

Faculty of Design

2022

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Suggested citation:

Lockton, Dan, Chambers, Josephine, Vervoort, Jet, Mattheus Vervoort, Joost, Browne, Joyce, Ripoll-Bosch, Raimon, Ruijtenberg, Suzan, Duncan, Jessica, Waardenburg, Maikel and de Lint, Lotte (2022) Playing With The Trouble: Exploring (mini)games for interdisciplinary connections. In: Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design, RSD11, 3-16 Oct 2022, Brighton, United Kingdom. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4231/>

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Relating Systems Thinking and Design
2022 Symposium
University of Brighton, Brighton, UK,
October 13-16, 2022

Playing With The Trouble: Exploring (mini)games for interdisciplinary connections

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This workshop explores the use of play to foster and support interdisciplinary connections and collaborations, in a systemic design context. We are developing creative prototype 'minigames' which address different aspects of the challenges faced in collaborations between disciplines, including facilitating collective imagination, surfacing worldviews, embracing ambiguity and uncertainty, and/or 'unmaking' systems, as part of a project which brings together an interdisciplinary team of researchers working at the intersection of technical, social, political, (bio)medical, and humanistic fields. The systemic design community, experienced in crossing boundaries and working at different levels of abstraction, is well positioned to contribute to this area, but also, we hope, will benefit from participating in playtesting some of the prototype minigame activities at RSD11. We will aim to make the most of participants' own (inter-)disciplinary and systems expertise—this is intended to be a session in which participants make new connections and collaborations with each other through play, with the minigames potentially offering useful methods for participants to use and apply in their own work and practice.

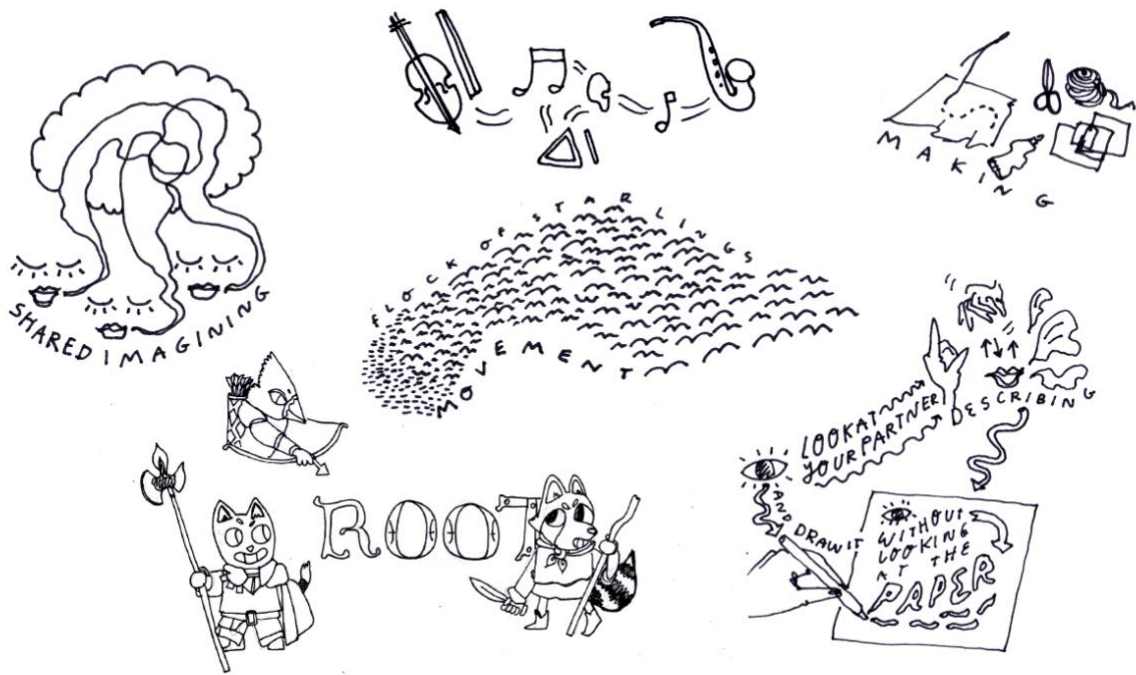
Keywords: interdisciplinarity, play, games, methods

RSD: Methods & Methodology

The challenges of interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinary interactions and collaborations are central to a systemic perspective, not just in terms of people with different areas of knowledge and expertise working together, but also recognising patterns and parallels at multiple levels of abstraction, across disciplines and perspectives—the “pattern which connects” (Bateson, 1979). Equally, systemic design can be an approach which seeks to *dissolve* established disciplinary boundaries (and binaries): it often involves working at a level above—or perhaps below—the divisions which might keep different expertise areas separated.

The RSD community brings together people with a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, and presentations and workshops often seek to address and cross boundaries, or to develop and explore methods which transcend the boundaries entirely, perhaps through tools for framing complexity (e.g., the Systemic Design Toolkit (Jones & van Ael, 2022)). The scales of this boundary-crossing can be at the global level of planetary issues, such as climate crisis, health, inequality, or ecology, through national or cultural political contexts, right down to small-group or team collaborations. When the challenge becomes not just collaboration as an end in itself, but cooperation to address and foster societal transitions and transformations, at every scale—even though the specifics of the challenges may be different—there are some similar critical issues. But practically, how can this kind of interdisciplinarity be facilitated, enabled, and supported? Are there lessons from the kinds of approaches that systemic designers take?



Images of games and play activities which project participants found inspiring when considering interdisciplinary collaboration and connection. Drawing by Elvia Vasconcelos de Gouveia.

The potential of play

What do a geneticist, designer, soil ecologist, sustainable futures thinker, epidemiologist, rural sociologist, organisational scholar, farming systems analyst, and co-production expert (not) have in common? As part of a project¹ under the aegis of the Centre for Unusual Collaborations, based in Utrecht, Netherlands, an interdisciplinary team of researchers—working at the intersection of technical, social, political, (bio)medical, and humanistic fields—have come together to explore the challenges of interdisciplinarity, with a specific question: how could **play** and **games** (very broadly defined) be developed and applied in this context, as activities to address

¹ The title 'Playing With The Trouble' derives from an appreciation of aspects of Haraway's (2016) *Staying With The Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, in which "unexpected collaborations and combinations" are the "hot compost piles" for "still possible pasts, presents, and futures", and where "staying with the trouble of complex worlding is the name of the game of living and dying well together."

interdisciplinary collaboration? Playing games (Feder and Gudiksen, 2022) can open up spaces where participants can express and share how they experience the world. In an institutional or team context, play can help to explore different roles, perspectives, and rules, and expand collective imagination and agency. There are of course parallels with many of the creative group activities developed and used in systemic design, participatory design, co-design, and so on, but perhaps a 'play' lens offers something more?

We have chosen to use the concept of 'minigames' (usually discussed in a video game context) as a way of framing small, partial games and activities—somewhat along the lines of Gray, Brown, and Macanuso's (2010) *Gamestorming*—which could help participants from different disciplinary backgrounds address one or more interdisciplinary collaboration 'purposes', which we have identified (non-exhaustively), including, most pertinently for RSD:

- Facilitating collective imagination
- Surfacing worldviews
- Embracing ambiguity and uncertainty
- 'Unmaking' systems
- Mapping theories of change
- Organising teamwork
- Mapping (emotional) 'trouble'
- Establishing social relations

These purposes intersect and build on some previous workshops and papers at RSD from the authors and others, for example Swat and Lockton's (2021) online session on 'Manifesting Worldviews', and Lockton, Brawley, Aguirre Ulloa, Prindible, Forlano, Rygh, Fass, Herzog, and Nissen's (2019) workshop on 'Tangible Thinking' which explicitly explored ways for participants to externalise the ways they think about disciplines and interdisciplinarity through physical materials. Our minigames are mostly physical, tangible activities although some also include a digital component.

The workshop

In our RSD11 workshop we intend for participants to experience and participate in a series of prototype minigames, including those we are developing ourselves, and existing games and activities which we have evolved or redesigned for this specific context of exploring interdisciplinary collaboration, with the systemic design community.

We will focus on a subset of the purposes identified above, potentially including **facilitating collective imagination, surfacing worldviews, embracing ambiguity and uncertainty**, and/or **'unmaking' systems**. We will aim to make the most of participants' own (inter-)disciplinary and systems expertise—this is intended to be a session in which participants make new connections and collaborations with each other through play, in the process 'playtesting' prototype minigames which in turn could be useful in their own work and practice. We aim to have a variety of activities—at least three—within the two-hour slot, including mechanics such as role-playing, creative expression, idea generation, following generative rules, and so on. The workshop will be facilitated in-person at RSD by one or two members of the project team, with sections also including live video contributions and participation by other team members, to enable a broader range of inputs.

A tentative outline schedule, assuming 15–25 participants, is:

- 10 minute introduction to interdisciplinarity, its challenges, and systemic design perspectives
- 10 minute activity creating *metaphors* in pairs as a way to introduce disciplinary perspectives to each other through alternative framings
- Minigame 1: 25 minutes on one of the purpose areas (e.g. surfacing worldviews), including share-back
- 5-minute break
- Minigame 2: 25 minutes on one of the purpose areas (e.g. embracing ambiguity and uncertainty), including share-back
- Minigame 3: 25 minutes on one of the purpose areas (e.g. facilitating collective imagination), including share-back
- 10 minute closing discussion with whole group

Our intention is that this is a physical, in-person workshop, due to the use of physical materials as part of some of the activities.

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