Name/s of applicants: **Julia Makivic**

Working title: **Blok Towers**

Summary:
A wearable, narrative, alternative controller game which examines themes of violence and connection.

Referee 1:
Phoenix Perry
Course Leader at University of the Arts London (CCI)

Referee 2:
Dave Ranyard
Founder and CEO at Dream Reality Interactive

Biography

Julia Makivic is a designer of alternative controller videogames who divides her time between London and Belgrade. She creates games using microcontrollers, custom hardware, and various sensors. Her games explore what it means to have an emotional exchange with a computational system and how our emotions are mediated by technology.

She graduated with a degree in Media Arts and Sciences from Wellesley College in 2015 and completed an MFA in Computational Arts at Goldsmiths University of London in 2019. Since then she has collaborated with authors, artisanal leather crafters, researchers at the University of Arts London, and many others in order to create games which push the boundaries of play and what a game can be. She is currently an Associate Lecturer at the Creative Computing Institute at the University of Arts London.

Her projects have been featured in a variety of international games festivals including the A MAZE, Game Happens, Interactive Futures, and the Leftfield Collection at EGX Rezzed.

She is a 2024 artist in residence for Now Play This and A MAZE and was shortlisted for the Future Fashion Factory’s IFSF Challenge.

Project Proposal

Background

Alternative controller video games are video games which use non-standard interfaces as an input. They are often made with custom hardware, and various hobbyist and maker crafts. Visit this website to familiarize yourself with many exciting alternative controller games.

Although often silly, playful, and whimsical, alternative controller videogames introduce a mode of making games that is subversive and antithetical to the mainstream gaming industry. Game designer and theorist Jess Marcotte posits that alt-ctrl games pose an alternative to traditional gaming because they subvert the need for learning and dominating a computational system. Many mainstream games are centered around the notion of “winning”. In order to win, a player needs to recognize the patterns of the computational system (i.e. pace/frequency of enemy attacks, how to time movement through platforms and traps). The player embodies an offensive mentality and is placed in a position where they need to dominate the computational system or be dominated themselves. This mentality is enforced by the hegemony of particular gaming interfaces. Familiarity and knowledge of various keyboard key combinations, ability to control a joystick, and other twitch reflexes is assumed when crafting difficulty and challenges within various gaming systems. Mechanics are centered on mastery of these modes of input and are often inaccessible to those that do not have previous gaming experience.

The mentality that players need to dominate a computer system aligns with a colonial ideology of conquering lands, areas, and peoples. It promotes the notion that winning is the objective of play and ought to be achieved through force. The controller hegemony centers one type of player that has been groomed into this particular mode of gaming since childhood and leaves out those that have not been able to develop these same skills. As a result gaming culture is often homogenous and circular because alternative perspectives are not welcomed or represented.

Alt-ctrl video games subvert this hegemony by introducing new modes of input that make gaming equally accessible to all players. They have novel interfaces that do not require previous knowledge of the controls in order to be played. In addition to this, they invite different kinds of gameplay that do not focus on dominating a computational system but rather emphasize exploration, emotional exchange, and curiosity. By eliminating the barrier to entry, alt-ctrl games provide an avenue for marginalized voices to engage as players and designers. Many alt-ctrl games are also made using custom hardware where designers program microcontrollers and sensors. These tools are often accessible to novices and hobbyists and allow designers to familiarize themselves with computer technologies. Familiarity with these components increases autonomy in a world where similar tools are covertly used for surveillance, weapons, and control.

Project

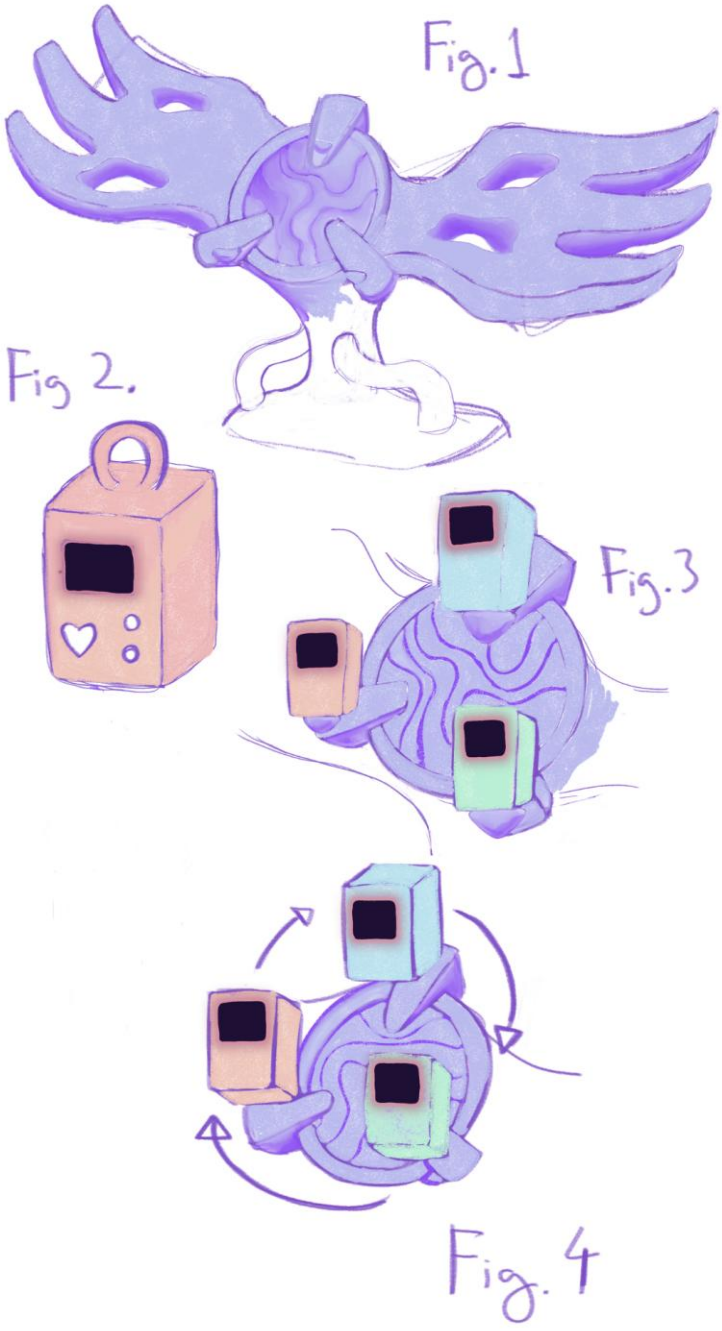
My practice centers on creating alternative controller videogames that examine how humans can have emotional exchanges with a computational interface. For this project, I would like to create a wearable, narrative alternative controller game. The image below is a diagram of how this game could be displayed in an installation space and how users could interact with it.

Figure 2 in the image below shows a device similar to the ones shown in the above video. It is a small container which players can hold in their hand. Figure 1 shows a large stand inspired by various brutalist monuments (Spomeniks) across the former Yugoslav region. This stand holds three individual devices on each platform as shown in Figure 3.

Each of these devices have a character that “lives” inside of them. Users can interact with this character by picking up the device from the platform and pressing various buttons on the device to complete certain actions.

The goal of this game is to make the character within each device complete a one day cycle. Players do this by lifting up each device, interacting with it, and then moving it to the adjacent platform as shown in Figure 4. Each character needs to experience the morning, afternoon, and evening within the game. Therefore, the player needs to make this rotation happen three times.

The content of the game will explore themes of Slavic mythology, diaspora, and brutalist utopia. The characters “living” within each device embody a type of disjointed telepresence. The contained lives of these characters mimic that kind of connection and longing.



View demos and ongoing documentation of this project on this page.

This game aims to build on top of themes of violence explored in video games by using the Spomenik, a type of war memorial present in the nations of ex-Yugoslavia, as the centerpoint. These monuments were made during the prosperous, glorified, and nostalgicized era of socialism. Many of them have gone into ruin since the conflicts of the nineties. This game introduces an alternative to modes of mainstream gaming which glorify violence, sanitize killing,

and utilize domination as the main mode of play by focusing on soft mechanics which are driven by the connection and synchronous movement of these devices.

In addition to connecting to the Spomenik, each of these devices are standalone games that are portable and wearable. They can be clipped onto the player's clothing and taken with them. The player has the option of caring for the character living inside of the device and playing through minigames related to their respective narrative arc.

Ongoing Research

This game is an ongoing project which aims to develop unique modes of wearable play and explore how play can be used as a tool for self-expression. Funds for this project will not only be used to develop this game, but they will be used to fund a prototype which uses sustainable and biodegradable materials.

You can view my previous work and ongoing projects here: https://juliamakivic.com/

Reason for funding

Games studios are much less likely to fund or publish alternative controller games because these games have an additional material component to them. Studios are unable to support the manufacturing process necessary to make mass-produced alternative control games. Moreover, alt-control games are often made out of custom materials, installation specific and not designed to be mass-produced and are therefore not profitable.

These games serve a crucial role in challenging what a game can be and provide a venue for alternative and marginalized voices to be included in an often homogenous and elitist gaming culture.

The production of alt-ctrl games encourages designers to become familiar with technologies that are often used as tools for surveillance, generating a sense of autonomy within an increasingly oppressive tech landscape.

Budget and Timeline

Timeline: 5 months of development
Artist fee: 700 GBP per month
Total artist fees: 700 GBP x 5 months = 3500 GBP
Development costs: 4500 GBP

I am able to dedicate 1-2 full days per week to this project.

Month 1:

- Gather materials and determine costs
- Define idea - narrative, characters, and game mechanics
- Begin prototyping

Month 2:

- Continue prototyping
- Finalize narrative elements
- Begin crafting visual elements such as sprites and background images
- Research sustainable/biodegradable materials

Month 3:

- Begin planning final visual design of the game
    - Case design, art aesthetic
- Refine circuit design
    - Select sensors and microcontroller boards that will be used in the final version
- Make a prototype out of sustainable/biodegradable materials
    - Determine whether it will stay a prototype or whether it is feasible to utilize this in the final version of the game

Month 4:

- Start crafting and modeling case
- Refine case and circuit design
- If it is feasible to make a biodegradable version, keep finalizing it (at least one device ought to be made out of biodegradable materials)
- Test cohesiveness - do the mechanics, materials, and narrative fit
- User testing - is it clear to users how to play the game

Month 5:

- Iterate on feedback from user testing
- Finalize case and circuit
- Focus on software implementation
    - Keep crafting additions to sprites and story