

# Affective Critical Play

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## Abstract

This application for the doctoral consortium at CHI PLAY 2019 presents an exploration of critical play from aesthetic and affective perspectives. It uses art and history museums as its field, and the design of hybrid experiences as its experiments. The approach is concept-driven and takes its inspiration from theories of ritual, play and performance.

## CSS concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Interaction design**;  
*Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms*

## Author Keywords

Critical Play; affect; design; museums

## Introduction

Critical play is a form of play which challenges norms and systems of power. It is the exploration of social, political and personal themes that function as alternatives to popular play spaces [6:261]. This is something that artists and activist engage in, but it can certainly be an activity that takes place in ordinary, everyday life.

According to Flanagan, the challenge in designing for critical play is "*to make interesting, complex play environments using the intricacies of critical thinking*" (ibid). In this way, critical play is framed as a dealing

## Monuments for a departed future

**Background:** This design experiment took place at the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, Serbia.

**Aim:** The aim of the experiment was to explore affective critical play in a contested history museum setting.

**Theme:** The theme used was the socialist monuments that are placed all over former Yugoslavia.

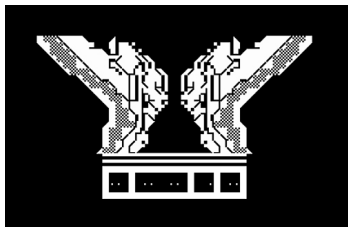


Figure 1. Marker of the monument in Tjentište

**How:** Visual markers which triggered poetic interactions were hidden inside the permanent exhibition.

with discourse and rhetoric. It is an approach that leaves out the materialistic aspects of play and the role of appropriation, agency and affect.

My intention is to contribute to the work on critical play by turning the attention to affect. The approach to affect as *practice* [17] emphasizes the entanglement of emotions and affect with social and cultural expectations as well as biological and material conditions. Within HCI, this is compatible with the approach to affect as *interaction* forwarded by Boehner et al. [4].

My design experiments are conducted in art and history museums. The reasons why I have chosen art and history museums for this purpose is because they foster secular rituals in which we are guided to the world and its wonders – rituals that are shaped by ideologies and power. In play we appropriate the world and we explore the constraints of its matter. As a consequence, ritual and play demand very different sets of attitudes, yet both may result in embodied, affective experiences. This is a space of tension that I find fruitful to use in the research on critical play and affect.

### Research objectives

My research objectives include:

- Defining the concept of affective critical play
- Working out a design framework for experiences related to affective critical play
- Contributing theoretical and practical knowledge to the design space of playful, hybrid and/or affective museum experiences

Research questions I currently work with are:

- How can affective critical play enhance a museum experience?
- What roles do intimacy, agency, embodiment and performativity play in affective experiences?

### Context: The changing role of the museum

Historically, museums have been dominated by a “pedagogy of walking”, signifying linear narratives appealing to rational ways of thinking and the strict use of vision as a sensorial tool [3]. Although this is a description of 19th century museums and both the museum world and our society have changed dramatically since, the idea that we come to museums to be guided through a transcendent and enriching experience is somehow still imprinted in us. Carol Duncan in her seminal work, describes art museums as “*environments structured around specific ritual scenarios*” [5:2]. What she is referring to is how museums construct universes of their own, and how they give cues on how to respond to them. The term ‘liminality’ is used to describe the ambiguous in-between state that occurs in rituals when you have left one identity behind and have not yet retrieved a new one [16]. Museums are liminal spaces in the regard that they let visitors step away from their ordinary life and for a brief moment open up to the possibility of being transformed. But it is important to point out that in rituals, and museums alike, there is a guide to help you on your way.

The framing of museums as ritual is important to keep in mind when we consider the growing interest of play in the museum world (e.g. [2]). The idea to use play in museums is influenced by several different developments. One is the proliferation of constructivism

## Never let me go

**Background:** This design experiment took place at SMK in Copenhagen.

**Aim:** The aim was to explore affective critical play in an art museum setting.



**Figure 2. Testing Never let me go at SMK in Copenhagen**

**How:** It lets two players take the role of an avatar and a controller. The controller has the responsibility to spontaneously create an experience for the avatar taking place in the museum. They can send commands, questions or instructions to the avatar, who will receive them as prerecorded voice messages. In this way conventions of how to be in an art museum is challenged.

– a theory that emphasizes that children play to learn [7]. Another is the work towards opening up museums for co-creation and participation [12,13], which goes hand in hand with the process of digitalization and digitization [10] enabling new applications of interaction in museums.

Hybrid experiences [1,14] are designed to complement, challenge or overlay the physical world with digital content. When hybrid experiences are used in museums, they offer alternative objectives, narratives or roles to engage with during a visit. This opens up for new types of play behavior, which may or may not be welcomed by the museum.

According to Huizinga, “*the ritual act has all the formal and essential characteristics of play*” [9:18]. Yet, Thomas S. Henricks [8] point out that despite their similarities, play and ritual are in some sense the very opposite of each other. Rituals involve accepting, adjusting, or conforming to things outside of us. In contrast, play makes us appropriate and create new worlds. According to Henricks, “*players (and workers) want to transform the world; ritualists wish to be transformed by otherness*” [8:55]. When we play in a museum, we therefore fundamentally challenge what the purpose of the museum is.

I argue that many of the challenges that arise from playful hybrid museum experiences come not only from the friction between the physical and the digital, but from the tension between ritual and play. From a design perspective, we may choose to capitalize on these frictions, or try to avoid them. My approach is to focus specifically on these frictions in order to critically

explore playful and affective encounters between visitors, museums and exhibited objects.

## Between ritual, play and performance

The exploration of concepts, which is a crucial part of my research process, has led me to discern the theoretical outlines of a design space highly relevant to affective critical play. I situate this space somewhere in between ritual, performance and play.

Richard Schechner states that “all performances exist in a creative tension between ritual and play” [19]. This illustrates the intimate relationship between these three activities (or patterns of behavior) so significant to human culture. The tension that Schechner points to, lies in the above-mentioned relationship between ritual and play, where rituals impose both its reality and procedures on the participants and in play reality is appropriated and the actions (or sequence of actions) freely chosen. Performances exist somewhere between the rigid structure of rituals and the freedom of play.

The question is what happens if we start seeing the intimate relationship and tensions between ritual, play and performance as a design space? Theories developed separately in these different fields need to be scrutinized, juxtaposed, merged (to some extent) and made practically applicable. This is part of my research process and it has helped me to come up with a tentative definition of affective critical play as *intimate, embodied, performative and subversive*.

## Research approach

The research is conducted as Research through Design (RtD) [18] using a concept-driven design approach, which is forwarded by Stolterman & Wiberg as a

"complementary methodology in interaction research with a specific focus on theoretical advancements" [15:96]. This approach can be understood as being rooted in reasoning grounded in theory rather than in careful studies of present user conditions and situations.

Mixed methods are used for gathering data and evaluating the design experiments. These include observations, semi-structured interviews as well as Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) sensors.

### Current and expected contributions

The first design experiment in this research project explored affective critical play in a contested history museum setting. It is called "Monuments for a departed future" and was carried out at the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, Serbia. The results were published at Museum and the Web in 2018 [11].

The second experiment is called "Never let me go" and was designed as a play experience for art museums. It was recently tested at Statens Museum for Kunst (SMK) in Copenhagen. The test results have not yet been analyzed. The plan is to assemble them into an article to be published next year.

### Next steps

After the work with Never let me go is finished, the plan is to conduct one more design experiment in an art or history museum during autumn. Right now, I am working to set up a PhD course on ritual, performance and play as a design space, which will run in December this year. This is part of my theory building process. I will dedicate 2020 entirely to writing.

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