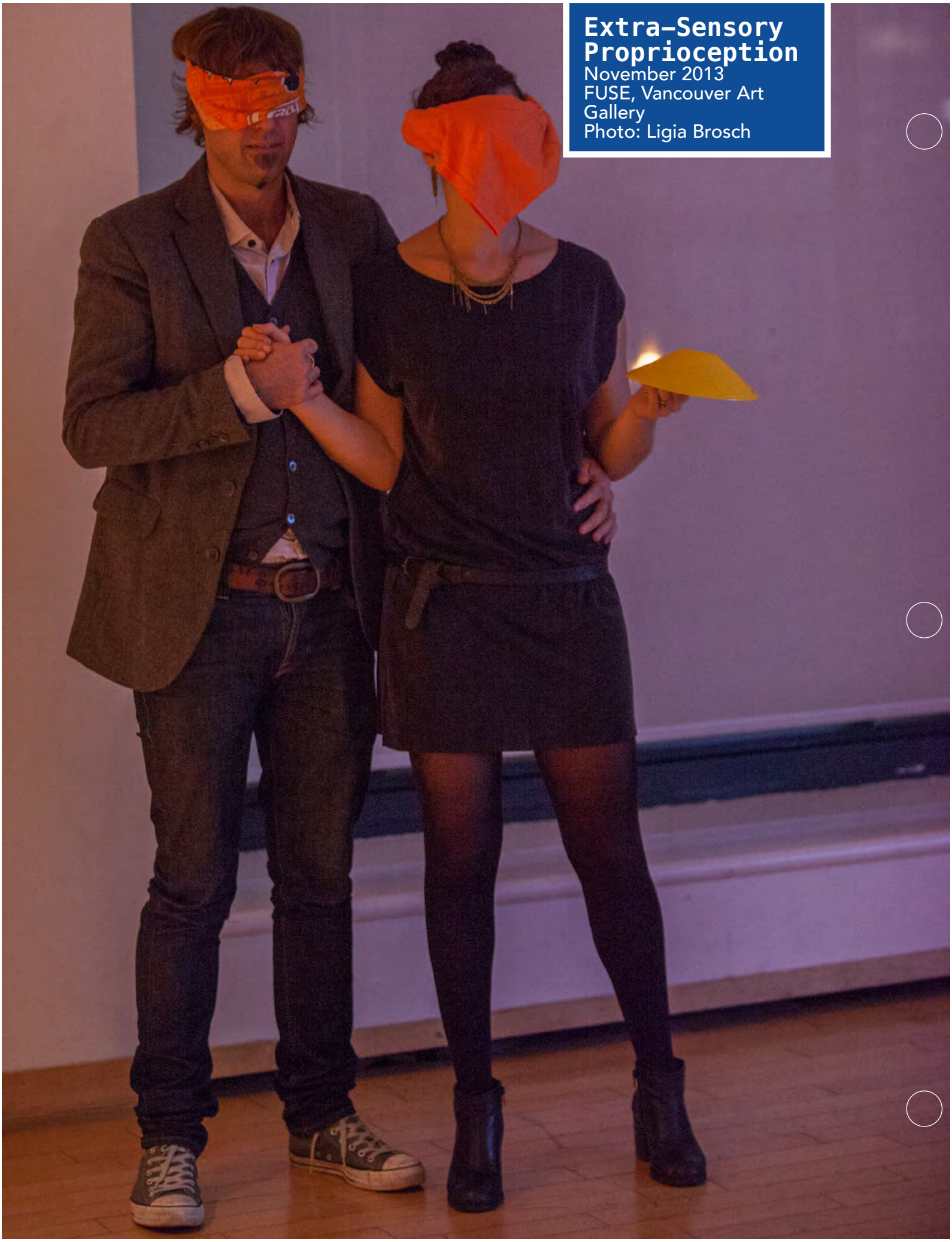
The workshops I lead on play as a creative practice (and variations thereon) sometimes begin with a warm-up activity such as one of the games previously invented at League that are known to disarm and bring people into a play state. The next phase is typically a brief section of theory, addressing topics such as the importance of play, anatomy of play, how play and creativity are mutually generative, and introduces League as a project focused on the processes of creative invention, along with some of the 'tactics' and processes we often employ to kickstart play and creative thinking. An important part of the workshops is one or two rounds of game development and testing, sometimes begining with specific prompts. During these sections, I (and occasional co-facilitiators) circulate and observe closely the dynamics and mechanics of how the groups work together. We watch things like the different kinds of group roles and teamwork that emerge, the decision-making and problem-solving strategies, and try to detect typical patterns. Between rounds of workshopping I share those observations and tie them back to the theory or into new observations, before inviting the participants to try another round of iteration.

Observations

There are some very, very typical patterns and lessons that emerge in this kind of invention, some of which are addressed in more detail elsewhere in this Plays section: see for example "Less is more" and "Rule bending." Along with those common patterns I could probably add my most common piece of advice: "Less talking, more testing," offered in response to the very common pattern of people trying to figure everything out before actually trying it out.

Some prompts I employ because they highlight some of the less obvious relationships between creative practice and play, and create opens to begin to discuss play as a critical function of upsetting conventions. Some of these prompts include doing things 'wrong,' prolonging a state of uncertainty, or being attentive to the metaphoric quality of one's actions (how they might stand for other kinds of patterns in the world).


Workshop
June 2019
Women Deliver
Conference
Satellite Sessions
City of Vancouver



Extra-Sensory Proprioception
November 2013
FUSE, Vancouver Art Gallery
Photo: Ligia Brosch

FUSE at the museum

Inserting play into unexpected social space

B10

Who / where / when

Vancouver Art Gallery, November 2013, facilitated by a big crew of League instigators including Meaghan, Alisha, Bruce, Nic, Bernice, Catherine, Toby and Germaine. Report by Germaine Koh.

Keys

- Large, crowded public event with audience primed for spectacle
- Rough outline of propositions playing with the character of the social, gala-type event

League was invited to be one part of a monthly social event at the Vancouver Art Gallery. We prepared propositions for the gallery and public spaces that were calculated to engage in a surprising way and play with impropriety within what we expected to be a crowded event with people primed for some kind of interactive spectacle. We also had one dedicated reception room outfitted with random play equipment and in which some documentation of previous League events was projected.

Besides the free play that arose, we prepared the following situations:

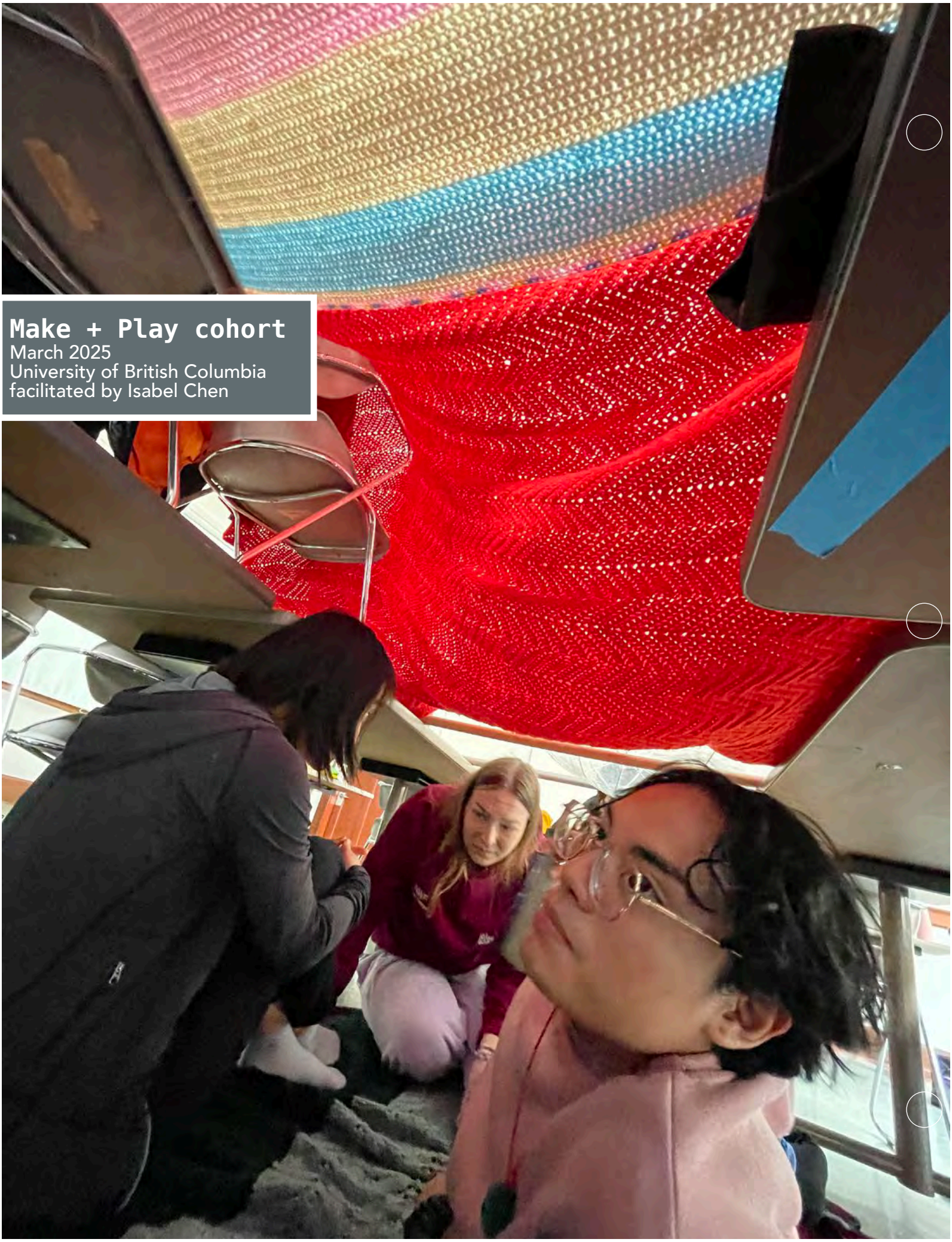
- Extra- Sensory Proprioception [see elsewhere in Plays], a game that is very difficult to play in a noisy environment and which puts participants in a vulnerable situation.
- A situation called Gates, first made up by Sean Smith for The n Games in Toronto, that involves people with outstretched arms, pivoting to suggest closing and opening gates that permit passage or not.
- Wave, a game-like performance idea of mine in which people do a stadium wave in relation to traffic.
- No Look Pass [see elsewhere in Plays], a game of deception.
- Experiments with rope—uncomfortably playing with vulnerability, trust and cooperation in this crowd situation.

Wave
November 2013
FUSE, Vancouver
Art Gallery
Photo: Ligia Brosch

Gates

Game by Sean Smith
November 2013
FUSE, Vancouver Art Gallery
Photo: Ligia Brosch

People with arms out-stretched pivot in sync, to suggest gates opening and closing.



Make + Play cohort
March 2025
University of British Columbia
facilitated by Isabel Chen

Make + Play cohort

B11

In which "gentle arrival" prevailed

Who / where / when

Cohort of about a dozen University of British Columbia students convened for three play sessions by Isabel Chen, March 2025

Keys

- Tactile and sensory play
- Engaging, or not, on ones own terms
- Attentiveness to the shape of a gathering, including how people arrive at/to play
- Cooperative and solo play

Student researcher Isabel (Bel) Chen participated in a student activation of public space by convening a group of students to explore materiality and sociability in public space.

Bel placed a lot of attention on how people felt arriving and participating, and their care with these aspects produced a setting in which people felt welcome to express neuro-divergent, sensory, and solo approaches. See also participant Simona Dolinská's essay "Playing Otherwise" in the Analysis section of this book.

Make + Play cohort
March 2025
University of British Columbia
facilitated by Isabel Chen

nGames Nuit Blanche

B12

Obstacles and invitations creating small time outs for play

Who / where / when

Nuit Blanche in Toronto, October 2013, with a small League crew headed by Sean Smith and Germaine Koh. Report by Germaine.

Keys

- Large, crowded public event with audience primed for spectacle
- Interrupting the fast consumption mode

The Nuit Blanche edition of The n Games, situated in the courtyard of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art was, unlike its tournament-styled versions, more like a rolling series of playful propositions that encouraged people attending this very crowded, large public overnight contemporary art festival, to take time out for play. In some cases this became a kind of invitation in: for example a very long jump rope. In others the play activities created more of an obstacle or friction to slow down the audience: this was how the ropes blocking easy entrance to the museum, and the game of human foosball operated. These adaptations emerged as disruptions that, to me, felt productive as it became evident that the audiences were in such fast consumption mode that they were not really taking anything in.

Human Foosball
October 2013
The n Games at Nuit Blanche, Toronto

Massively Multi-Player Ping Pong (MMPPP)

B13

An adaptation of table tennis that emerged through environmental constraints and real-time player input

Who / where / when

Developed collectively during a game development company retreat, circa 1992. Report by Ian Verchère.

Key ingredients

- Bored people in isolation with a lack of other things to do
- Table tennis equipment, typically one table, four to eight paddles in varying condition and quality, and no other entertainment options or diversions
- A hard floor

Elm Park fieldhouse, Oct 2012
Photo: Karen Zalamea

Massively Multi-Player Ping Pong ("MMPPP") emerged from a game development company retreat at the UBC Ski Club cabin in Whistler, BC. After hours of "company mission" and "career objective" PowerPoints, a dozen-plus artists, programmers, and designers were ready to vent some creative energy.

Boredom and a desire to be part of the action were key motivators. Conventional table tennis formats (singles or doubles) meant most attendees were spectating. An evenly matched doubles game—where a margin of two points is required to claim victory—could drag on considerably. Bored spectators began to intervene, grabbing spare paddles to deflect or hit the ball, and even interfering physically to affect the outcome.

The group soon embraced the challenge of designing a game that would, in gamer terms, make ping pong "massively multiplayer."

The first inspiration came from schoolyard games like Four Square: if a player faulted, the next person rotated in. But sticking too close to traditional structures still left too

much idle time. *The breakthrough came when all eight paddles were used*—four on each side. Defending corners and sides created dynamic movement and close-contact improvisation. Like in traditional doubles, overlap demanded fast decisions and quick communication.

With the net acting as a de facto center line, returns with spin often required players to cross into opposing territory. This led to *the defining change: removing the net*, opening the table for 360-degree play. Players were assigned numbers from 1 to 8, hitting in strict sequence—2 after 1, 3 after 2, looping back to 1 after 8. If a player faulted, they exited the rotation and a new player entered, assuming the vacated number.

Iterations and variations

This worked—but play became too chaotic. Quick strikes and "kill shots" led to constant substitutions and broken rhythm. There needed to be time for players to position themselves. A final rule was introduced: the ball must bounce three times on the table and once on the floor before it could be struck.

Of course, edge cases followed. A ball that bounced once, then rolled, raised a question: does rolling count as a bounce? It was quickly agreed that a rolling ball constituted infinite bounces.

This rule produced the MMPPP "kill shot": a softly angled shot across a table corner that rolled just enough before dropping almost vertically to the floor. The shallow bounce made a return nearly impossible.

Breakthroughs and Discoveries

The first breakthroughs came with the idea to use all equipment at hand, and then to remove the net. After that, rotational numbering and positional sequence reshaped the game's flow. Players had to anticipate two moves—trying to set up the next player to fault while staying aware of who preceded them. Because paddle numbers were fixed, each new entrant had to quickly register who they were hitting before and after.

MMPPP illustrates what Salen and Zimmerman call "transformative play"—when a system evolves through player interaction rather than top-down design. It didn't start as a game. It became one through consensus, improvisation, and the desire to keep everyone playing.

Edmonds Park, August 2024

Reference

Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2003). *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press.

bored games
March 2025
with University of British Columbia Wargamers

B14 Dedicated practice

Mastery helps you advance, but also prepares you to evolve

Reflection by Germaine Koh

Most League gatherings are basd on inventing new games and sports, and this is deliberately framed in order to remove the element of mastery and have everyone start at the same place, as amateurs to the things we develop together. At least that's in relation to specialized skills that are known to be useful to this game or that sport. It somewhat discounts the training and practice in creative decision-making that many people bring, which are mental skills that are equally useful in League, and are some of the most important ones that we train and exercise.

Innovation, invention, and discovery don't come out of nothing, even if they might appear to be sudden. Developing something new is likely to come from a combination of dedicated practice within some discipline(s) or other—enough that one can judge the fine detail of an activity or situation—and a honed practice of observation that allows one to recognize opportunity to innovate, level up, and evolve. It's that kind of practice—not *guaranteed* to lead anywhere specific but nonetheless advancing our general ability—that we were doing on this chilly October day pictured here, when it was just a few League regulars (Germaine, Bruce Emmett, Jay White, plus one newcomer) who noodled around and improvised a full-on challenge, virtuosic in its own way, that used all the balls and equipement League had at the time.

Golstrom, October 2013

Less is more

Simplification allows focus; beware cognitive fallacies

B15

Who / where / when

Many, many, many occasions. Report by Germaine Koh.

Keys

- Self-reflection and self-critique
- The philosophical concept of elegance, aka Occam's razor
- Avoid the "sunk cost" fallacy

At most League workshops and events—and understand that League gatherings are actually proxies for art studios, rehearsal halls, and other places where creativity unfolds—when people dive into deliberately trying to make something new, at some point, there unfolds a profusion of stuff, in which every bit of equipment and material on hand is hauled out in an attempt to integrate it into the play. This can spiral for some time, with people stubbornly trying to find a way to make tennis balls AND masking tape AND rope AND THEN playing cards work together. The cognitive fallacy at play here is something like the "sunk cost" fallacy, in which you have invested enough effort into something that you don't want to give it up.

So in almost every workshop—as in many an art class—there is a moment in which someone takes a step back (a self-reflective move, which is an important skill) and says, "There's too much going on here. We could simplify." That's a key moment and an important lesson in making things work. I could replace the word "work" with "good," and that would be occasion to say that although it sounds like a private value judgement to say that a game or and artwork *works* or is *good*, in reality those judgements are usually shared by others who are looking at the same thing dispassionately, and the characteristics they are responding to very often have to do with simplicity or elegance, used in the mathematical or philosophical sense of using the simplest solution that sufficiently explains a phenomenon. Sometimes things *work* because they're uncluttered. It relates to the adage "Less is more," associated with minimalism in art and design.

The philosophical principle of simplicity, called Occam's razor, can also be its own cognitive fallacy, when one assumes that the simple explanation *must* be the right one. So there's that. There's not a single solution to make a thing *work*, but do consider that often, less could be more.

University of British Columbia, March 2025

Twister
Germaine Koh, with assistance from Max Wu, 2025
Found object (street sign) lightly modified to become a "Walk / Push-up / Breakdance / Nap generator"

Extra-Sensory Proprioception (ESP)

B16

Knowledge of your body in space, but with a partner

Who / where / when

Developed in time for The n Games tournament at Elm Park in September 2013. Report by Germaine Koh.

The n Games tournament. September 2013

Keys

- Teamwork and communication while tracking your body in space

Observations

As I recall, Extra-Sensory Proprioception was conceived by Jay White, Bruce Emmett and me, as we were planning for the first n Games tournament. It is essentially a simple problem-solving situation, and we see different teams quickly develop strategies to solve it. The challenge lies in the multitasking in different registers that is required: communicating with your teammate while trying to keep track of the location of a remembered sound while navigating through space blindfolded. It tests, and possibly trains, proprioception (the sense of one's body in space) and teamwork.

How to play

From The n Games 2013 rules sheet:

- The game is played in rounds.
- Each team's goal is to place a marker as close to the target as possible.
- At the beginning of the each round, all players will have the opportunity to hear the bell rung from the centre of the field. They may position themselves wherever they wish to listen.
- For each round, each team fields up to two blindfolded players, who begin on the perimeter of the playing field, from different sides (adjacent sides are permitted).
- Once the blindfolded players are in place, the target is placed somewhere in the field, and the bell is rung.
- All the active players walk towards the target, stopping and dropping their marker when they believe they are as close to the target as they can get.
- There is a 4-minute time limit after the bell is rung.
- Active players may communicate with the other active players. Non-active players and spectators mustn't communicate.
- Once all players have dropped their markers, the distance from target to each marker is measured (in feet, rounded). Each team's longer distance is discarded, and the shorter is their score for the round.
- The winning team is the one with the smaller cumulative score after all rounds.

Extra-Sensory Proprioception

August 2013
Stanley Park 125th anniversary events, Vancouver

Blindfolded partners line up on the edges of a field. Each has a flag. A marker is placed on the field and a whistle is blown once from that location. Each person navigates as close as they can to where they think they heard the sound, then drops their flag. The partners can communicate with each other if they want. Once all flags are dropped, compare distances. If competing against other teams, keep the closer of the partner's distances.

Swatches

B17

An open-ended cue leaves room for debate, multiple interpretations

Who / where / when

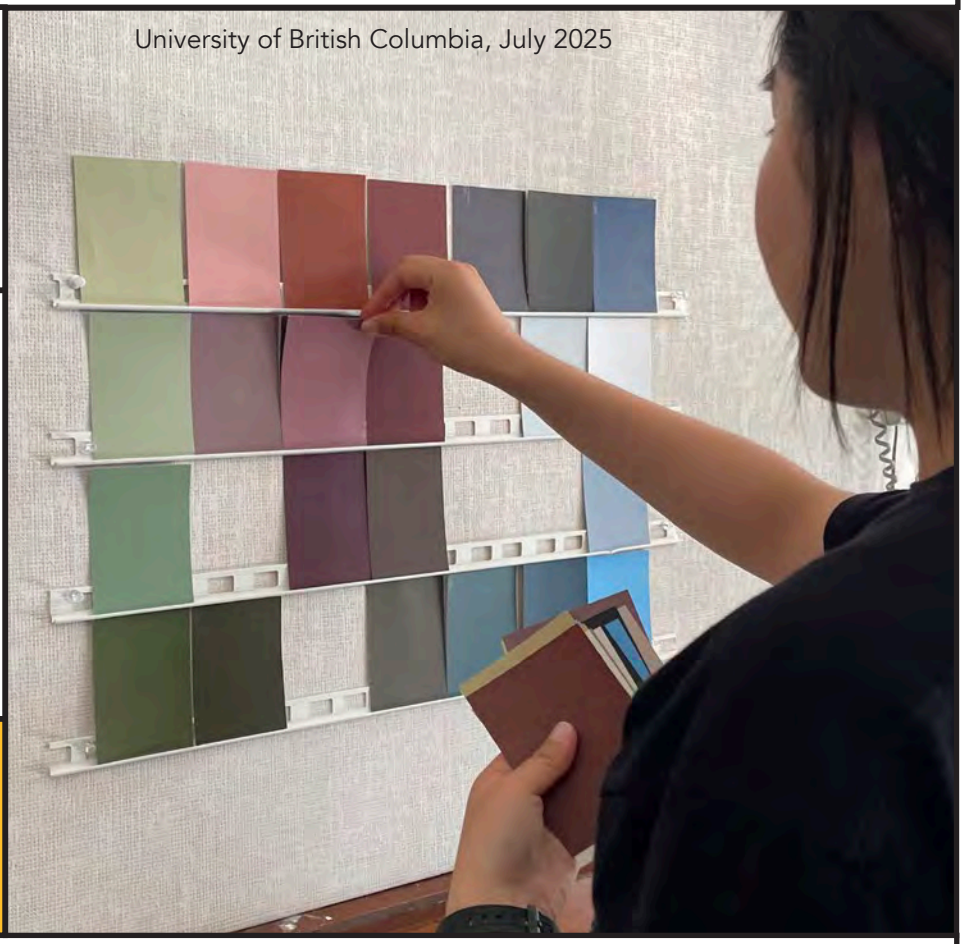
Developed by Germaine Koh for League Nanaimo, 2025. Report by Germaine.

Keys

- Ambiguity
- Negotiation, recognizing different viewpoints
- Recognition of types of strategy
- Elements of connoisseurship/ taste and visual acuity

How to play

Take turns to play a colour.



University of British Columbia, July 2025

Observations

The vague and open-ended one-line cue "Take turns to play a colour" opens onto a surprising multitude of inerpretations and game mechanics. It leaves many questions unanswered: is it competitive? What is the playing field and how exactly does one "play a colour"? How many people are involved? What are the criteria? How does it end? Because of this, all of these mechanics are open to negotation, and we see different assumptions and conventions brought into play and brought up for debate. We have seen Swatches played head-to-head as a gridded abstract composition, in a dominoes-like formation, war-like, Uno-like, and one procedure morphing into another. We have seen it played collaboratively and socially. We can imagine yet other interpretations of "playing a colour."

The mechanics also often reveal deep-seated and probably culturally-conditioned associations and attitudes about colours, whether these are symbolic or physiological. We also see opinions and values about colour and taste enter the debate: certainly, some folks have sharper visual acuity and more training in colour theory than others, and it is interesting to see how they choose to wield these powers in a situation in which their value is debatable. Ultimately, the proposition is a stew mixing taste, connoisseurship, cultural norms, and optics.

Swatches

June 2025, Nanaimo

Take turns to play a colour.

Bean Race

B18

A slow-growing parody of competition and aspiration

Who / where / when

Elm Park field house, May-September 2013. Competitors: Verena Kaminiarz + Cedric Bomford, Gropp's Gallery Collective, League regulars. Report by Germaine Koh.

Keys

- Patience
- Tolerance for uncertainty
- Knowledge and willingness to research useful but not required

Creative process

Framed as a slow race to new heights, League's Bean Race was inspired by the Bean Tower built by artists Verena Kaminiarz and Cedric Bomford in the Skulpturenpark Berliner Mauer (Berlin Sculpture Park), which re-imagined an industrial structure such as Vladimir Tatlin's 1919-20 *Monument to the Third International* as organic and pragmatic. Just as Kaminiarz and Bomford had reframed the hard-edged and utopian conventions geometry of Tatlin's revolutionary architecture, the Bean Race continued the tactic of parodying the language of competition and aspiration. Using sporting language to describe this actually non-competitive "race" lent an absurdity that made room for community-building, as in the feast which followed in September.

Sneaky Spring
March 2024
Law Courts, Vancouver

Game developed by the Environments II class led by James Long at Simon Fraser University. The game responds to a particular piece of public art near the Law Coarts Robson Square. It involved trying to steal a noisy trinket (a bell) guarded by a blindfolded opponent without their perceiving you. Photo: Ryan Tsang

Site-responsive play

B19

Finding/making arenas for play within the urban environment

Who / where / when

Event adjacent to Culture + Community Symposium organized by Emily Carr University of Art + Design, October 2013. Co-facilitated by League regulars Jay White, Bruce Emmett, Meaghan Hackinen, Toby Sheldon. Report by Germaine Koh.

Key ingredients

- Marginal urban space
- People negotiating inhibition and hesitancy
- An unprecious attitude
- Recognizing and acting on an interesting situation

How it happened

We had been invited to provide a play-based activity to accompany the Culture + Community Symposium organized by Emily Carr University (ECUAD). I suggested using the large "vacant" lot that would soon become ECUAD's new campus, but was then circled by shipping containers and an older building temporarily housing contemporary art galleries.

Preparing for what we expected to be a lot of participants, Jay and Bruce and I went the day before to scope out some possibilities, and used field paint to highlight and add suggestive prompts to some interesting features, including leftover construction scraps and orphan street markings.

On the day itself we brought a kit of typical game equipment: balls, flags, cones, pinnies (my Scrumble shirts), and the field paint. We started without any fixed idea about what we would play (perhaps a miscalculation for a larger group event), which may have caused those who hadn't already committed to playing *something*, to hesitate. Others came ready with a will to play with whatever they found. It seems to me that this was the key differentiator within how the play evolved.

Vague play eventually coalesced in response to an interesting constraint discovered during our activity. We had started with some warm-up play with the Scrumble shirts (see Scrumble case study) and playing around with balls on the field and with the construction leftovers. The day's breakthrough came when a ball found its way into the narrow space between two shipping containers. The players followed it, and Line Soccer was born. Before too long, the field paint was deployed to formalize that 'playing field' with a centre circle and end lines. To be clear, those markings were absurd and unnecessary to the actual play, which was more about struggling bodies. More than anything, the markings reframed that play as a kind of performance of ritualized struggle (agon, as theorists might call it).

Line Soccer

October 2013, future Great Northern Way campus, for Culture + Community symposium

A ball found its way between two shipping containers, which became the new playing field. An unnecessary centre circle/oval and end lines were drawn, reinforcing how silly the situation was.

Walking the Arbutus Line

B20

A day of slow engagement with a place at walking pace

Who / where / when

Small group, walking along the Vancouver portion, of the former BC Electric rail corridor, July 2013. Report by Germaine Koh.

Key ingredients

- A small group open to exploring
- A rough framework (a day, a 10-km distance) with openness for improvisation
- An overlooked place with local history

We proposed to take a day to walk the length of the Vancouver portion of the former BC Electric Interurban train line between Steveston and Vancouver until the 1950s. Disused since 2001, community gardens, other D.I.Y. uses, and blackberries and other plants had taken over many places along the 10 km line. The rails were still intact at this point, but we already knew the site was slated to be redeveloped into a public greenway.

Starting point

We suggested to the people we knew were coming, that they might think of a provisional way to interact with the space during the walk. As we met up on the northern end, Jay White had a temporary marker

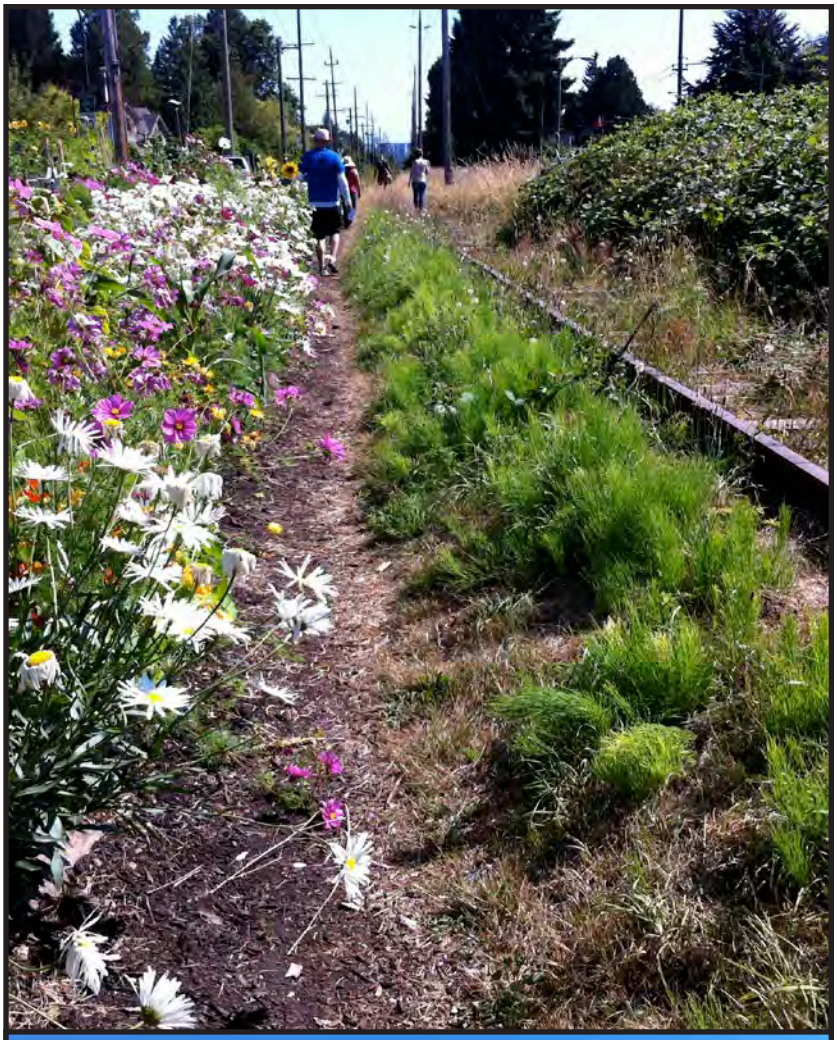
to write observations on the rail. Sarah Nordean had pages from a novel she tried to read while walking. I decided to try to carry a glass of water from Burrard Inlet on the northern end, to the Fraser River on the southern. These were just starting points to spur thinking and observation: lenses to begin to frame the experience.

Evolution through time

Over the day, some of the vaguely intended actions fell aside as the physical and sensory experience of the walking pace, the sun, the plant life, and interesting human interventions took over our attention. Intermediary challenges appeared and were solved. A feeling of camaraderie grew over time. A commitment to the process led us to this unique state.

As we emerged from community gardens and into a more industrial area as we approached the Mighty Fraser in the late afternoon, I felt a sadness that it was coming to an end. Finally, we came upon a fence with locked gate, and climbed down the rocks to touch the river water, where I deposited my water from the Inlet.

This was an action framed by the intention and permission to simply have an experience shaped by the place, with no expectation that we would be creating Work. And yet the intention to observe and digest produced an experience that endures in my memory.



League Easy

Revealing urban structures and re-mapping the city as a site for play and exploration

B21

Who / where / when

Devised by The Everything Co. (Jason Gowans, Chris Dahl, Michael Love), realized May 2013 from temporary headquarters in East Vancouver. Report by Michael.

Key ingredients

- A city with a history of rum-running
- Community armed with local knowledge

League Easy was a game that expanded on the Moonshine Project by The Everything Co., a collective comprising Jason Gowans, Chris Dahl, and Michael Love. The Everything Co. initiated many DIY projects that aimed to bring different groups of people together through collective agency, and for the Moonshine Project, the collective distilled their own alcohol using a homemade still. The alcohol was then distributed for free at various speakeasy events. The project brought into question the legal framework and accessibility of alcohol production, while the events engaged in community building within the local arts community.

During the Prohibition Era in the United States, Vancouver was known for its rum-running ships including the Malahat, which transported contraband liquor down the Pacific coast to California. For League Easy, teams of cyclists became rum-runners and delivered alcohol throughout the city in a race. Twelve bottles of The Everything Co. gin were available for delivery, and at a predetermined game time, participants submitted their home address through email to receive a free bottle. The addresses of the first 12 people to email were divided up among the cycling teams based on distance. The cyclists strategized the best routes to efficiently deliver their supply and to make it back to the home base. The first team back also received free bottles of gin.

Like a rum-running *dérive*, League Easy set up parameters that recalibrated the cyclists' city navigation. Racing on different routes, the city itself became an obstacle course, where the fastest route may not be predetermined. Would alleys and pathways be quicker than traversing the city's roads and bike paths? As cyclists raced to their destinations, they were also unaware of who was waiting at the delivery sites. Was it a stranger or an acquaintance? And for the duration of the race, the players were unaware of their position, only finding out if they were winners or losers when they finished their deliveries and returned as a team to the start line.

League Easy elaborated on The Everything Co.'s questions into the production, transportation, consumption, and social function of alcohol. At the same time, the game pointed to the established structures that mediate our relationships to the city and gamified those structures to momentarily remap the city as a site for play and exploration.

League Easy
Collaboration with The Everything Co.
May 2013
Great Northern Way, Vancouver

Social (media) organizing

New media creates novel ways of being in the city

B22

Keys

- The new reality of social media generates new action and creative energy
- Adaptability and openness

Who / where / when

Reflections by Joseph Strohan, including on Predator-Prey Games, organized with Manhunt! Vancouver, and Urban Animal Agency (Jay White). around Second Beach, Vancouver, November 2015.

Social events were once organized through friend groups who called each other on the phone, through newsletters and magazines, at school in assemblies and over PA announcements, inside community centres, and in newspapers. As these cultural systems have faded in importance, we have become nostalgic about their absence, even though what we produced from those social systems tended to be the same things done in the same ways. The potluck, BBQ, baseball game, dance, and festival were predictable and repeatable—we liked it that way.

Even the invention and popularization of the internet didn't initially change this order, as in its Web 1.0 phase it was largely text-based. Once pictures, video, and then social media came online, things started changing fast.

Facebook wasn't the first social media platform, but it was the one with the most features. As its users surged past its main competitor, Myspace, just about every social event started being organized through the Groups and Events features. Then, with the launch of Youtube, you could see more. The first practitioners of Parkour, and the first flash-mobs to be organized, could now be seen for yourself on your home computer. These phenomena were astonishing and completely novel. The addition of video to the internet was essential to the growth of phenomena like these, as no one had seen such things before. Written descriptions or still pictures couldn't hope to do them justice.

At the same time as we were getting out of the house because of social media, news reports only focused on the negative aspects of it. The concern was mainly that our social lives were moving online at the expense of an in-person reality. In fact there wasn't really a term for what they thought we were moving away from, as what they felt was changing or disappearing was something that had been taken for granted as the only possible way of being. I doubt any newscaster at the time phrased it this way, but social media was in their estimation essentially a new form of alienation. Ironically this new form of alienation immediately inspired its antithesis, which was and is an intensely successful way to organize social events in public space.

A sequence is probably impossible to pin down; everything seemed to be happening at once. On one Saturday in 2005 I spent the afternoon practicing Parkour in a group of 30 people in downtown Vancouver and then in a few hours rotated to a pillow fight flash-mob with about 500 people on the steps of the Art Gallery. I found out the people who organized that flash-mob also organized an urban gaming group called Manhunt. Manhunt is a type of build-up tag—but the group also plays all types of schoolyard games including Capture the Flag, Skittles, Camouflage, etc. I started going to every event posted from their Facebook Group page. The participants were the same odd mix of people as the flash-mobs and Parkour: that is, martial arts people, improv and theatre folk, rock climbers, ultimate players, artists, skateboarders, etc.

Everyone was welcome at Manhunt. We were so inclusive that when most of the people who confirmed had shown up we would then spread out and start inviting anyone we found on the surrounding streets to join us too. We wound up with children, seniors, and people with disabilities on more than one occasion. This didn't present an issue since these were kids games after all and we just invented new rules to accommodate differently-abled folks.

I found all this invigorating and inspiring, but I saw it as quite separate from my own art practice. Germaine Koh didn't make that distinction though and started League in 2012 as part of incorporating it into her own practice.

Participating in League, Manhunt, and other groups gives you a distinctly novel sense of being in the city. You realize that there are unlimited possibilities of action and creative energy available to you that no one has discovered. Anything can be made into a game, players arrive from the internet, and you can also rope in random NPCs [non-playing characters] wandering the map, to play with you.

Predator-Prey Games, organized with Manhunt! Vancouver, and Urban Animal Agency. around Second Beach, Vancouver, November 2015

Petri

An extended metaphor about infection, with runaway scoring

B23

Who/where/when

Developed collectively during League play at Elm Park, 2013.
Report by Germaine Koh.

Keys

- The emergence of a metaphor that suggested additional game logic
- Using as game pieces whatever is at hand, with strategy emerging from their unique character

n Games tournament,
September 2013

Creative process

Petri emerged during one of our regular League gatherings, and started out as a target-type game that in this case was like a cross between curling and bocce. We had been playing with field-marking paint, when someone drew an arm's length circle, then another. With an indeterminate number of circles that suggested "live" areas, we tossed balls (and whatever else we had) towards the circles, trying to get them in and knocking the other people's out. From that vague play emerged the idea that you could only score if you/your team were the only one with items in any particular circle: any circles containing objects from both teams were neutralized. From that emerged a key observation—"oh, it's like infection and inoculation"—and from there the extended metaphor of infection shaped the game. The tossed objects became molecules and the circles petri dishes, and now if another molecule landed in your petri dish, that dish was inoculated against scoring. Then the breakthrough: if it's infection, then

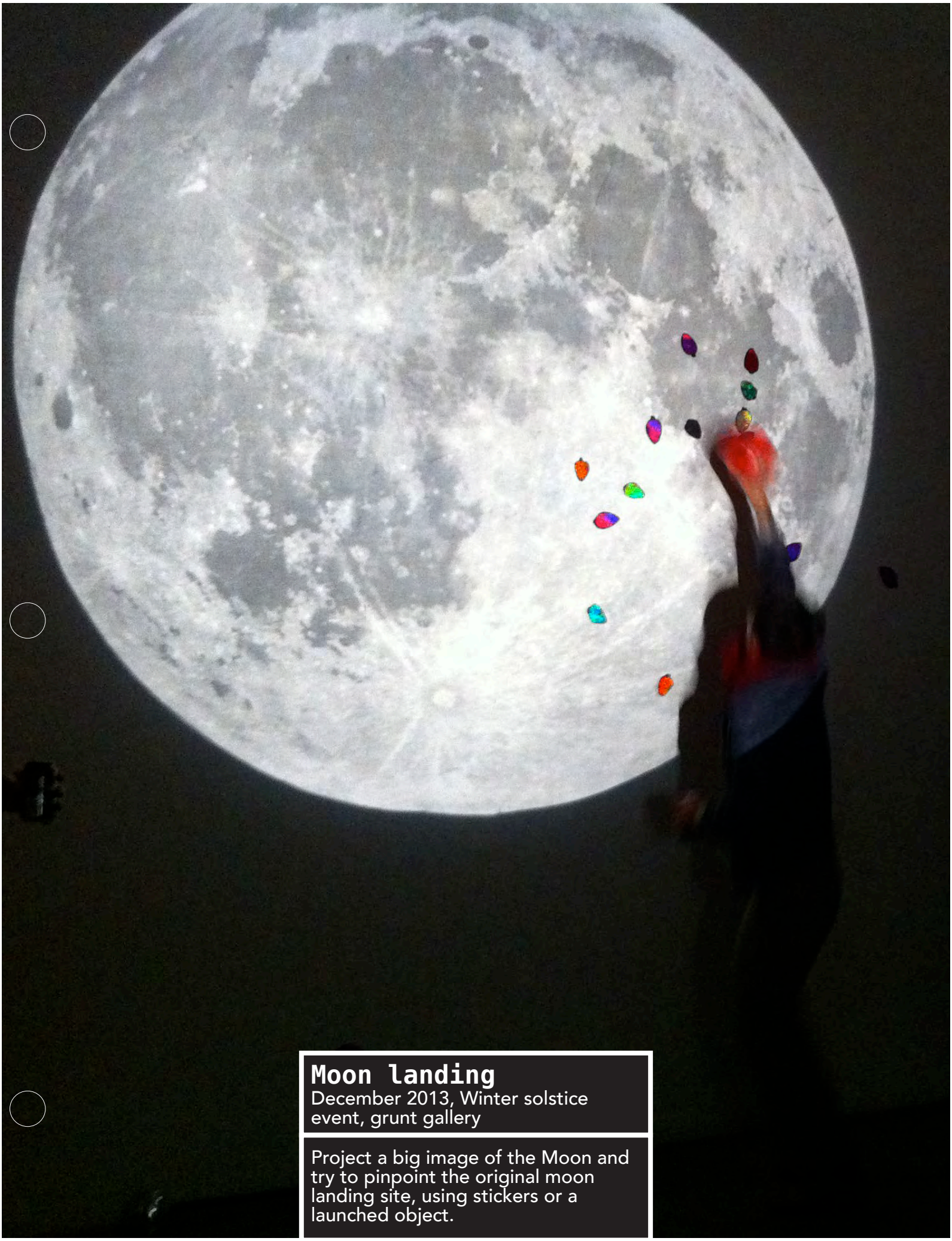
it can get out of control, and the idea of scoring by multiplication arose, as a way to replicate how multiplication can create exponential or runaway growth. Each round, each team's score is their score for each of their still-infected dishes multiplied by the next and the next—so multiple dishes scoring 1 result in 1 as a score, but dishes scoring more than 1 can begin to create large scores.

Petri has become one of the most enduring games ever invented at League because of its coherence with that metaphor, and really came into its own during the COVID pandemic, as we gloabally got a crash-course in understanding about R numbers describing the spread of an infectious situation. Petri strategies that are used almost every game have to do with containing scoring. Others turn around choosing objects for their physical characteristics (some heavy and powerful, some predictable and reliable, and some chaotic). Likewise, the playing area and objects can be adapted to many different places, and part of the pleasure of each Petri game is in figuring out how to master the terrain and the molecules.

Petri

- Equipment: at least two sets of "molecules" of different character, plus something to mark the ground as a set of circles designated as "petri dishes." Adjust the number, size and position of the dishes to create a productive challenge relative to the number of molecules and other conditions.
- In teams or single players, take turns tossing a molecule towards the petri dishes from a distance. First team/person to go selects which set of molecules to use that round.
- The goal is to infect the petri dishes by landing your molecules in them, without being neutralized by the other team's molecules.
- At the end of the round, each dish scores only if there is only one team's molecule infecting the dish. Scoring is by multiplication: each team's scores for the dishes they alone infect are multiplied. For example, team A scores 1 x 2 x 2 = 4, while team B scores 2 x 3 = 6.

n Games tournament, April 2024
Photo: Ryan Tsang



Moon landing

December 2013, Winter solstice event, grunt gallery

Project a big image of the Moon and try to pinpoint the original moon landing site, using stickers or a launched object.

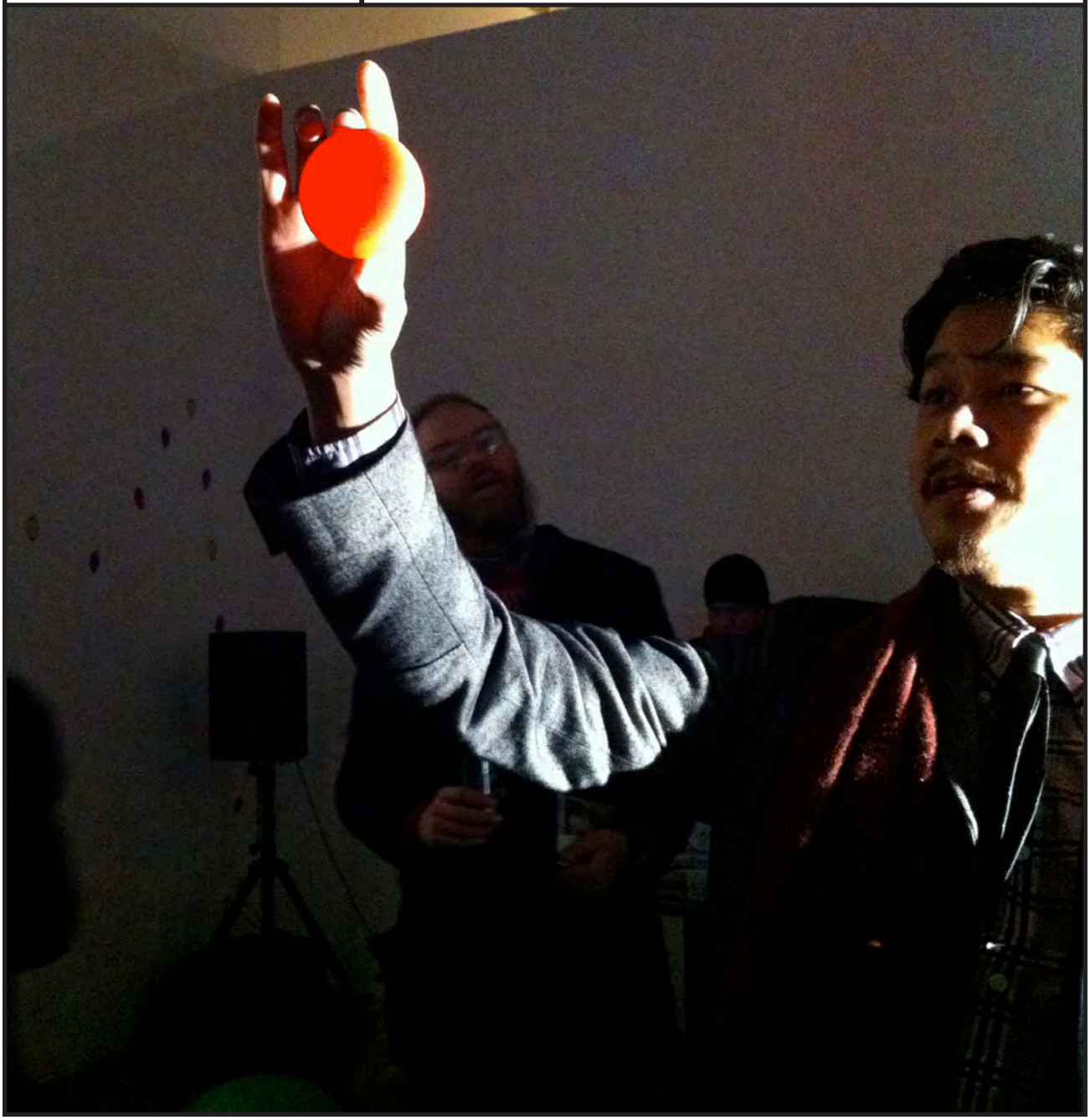
B24 Solstice play

Metaphoric play as organizing principle and generator

Who / where / when

grunt gallery's Winter Solstice event, December 2013. Report by Bruce Emmett.

On the Winter Solstice, grunt gallery was packed and the moon was full. On the shortest day of the year, light played a key role as a massive projection of the moon became the focal point of multiple games, the most memorable being "Moon Landing" where a full-arm-throw was required to propel a bouncy-ball off the opposite wall to "land" on the moon. There was no sea of tranquility in this chaotic space. Things mellowed out a bit when a series of white-helmeted planetoids started orbiting one another in a strange elliptical dance.



Tidal locking

December 2013, Winter solstice event, grunt gallery

Pairs of “planets” (people wearing football helmets circled each other, like celestial bodies in each other’s gravitational pull.

Ball Gown
Germaine Koh, 2025
Upcycled and dead-stock fabrics, balls

Play acting, role-playing

Where the magic circle intersects the fourth wall

B25

Reflection by Germaine Koh

As a person who loves play but is a strong introvert, performance and role-playing have mostly been excruciating for me, although over the years I have eventually found what I think of as a 'performance mode' that allows me to get over that debilitating shyness.

For me, the problem was in the disconnect between two different key elements described in classic play theory. On one hand, Johan Huizinga described a "magic circle" of play, a protected *mental* space in which one feels that the world external to play is suspended. This can happen in spaces designated for play, but also wherever play arises. On the other hand, Roger Caillois outlined four different modes of play, which included mimicry/simulation—play-acting—alongside competition, chance, and vertigo (thrilling play). To me, that mimicry or role-playing mode implied an audience, which made me too self-conscious to enter a mentally playful state. For me, the "cherished" (Huizinga's word) magic circle implied that there was no audience watching and judging, whereas in performance situations I was acutely conscious of the "fourth wall" separating performer from audience.

How did I trick myself into finding my performance mode? I eventually realized that the discomfort I felt rippled outwards to make everything painful for everyone involved, which created its own feedback loop that made me embarrassed to be embarrassed. And so, somehow, I convinced myself to learn to take a deep breath and just do it. And now here I am, your poster child for learning how to be a performer.

Theorists of many stripes have thoughts about the value of role-playing in learning, negotiation, creativity, and civics. In it, you practice empathy as you 'put yourself in another's shoes.' You develop social and communication skills as you view things from new perspectives. You face challenge, including the discomfort of coming out of your shell, for people like me. You exercise mental agility as you figure out how to 'be' someone or -thing other than yourself. I think it was in that loss of 'self' that I finally located the magic circle of play within role-playing.

References

- Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, original Dutch 1938
- Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 1958 original French 1958

Bear, Frog, Bug played at The *n* Games tournament, Elm Park, September 2013

Rain or Shine

June 2024
Hadden Park, Vancouver

The prompt:
bring an umbrella

Basketpack
September 2024
Under Cambie Bridge,
City of Vancouver
Community Placemaking
Program
Photo: Alison Boulier

Catalogue for Action: Teeter Totter

Germaine Koh, 2025
Scrap wood, paint, vinyl tape
University of British Columbia playtesting

Catalogue for Action is a series of playable furniture-scaled objects

Feedback + testing

B26

The cybernetic principle of regulation also applies to play

Keys

- Adjustment in relation to observation
- Acceleration and dampening are both necessary

Board game playtesting, Elm Park, December 2013

Reflection by Germaine Koh

As the prefix *cyber-* has become separated from its original *cybernetic* and used to provide futuristic flavour, the workings of that original term have mostly been forgotten—but in fact, cybernetic principles are at the core of how we communicate and how we regulate the world around us.

The term cybernetic derives from a Greek word related to steering. It's the study of processes in which some amount of a system's actions are 'fed back' as inputs into the same system in order to influence subsequent action. In practical terms, this 'circular causality' in the form of *feedback* is used for control and regulation: steering.

Feedback loops are used in complex systems such as engineering, ecology and biology, and social and cognitive systems. We also use them in games, play, and creative processes, sometimes without being conscious of it, which is why I often try to point to the principle in action during League gatherings and workshops.

Just as providing a bit of counter-steering helps a vehicle stay on course, within play and games—and artworks—the mechanics of feedback are constantly present, not only in the action but also hopefully in the design of a game or work itself.

In popular use, the terms "positive feedback" and "negative feedback" have also been emptied of meaning except to imply encouragement and discouragement, but let's examine the mechanics of what they originally meant. They are described in relation to a 'desired state,' such as room temperature or, say, a fair game.

- Positive feedback increases the difference from that desired state, and produces effects such as microphone feedback (where the mic picks up part of the output, which becomes input) or out-of-control speed, if you were to 'put the pedal to the metal' in your car. In games (as in life and metaphor), we see positive feedback in acceleration and momentum—where having movement gives you an advantage in increasing that movement. It is also what produces runaway effects, such as in play when the conditions over-privilege one team or action.
- Negative feedback works to maintain that desired state by countering the effect: braking that car, or balancing an object by applying pressure in an opposite direction. The effect is to dampen and prevent runaway effects. In play, it appears in the form of additional challenge or penalties: features that make play more difficult. It should be one of the mechanisms we think about when designing and testing systems.

In colloquial use, feedback is also a social mechanism used for regulation, and some folks would do well to practice thinking of it more in those terms than as unwanted advice. "Hey, you went too far with that joke" or "This part of your work dominates in a way that you can't pay attention to the rest" are forms of negative feedback that serve that steering function. Competitive athletes are trained to hear feedback, and it is equally valuable for artists to build feedback systems to help steer their practices.

PushupKucha
April 2014, Elm Park
Here: Justin Langlois' arm-wrestling-as-negotiation proposition

PushupKucha

Embodied, experiential learning

B27

Who / where / when

April 2014, Elm Park. Presenters: Bruce Emmett, Nick Boulding, The Royal Oui (Adrienne Pierce + Ari Rosenschein), Justin Langlois, Matt Hern.
Format and report by Germaine Koh.

Keys

- Enacting the mind-body connection

The publicity

"PushupKucha is a new action-oriented salon concept that plays on the short presentation format, augmenting ideas with practice. Not only do PushupKucha presenters convey new ideas in a few short minutes, they also include physical audience action."

The action

- Bruce Emmett presented his *Mill Project*, an initiative to uncover the first skatepark built in Canada, which still lies buried next to West Vancouver Secondary School. He had participants attempt to draw to scale the undulating topography of the park using field-marking paint.
- Nick Boulding from Take A Hike, an alternative high school with an outdoor education focus, challenged the group with a wilderness first-aid problem-solving scenario.
- Adrienne Pierce and Ari Rosenschein of the duo The Royal Oui, shared some of their songwriting process.
- Community-engaged artist Justin Langlois tested arm-wrestling as a negotiation method.
- Appropriately, we finished with another face-off game, Matt Hern's devilish "Touch Last," in which the objective is to be the last person to touch your opponent.

The intention, the observations

Deliberately playing against the short "pecha kucha" presentation format (of 20 slides x 20 seconds each), we intended to point out that there's something missing from that often-rushed format: the chance to integrate and digest any of it. By contrast, PushupKucha, although also brief, acknowledged that there are other kinds of learners—some of whom rely on doing, enacting, experiencing, and physically trying stuff.

PushupKucha
April 2014, Elm Park
Here: Bruce Emmett's presentation on the Mill Project

Supertubes
Hadden Park,
March 2024

Cardboard tubes loaded with ping pong balls and launched

B28 Mashups

This X that, a quick way to play with meaning

Splicing or mashing up known types of approach is a quick and convenient way to play with meaning. Often described as something crossed with something else, or "the love child of x and y," it can bring everything we know about both forms into productive play.

Twist Check, developed by Arts Umbrella group, Elm Park fieldhouse, April 2014

Cyclada

December 2013
Elm Park

A cross between cricket and tug of war, with an adjustable boundary. A rope was tied with a lot of slack around two trees. An object was tossed near the trees and the players inside the rope tried to retrieve it, while teammates outside the rope adjusted the boundary.

B29 HAIKU AVENU

Embodied connection to the urban environment via a highly constrained form

Who / where / when

Developed with James Long's Environments II class at Simon Fraser University, for The n Games tournament around Robson Square, April 2024. Judged by Gillian Jerome and Clint Burnham. Report by Germaine Koh.

Keys

- Constraints prompt problem-solving
- Combination of abstract thinking and embodied challenge
- Upset conventions of competition

Creative process

The Japanese poetic form of the haiku was borrowed (okay, culturally appropriated) for its abtract character that gives 'permission' for equally abstract and ambiguous solutions, its tight constraints of 5-7-5 syllables that creates challenge, and its traditional practice of including a seasonal reference. The latter feature, along with the requirement to write a haiku using only words photographed from public signage, were calculated to encourage participants to connect concretely with the springtime environment of downtown Vancouver.

Developed with James Long's "Environments II" class for The n Games tournament which we produced together, our framing of poetry-writing as a game, also played with the conventions of competition, particularly the notion that an activity as infinitely variable as poetry, could be quantified. The absurd challenge of that vague task was heightened by the game's constraints.

HAIKU AVENU

April 2024, The n Games
Photo: Ryan Tsang

Write a haiku (poem of 5-7-5 syllables) using only words photographed from public signage. Extra street cred for including a kigo (seasonal reference).

Rock, Paper, Violence

Game developed by Envinronments II students for The n Games
Robson Square, Vancouver
April 2024
Photo: Ryan Tsang

Basics: Cones create a set of steps for each team's TARGET players towards the centre. The game is a series of duels with two actions in quick succession. Action 1 is a full-body rock-paper-scissors duel between each team's TARGET players, with the winner advancing one step towards the centre goal. Action 2 is each team's SENTINEL players throw a missile at the other team's TARGET player who, if hit, must retreat by one cone.

No Look Pass

The n Games
September 2013
Elm Park
Rethink vs
Double Rainbow

- A game of deception and teamwork that unfolds in waves, with the teams beginning in their own end zones.
- The object is to bring as many balls as possible to the other team's nd zone, without being tagged.
- The carrying team has a set number of balls (four balls between six players works welll) and the defending team has fewer players than the carrying team.
- If a player carrying one or more balls is tagged, they must surrender the ball(s).
- Once a player brings a ball into the opposite end zone without being tagged, that ball is out of play for the rest of the wave. The player may return to play.
- Balls must be carried behind the player's back. Balls may be passed between teammates, but passes must also be made behind the back.

B30 Rule-bending

Strategic and critical instincts both probe conventions

Reflection by Germaine Koh

When I do presentations about play as a form of creative process I usually touch upon one of the instincts we see emerge almost as soon as there is a rule: the urge to play with it that rule and strategize how to push it as far as it can go, sometimes to the point of breaking it. I show examples of how sports have evolved because of those strategic impulses to test boundaries.

The philosopher Bernard Suits distinguished games from play in his work *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (which holds play as an advanced expression of cultural development). According to Suits, a key element in the transition to playing a game is the "lusory attitude": the tacit acceptance of rules that create challenge, as a precondition for entering game-play. Suits also distinguishes between cheats ("lusory thieves") and spoilsports, who destroy play itself becasue they do not respect the spirit of the game. If I understand correctly, someone who pushes rules while maintaining that spirit of challenge is neither a cheat nor a spoilsport. Maybe they are even doing service to their sport by causing it to adapt and evolve.

Philosophy aside, I believe that one of the cultural functions of play as a critical and creative practice is to question the conventions that shape our systems, to push against and revise contraints and bounds. I see rule-pushing and rule-bending as important critical functions in both society and games. See Elizabeth Nijdam's essay in Analysis for more thoughts on play as criticial work.

Reference

Bernard Suits. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Broadview Press, 1978.

No Look Pass, a game of deception, as played at FUSE at Vancouver Art Gallery, November 2013. Photo: Ligia Brosch

Whoseball

September 2013
The n Games

Game developed for the first *n* Games tournament. The game is soccer/football, but the teams alternate changing one of the rules. Here players had to roll on the ground and fake an injury after making contact with the ball.

Satellites

September 2013
The n Games, Elm Park
Double Rainbow vs
Daughters of Beer

Objective: move the planet (large ball) to your opponent's end line without touching it, only by hitting it with the satellites (smaller balls). Each team chooses a type of gameplay for one half of the match.

Option 1 (turn by turn):
A number of satellites are in play. Teams take turns throwing/kicking a set number of satellites towards the planet, from the satellites' current locations.

Option 2 (continuous play):
Three satellites are in play until one team scores, or there is a penalty, or the planet goes out of bounds.

The *n* Games tournaments

B31

"Solve for *n*, the unknown quantity"

The n Games are described as innovative tournaments of games invented during League, in which diverse teams attempt to "solve for *n*, the unknown quantity." The tournaments are described and organized using the language of sport marketing, although the actual games play with some of the conventions and expectations of competition. For example, there were games based on deception, a game-development game and one based on changing rules, and games based on poetry and drawing. As a whole, they challenged teams' adaptability, problem-solving and teamwork.

Each tournament was organized with initial round-robin pools, moving on to an elimination round. Teams were introduced to the rules of the game they were to play, immediately before playing them.

2013 First Edition

Who / where / when

Elm Park, September 2013. Teams: Rethink, Theatre Replacement, Roadhouse, Double Rainbow, Manhunt!, Daughters of Beer.

Report

The games prepared (not all were eventually played) were as follows. For those marked with a *, documentation appears elsewhere in the Plays section.

- Petri*, a cross between bocce and curling based on an extended metaphor of infection and inoculation
- Whoseball*, football with changed rules
- Satellites*, using balls as satellites to move a metaphoric planet, with two possible versions
- Drawn Blind, a team-communication-based blindfold drawing game (not used)
- Field Pong*, like Pong but with humans holding sticks and running
- Extra-Sensory Proprioception*, a game relying on both communication and sensory accuracy
- Scrumble*, like Scrabble but with people wearing lettered jerseys
- Lotto Rules*, a game-invention game based on randomly drawn words
- No Look Pass*, a strategic game of deception
- Bear Frog Bug, a version of Rock Paper Scissors, in which one must act out the animal, used instead of a coin toss.

Champions: Team Roadhouse, with trophy by Brendan Tang

2024 Urban Edition

Who / where / when

Robson Square, organized with James Long's class, Simon Fraser University University School for the Contemporary Arts, April 2024. Teams: Pretty Princesses, Pontin Family, team Grumbo, Mountpcrew, Paper Crowns, Sneaky Spring.

Report

Games were developed in and with James Long's Environments II performance studies class, studying the play theory and theme of Gaming the City. Some were developed specifically in relation to the Robson Square rink site of the tournament.

The games prepared (not all were eventually played) were as follows. For those marked with a *, documentation appears elsewhere in the Plays section.

- HAIKU AVENU*, a poetry-writing game based on words photographed from public signage
- Inner Circle,* a game in which players negotiate with their Manager
- Marco Ballo*, a particular favourite of the students, a last-man-standing scenario
- Snap Quest, a task-based game using smartphones (not drawn for play)
- Down Stream,* a site-specific game using the architecturally distinctive ramps of the site as metaphors for a stream and logging
- Streetionary*, a blindfold drawing game
- Rock, Paper, Violence*, another student favourite that a position-based dogeball game, available as a tie-breaker and for drop-in players
- Petri*, a previous League game in which 'petri dishes' are 'infected' by molecules
- Whoseball*, also a previous League game in which each team changes one of the rules of soccer.


Photo: Ryan Tsang


Champions: Paper Crowns

Inner Circle

Developed by Environments II class
April 2024
The n Games, Robson Square

Set-Up: OUTER CIRCLE on the ground about 3 metres diameter. INNER CIRCLE 1.5 metres diameter.

Rules:

- The object of the game is to be the sole EMPLOYEE left in the INNER CIRCLE. That person's team wins the match.
- The game begins with 4 active EMPLOYEES from each team with ping pong paddles standing around the INNER CIRCLE. An equal number of UNPAID INTERNS from each team stay outside the OUTER CIRCLE.
- To stay active, you must ensure that when the ball is hit toward you, you properly return it back to another person while you are in bounds (between the lines).
- The oldest player gets to serve first.

Acceptable game play:

- A proper return can bounce once within the inner circle or not bounce at all, but it MUST reasonably be able to be hit by another player. This reasonability will be decided by the MANAGER
- If the play IS reasonable and the receiver doesn't play the ball, they are demoted.
- If you do not hit a ball that the MANAGER deemed was REASONABLY ABLE to be hit OR if you play a ball and do not hit it to another player in a reasonable way, you will be DEMOTED!
- You start the game with your paddle in your DOMINANT hand. If you get demoted the first time your paddle must be put in your NON DOMINANT hand. If you get demoted for the second time your paddle is removed entirely and you must hit the ball with any body part you prefer. If you fuck up a third time you are out of the INNER CIRCLE.
- Outside of the OUTER CIRCLE, UNPAID INTERNS play a crucial role by trying to catch balls, which enable them to join the game. If a ball is hit outside of the square and an UNPAID INTERN catches it before it hits the ground, they IMMEDIATELY get promoted and replace whichever EMPLOYEE hit the ball towards them.The player who hit the ball is not demoted, they are immediately OUT of the inner circle and become an INTERN.

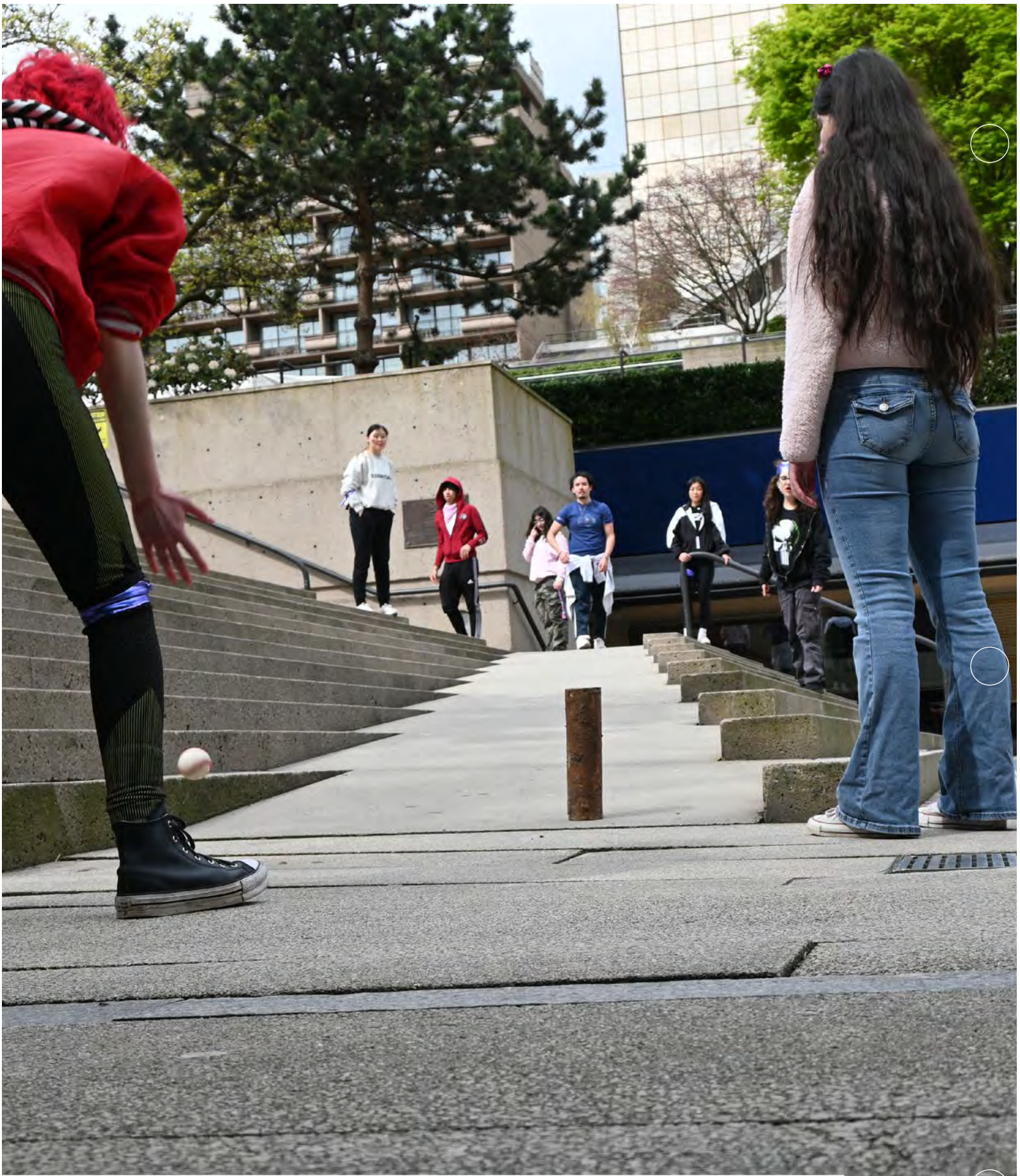
Streetionary
Game developed by Environments II class
April 2024, The n Games.
Photo: Ryan Tsang

.A blindfolded drawing game in which teams direct a blindfolded teammate to draw the scene in front of them.

Marco Ballo

Game developed by Environments II class
April 2024, The n Games

A battle royale scenario that adapts to the particular location, with a blindfolded person throwng a dodeball. The playing area gets progressively smaller as people are eliminated.



Down Stream
April 2024
The n Games
Robson Square,
Vancouver

Game developed for The n Games tournament by Environments II class led by James Long at Simon Fraser University. The game responds to the particular architecture of the Robson Square integrated stairs and ramps, designed by Cornelia Oberlander. The serpentine ramps are treated like a river, with log obstacles/targets. Photo: Ryan Tsang

Play with materials

Previous lives and physical characteristics of materials are rich starting points

B32

Germaine Koh, Basketpack, 2024 objects of recuperated street sign, wire basket, wood and metal scraps, milk crate, two reworked discarded pairs of jeans, packing foam, hardware

Key ingredients

- Materials from the world
- Observation, attention to the stories the stuff brings
- Tools and know-how are useful: your ability to imagine transforming things is limited if you don't know *how* to do so

Improvising with found materials is a mode as old as humans, so of course it's a go-to art-making mode. Specifically, the history of the Readymade in art calls upon a recognition of existing materials and the associations they bring, and the creativity involved in making something from found material is often in drawing out, combining or contrasting those stories with other details, or in displacing those materials or objects into unexpected contexts.

If you think of a blank canvas or a blank wall as something that is supposed to be empty and waiting to be filled with meaning, it is quite intimidating. But if we think of objects as tokens that circulate within a whole web of systems that give them meaning, then even a blank canvas actually speaks to a whole set of conventions and expectations and codes and values. Objects even more so; the histories visible in the odd shapes of scraps or worn-out parts can be the starting-points for poetry.

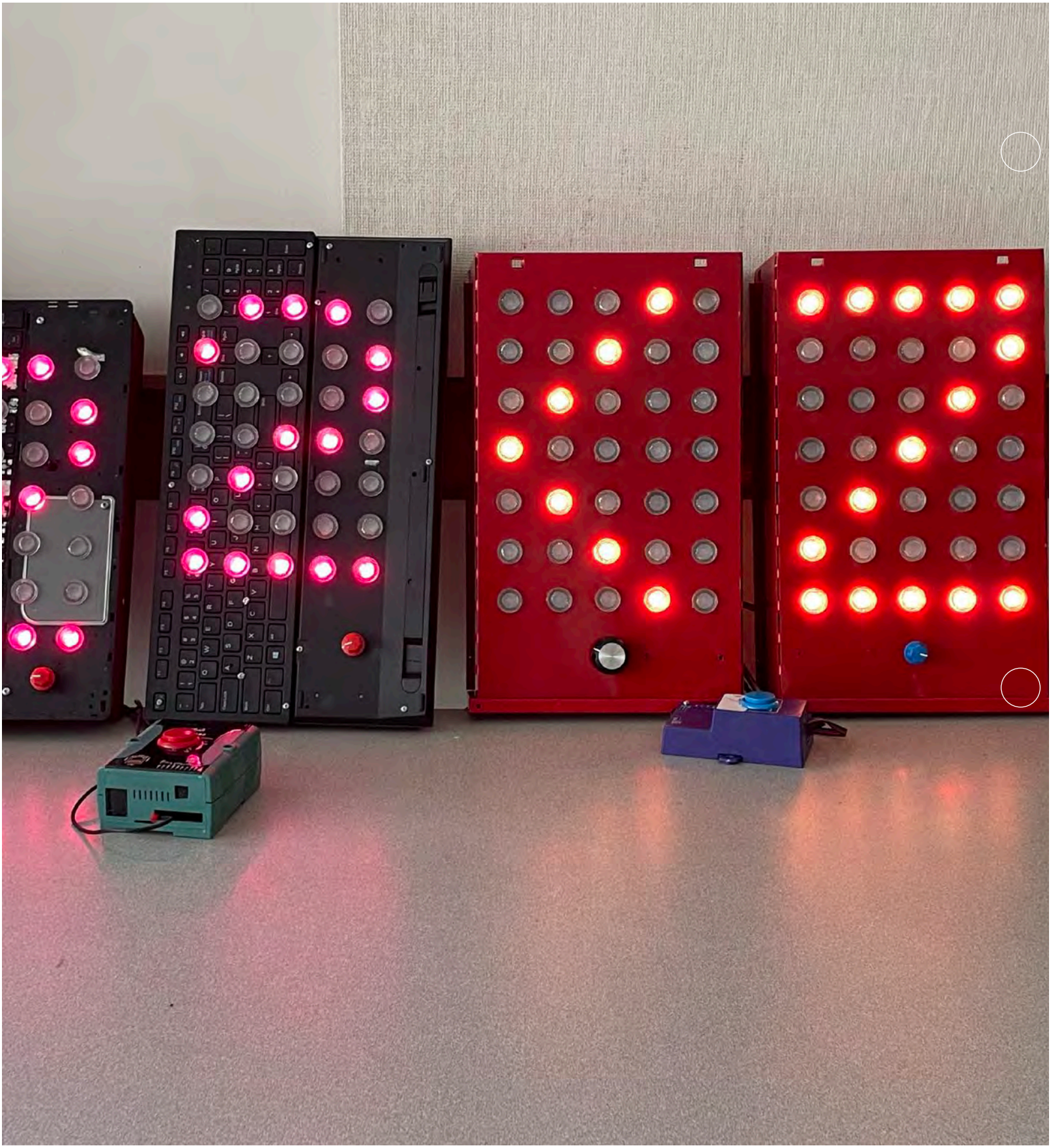
Germaine Koh

Play building

June 2013
The Western Front 40th anniversary event

A team of artists known to play with materials (Cedric Bomford, Ian Verchère, Germaine Koh, Jay White, Bruce Emmett) together improvised objects with materials accumulated in the basement of the Western Front artist organization.

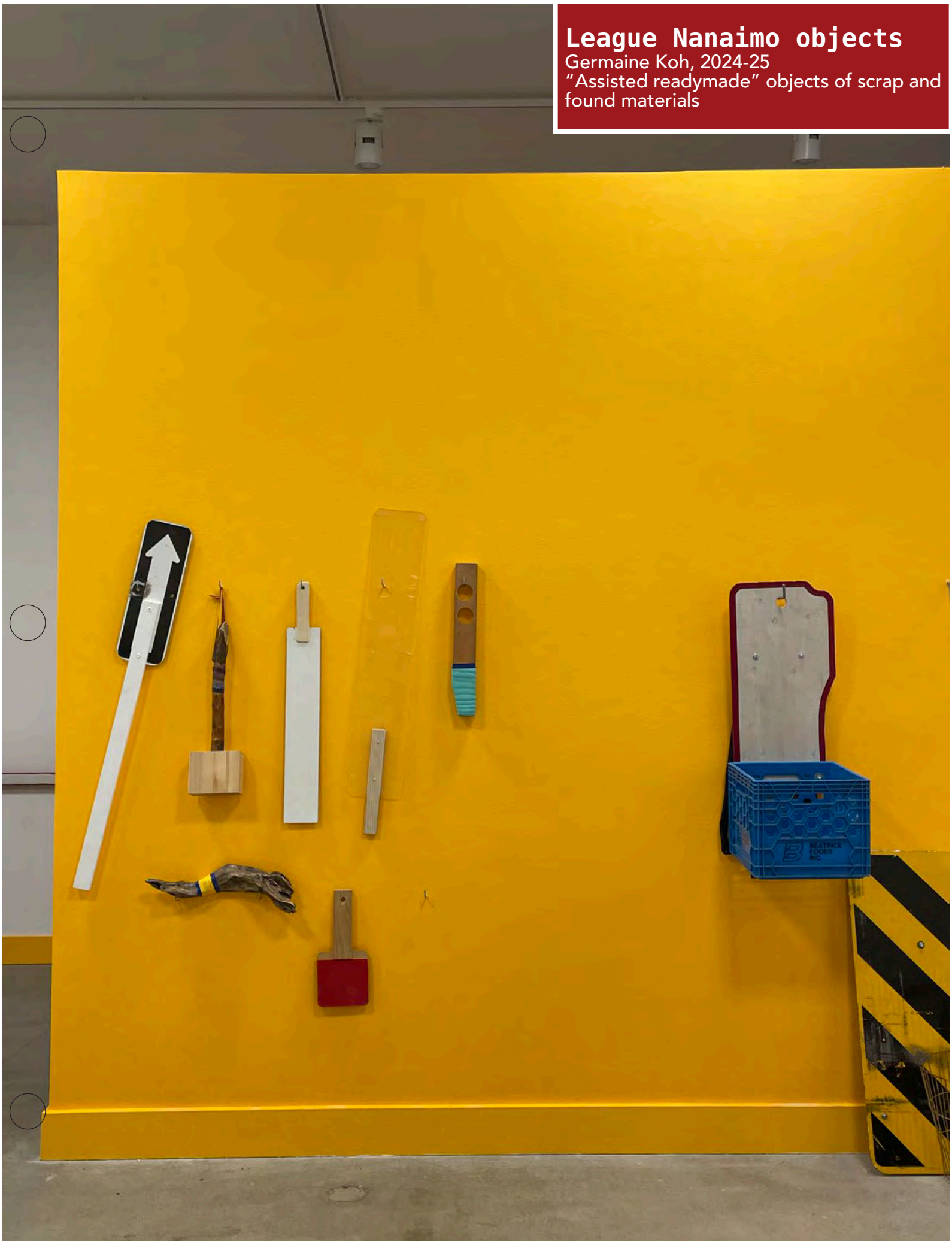
Play building
June 2013
The Western Front 40th anniversary event



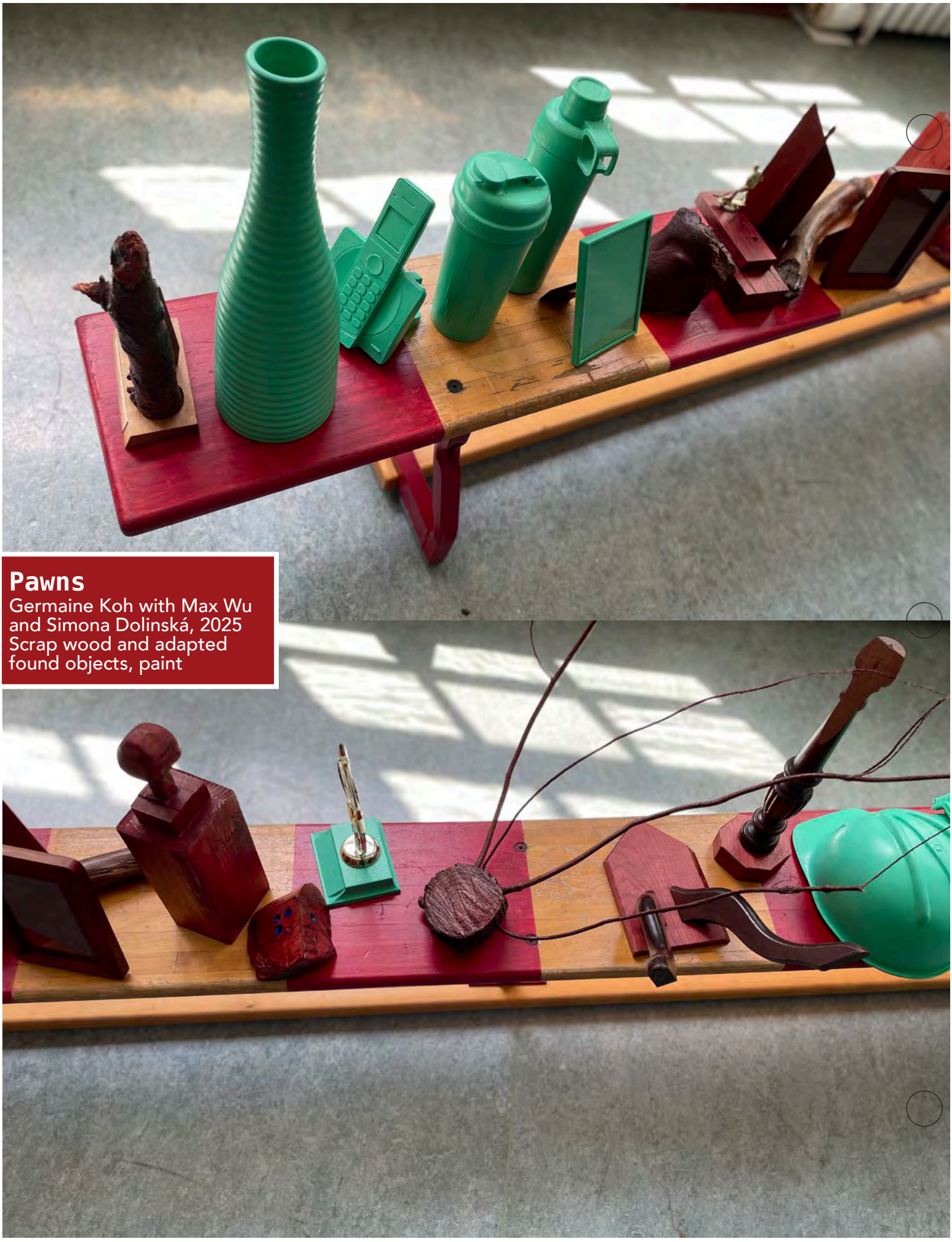
5K0R

Germaine Koh with production assistance and programming by Max Wu
June 2025
Interactive scoreboard of reworked electronic waste, addressable LEDs, Arduino microcontroller

Starting with the intention to make a "scoreboard" that could be adjusted by users and would include letters for wordplay, we improvised within the self-imposed limits of working with e-waste. The idea of adding a slot-machine-like random character generator feature came up during the process and creates the delightful possibility of hitting a swear-word jackpot.



League Nanaimo objects
Germaine Koh, 2024-25
"Assisted readymade" objects of scrap and found materials



Pawns
Germaine Koh with Max Wu and Simona Dolinská, 2025
Scrap wood and adapted found objects, paint

League Nanaimo exhibition

B33

Art gallery as arena for creative process

Who / where / when

31 July-5 October 2025, Nanaimo Art Gallery, curated by Jesse Birch. Report by Germaine Koh.

Key ingredients

- Art gallery architecture made strange by crossing it with the visual language of a hockey rink
- Many recognizable materials and found objects, altered through playful making processes such as mash-ups
- An installation arrangement that invites interaction
- Situations balanced between contemplative and interactive

The League Nanaimo exhibition installation crosses the architectural language of a contemporary art gallery—white walls, high ceilings, open rectilinear shape—with the visual conventions of a hockey rink, with a waist-high rail, yellow baseboards and centre- and blue lines, along with markings suggesting other games. Gallery plinths are repurposed as multipurpose furniture blocks, while unfixed walls become playable objects. The centre face-off circle is replaced with a reference to an archery target, also destabilized with a reference to the eccentric circle design of Marchel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*. There are other nods to Duchamp (and other modern artists) in the exhibition, especially in that almost everthing in show has the character of an "assisted readymade": found objects adopted, or in this case adapted, with all the social and cultural references they carry, and in this case brought in to play and crossed with other materials to produce curious propositions.

The exhibition is a collection of situations or tableaux that have a relationship to creative play. Some are the result of playful process of making. Some are the equipment for games that have previously been invented through League play. All are conceived or calculated to prompt critically playful consideration about how they could be used.

League Nanaimo Inventory

Arena

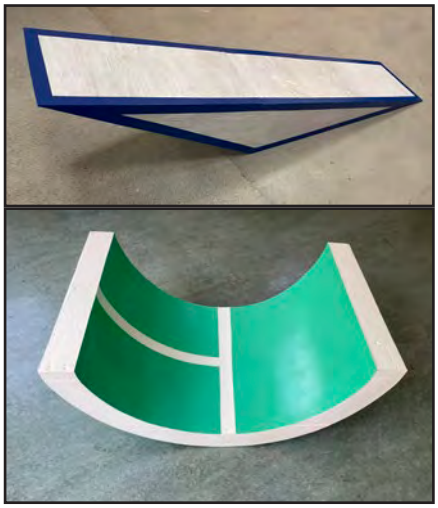
- *Arena* – site-specific installation with adhesive vinyl, lumber, paint, gallery plinths, gallery walls, gallery lighting. Germaine Koh, 2025

Along the long side:

- *Zoo* – thrift-store stuffies housed in repurposed wire cage. Germaine Koh, 2025
- *5K0R* – interactive number/letter generator of repurposed keyboards, electronic waste, LED lights, scrap metal and custom electronic circuits. Germaine Koh with production assistance and programming by Max Wu, 2025
- *Swatches* – commercial paint swatch playing cards. Germaine Koh with production assistance by Simona Dolinská, 2025
- Equipment for *Petri* – floor vinyl, wall-mounted storage bins with "molecules". Game invented during League play, 2013

Middle of the arena:

- *Catalogue for Action: Love Seat* – scrap wood, paint. Germaine Koh with production assistance by Max Wu and Simona Dolinská, 2025
- *Catalogue for Action: Teeter Totter* – scrap wood, paint. Germaine Koh, 2025

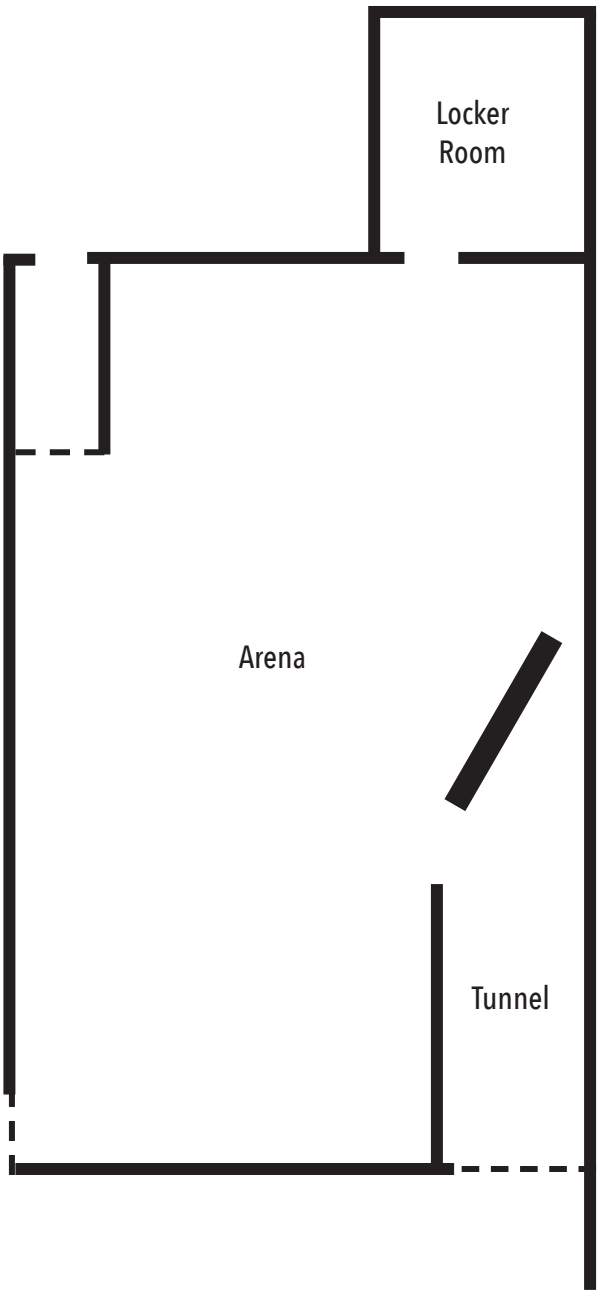


West end of the arena:

- Tools – found objects and repurposed materials, adapted with tape and fittings. Germaine Koh with production assistance by Max Wu and Simona Dolinská, 2025. Includes specific pieces: *Double Hole Experiment* by Bruce Emmett, modified by Germaine Koh
- *Basketpack* - repurposed street sign, found plywood, wire wastepaper basket, milk crate, repurposed jeans, hardware, paint. Germaine Koh, 2024-25
- Sticks and tubes – adapted found objects. Germaine Koh with production assistance by Max Wu and Simona Dolinská, 2025. Includes specific pieces: *Sweeper*, *Schneewarnstang1* and *Schneewarnstang2*; lacrosse stick and geta paddles by Max Wu
- *Trunk* – hollow stump, epoxy resin. Germaine Koh with production assistance by Ian Verchere and Max Wu, 2025
- *Lover / Fighter* – upcycled textile waste and oak frame, for existing wall opening. Germaine Koh, 2025

Outside the Locker room:

- *Scrumble* – "jerseys" sewn from repurposed University of British Columbia swag, deadstock and waste fabric. Germaine Koh with Max Wu, 2025
- *Ball Gown* – deadstock (yellow) and upcycled (green) fabric with new (red) trim, mounted onto rolling mannequin. Germaine Koh, 2025
- Screens – interchangeable curtains of deadstock and waste textiles, fittings, rolling clothing rack. Germaine Koh with Max Wu, 2025



Locker room

- *Pawns* - wood scraps and found objects with paint and stain, with repurposed storage crates. Germaine Koh, with Max Wu and Simona Dolinská, 2025
  Includes specific pieces: *3/4/5 Die*; *The Sphincts*; *Bull's Head*; *Chophog* by Max Wu
- *Benchers* - painted repurposed benches. Germaine Koh with production assistance by Simona Dolinská, 2025

Tunnel

- *Lotto Rules* equipment – words cut from textile waste, hanging screws. Germaine Koh, 2025
- *Twister* – repurposed street sign with added hardware. Germaine Koh with production assistance by Max Wu, 2025

Catalogue for Action: Love Seat

Germaine Koh, 2025
Scrap wood, paint, vinyl tape
University of British Columbia playtesting
Photo: Jia Jhen Chang

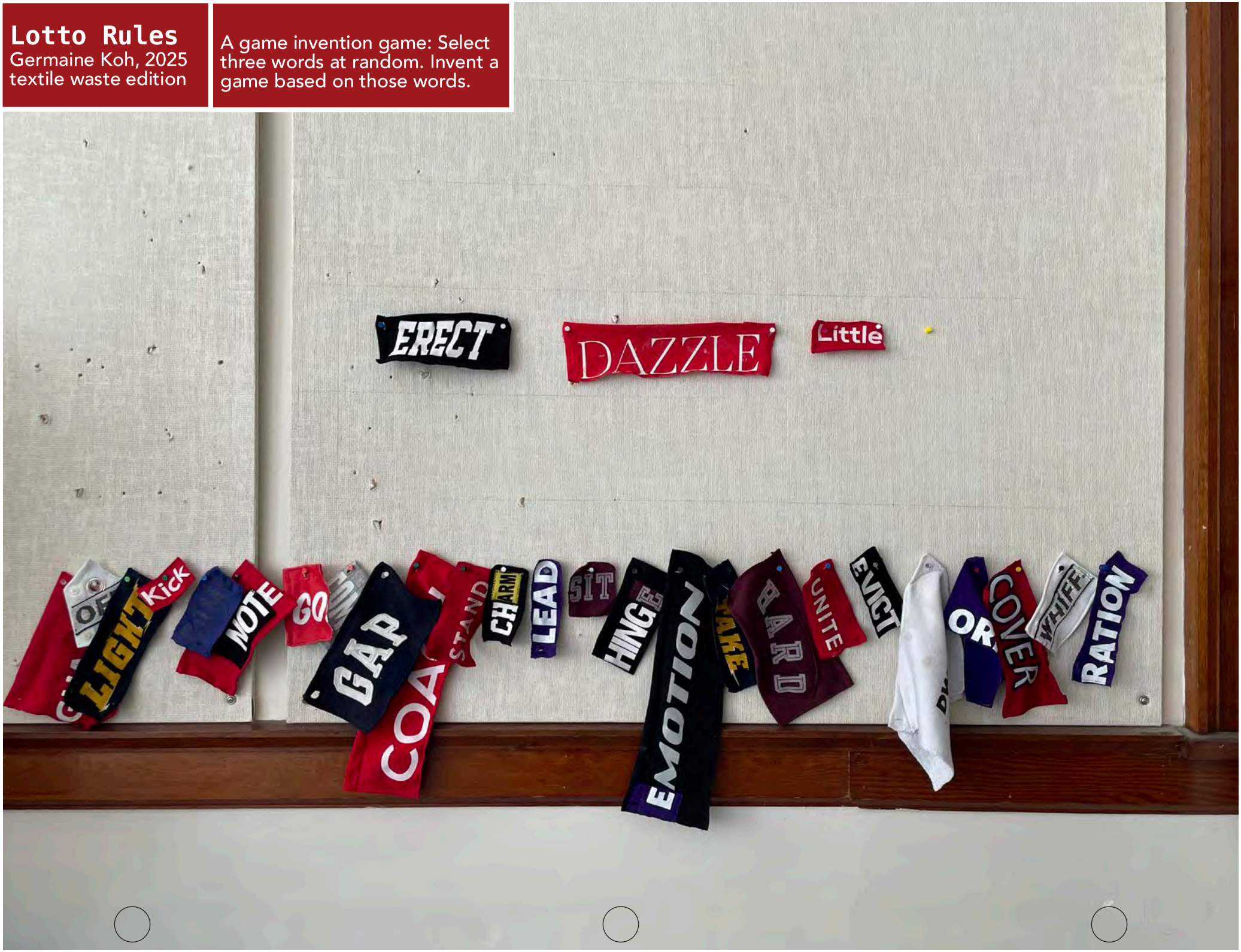
Catalogue for Action is a series of playable furniture-scaled objects

Lover/Fighter
Germaine Koh, 2025
Discarded jeans and other textile waste, scrap oak

Lotto Rules

Germaine Koh, 2025
textile waste edition

A game invention game: Select three words at random. Invent a game based on those words.



Lotto Rules

An element of chance sparks a play of associations

B34

Who / where / when

Developed by Bruce Emmett, Jay White and Germaine Koh in time for the first n Games tournament in September 2013. Report by Germaine.

Keys

- Chance
- Play of assocation
- Problem-making, game design

Lotto Rules is a game-making game. It begins with an element of chance and usually develops through a play of associations. We made a deck of cards carrying single words, many of which work as both verb and noun or otherwise have double meanings. After randomly choosing a number of words, the challenge is to develop a game based on those words. As with so many things in life, it is easy to make something basic, but harder to make something interesting, enthralling, compelling, beautiful, or elegant.

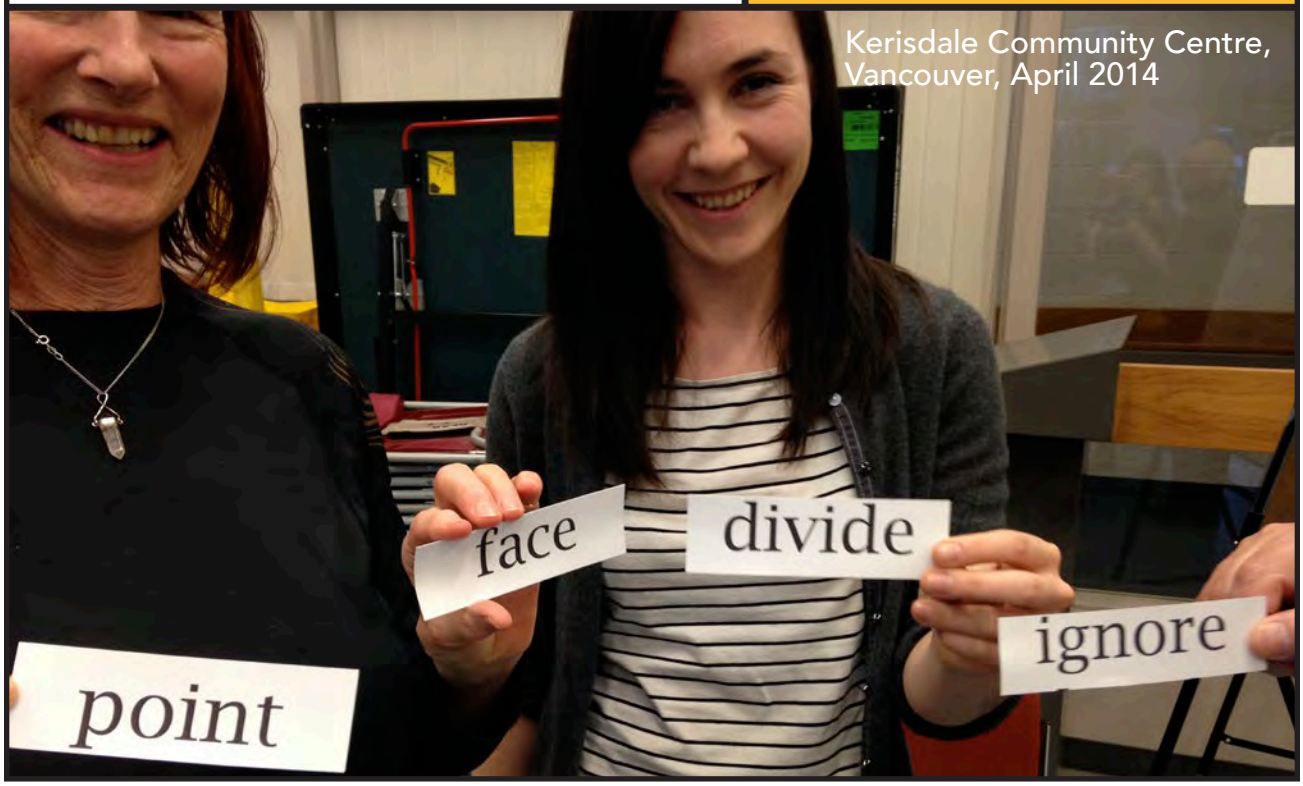
This challenge is a test of one's ability to consider how what you make will be received and interacted with, and of setting interesting problems. Because this meta-game goes beyond problem-solving and into problem-making, we saved Lotto Rules as the championship match of the n Games tournament.

Lotto Rules

- Randomly choose three words (see over).
- Develop a game that uses all three words.
- This can be done as an exercise, or as a game, in which case the side that makes the 'best' game wins.

Variations useful for competition:

- Set a maximum duration for the games.
- Set a time limit to develop the games.
- Assign judge(s) to decide the winner.



Kerisdale Community Centre, Vancouver, April 2014

pass	avoid	undo
follow	roll	reduce
carry	crawl	follow
steal	divide	lie
pin	march	soften
face	speak	open
touch	slip	lend
hide	point	crowd
act	agree	loop
protect	turn	back
nudge	spread	cover
reverse	bend	

Lotto Rules

PRACTICE

Play

Who / where / when

Creative processes at play

__ Improvisation
__ Iteration + evolution
__ Negotiation, interaction
__ Technical mastery, specialized skills
__ Observation
__ Experimentation
__ Mental preparation
__ Sensory experience
__ Material/formal play
__ Chance
__ Play of meaning, ambiguity
__ Punning, word play
__ Cooperation, collaboration
__ Practice, repetition, drills

Nanaimo Art Gallery