

Rituals for building futures: games as speculative praxis

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In the midst of a global polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024), threats to social, economic, and environmental justice continue to intensify. To respond to this polycrisis, we must imagine new ways of thinking, being and acting. Yet the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism has resulted in an impasse, a “suspended imaginary” (Berlant, 2011: 86) where existing practices fail and new imaginaries are yet to emerge. This has led to a “slow cancellation of the future” (Fisher, 2014: 11), in which it has become almost impossible to imagine futures that centre alternative values. We must therefore work to create a collective radical imagination that pushes beyond the constraints of what we are told is possible (Benjamin, 2024).

Games support people to develop a radical imagination by engaging players’ “double consciousness” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 455) of the game world and the real world, helping them to find “forms of agency [they] might not have discovered on [their] own” (Nguyen, 2020: 2). The making and playing of games becomes a process of worlding otherwise (Spivak, 1985) that invites players to engage in imaginative experiences centred on “the ongoing creation of further relations of possibility” (Colebrook, 2020: 365).

In this presentation, we suggest that both the playing and making of games can act as a “speculative praxis” (Cutting, 2022), acts of speculative design that ritualistically prefigure futures which are more just, inclusive, and revolutionary. We discuss three projects that employ the mechanics, narrative structures, and world-building practices of games to enact a speculative praxis, inviting participants to engage in a “dramatic rehearsal” (Haarman, 2022: 56) through which they might imagine new worlds and develop their own capacities to build those worlds. In so doing, we suggest that making and playing games is a vital component in the development of “imagination infrastructures” (Oldham, 2021).