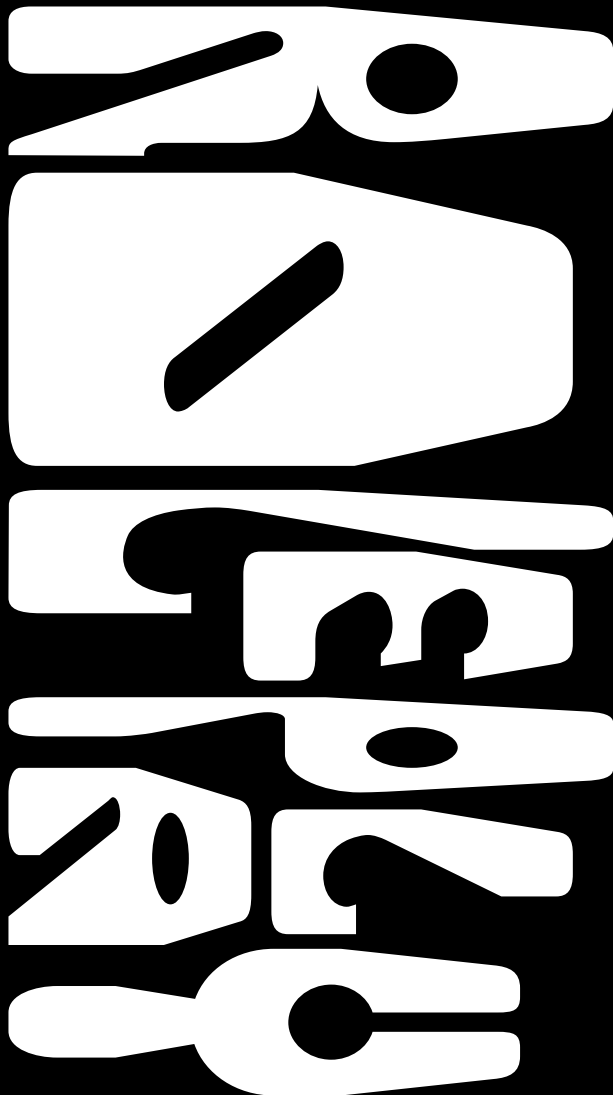# States of Play: Roleplay Reality

Exhibition
Guide

States of Play:
Roleplay Reality

The roles we play, both on and offline, reflect and shape our realities. *States of Play: Roleplay Reality* considers how roleplay —found in many video games— can be used as tactic to reflect, contest and move beyond real-world power structures. No longer understood merely as a place of escape, the game realm and the 'real world' have collided.

As changes in technology enable a broader range of people to make games, the limitations of commercially driven high-budget titles have been accentuated. Gamergate, a volatile scandal which exposed deep-rooted sexism in the industry, showed not only that the physical and virtual are inseparable, but also exposed the radically differing views that make up today's game culture. This constantly shifting landscape is set against a wider backdrop of global uncertainty: the rise of right-wing extremism; the contesting

of traditionally predominant narratives by previously marginalised voices; as well as an ever-increasing convergence between the physical and virtual, fact and fiction.

Within this context, *States of Play: Roleplay Reality* brings together artworks and industry games to explore how the roles we play expose our true realities: with all of our contradictory motivations, biases and assumptions. The result of this can be joyous and disturbing, freeing or subjugating, but now —more than ever— it is impossible to separate our physical identities with the roles that we take up in virtual space.

An exhibition in partnership with Crafts Council, London.

Artists
Atrax Games (IT), Larry Achiampong and David Blandy (UK), Bluehole Studios (SK), Alan Butler (IE), Nina Freeman (US), Reija Meriläinen (FI), Rindon Johnson (US/DE), Youngju Kim (SK), Minority Media (CN), Kimmo Modig (FI), Porpentine Charity Heartscape (US) & Brenda Neotenomie (US), Jon Rafman (CA), David O' Reilly (IE), Tender Claws (US), Werkflow (UK), Angela Washko (US), Jordan Wolfson (US), Pinar Yoldas (TR)

Curators
Lucy Sollitt and Lesley Taker (FACT)

Exhibition opening hours
Tuesday — Sunday, 11am–6pm
22 March — 17 June 2018

FACT, Liverpool

WHY A SHOW ABOUT GAMING, NOW?

"For a brief time you joined us. You are one. Between the worlds."[1]

"One day, through technologies such as virtual reality, games may even become indistinguishable from (and preferable to) reality… Understanding video games means getting a grip on an increasingly game-like society."[2]

1 Vortigaunt, *Half-Life 2*
2 Keith Stuart

Video games have progressed immeasurably in the past two decades. Now, you no longer need to be a computer programmer or part of a large studio to make and distribute games. This means more independent or experimental experiences can be made using diverse narratives and characters not traditionally associated with the format. Gaming stereotypes are also being challenged as video games are embraced by all races, genders and ages. These changes are both productive and destabilising for the gaming world, bringing new opportunities but also new complications, exposing different views - from who this space belongs to, to what makes a game good or even a game at all. This instability is the starting point for *Roleplay Reality*.

In the midst of this complexity, the subjectivity of roleplay can be an important tool for voicing your perspective, or navigating the perspectives of others. *Roleplay Reality* takes a look at this ever-evolving landscape of gaming and game culture, the importance of roleplay within them and how it affects the way we experience 'reality' and the 'virtual'. We have included a variety of artworks and games into the same space, in order to explore some of the key issues in gaming today – but not always from the conventional perspective.

The show builds on research and programming already undertaken by FACT over the past decade around the role of media artist as game-designer, including an exhibition called *Space Invaders* (2009), which explored the computer game environment in new ways, and an accompanying publication, *Artists Re:Thinking Games* (2010), produced in collaboration with Furtherfield. That body of work and

this show both focus on the "confusion between real space and game space": a concept that is even more relevant today than it was 10 years ago.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLEPLAY IN VIDEO GAMES?

"The definition of a person is where you look at them from. Everything in the world feels like that."

"Their flesh continues into the network, haunting their avatars. They construct themselves again here, but their scars remain."

Roleplay has existed for centuries – from reenactments, to modern improvisation theatre and tabletop games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. The power of roleplay could be said to exist in the encounter with the other. As we act and are acted upon during this encounter our sense of self and the other may shift. Roleplay in video games may vary from single to multiplayer, from text-based narratives (e.g. *Mud* or hypertext games such as *Howling Dogs*) to free-form interactions as part of non-linear plots in 3D

worlds (e.g. *Grand Theft Auto* or *Rust*). Customisable avatars, individual or group play, and character development all provide opportunities for complex roleplay.

Many of the artists and game makers in *Roleplay Reality* incite us to reflect on the experiences, beliefs and decisions that shape our identities by highlighting the continuum between the physical

world and the virtual game world. Reija Meriläinen's game installations such as *Fat Lap* and *Survivor* accentuate the physical body. In *Survivor*, the ruthless manipulation of the other non-playable characters that is required to succeed in the game is contrasted with the emotional vulnerability shown by those characters, sugary graphics and a enveloping fleshy control chair. We feel this contrast. It highlights the tensions and power dynamics that lie beneath our choices in the game and may lead us to question the basis of our decisions.

While the roles we play in games may free us to have experiences inconceivable in our physical realities, they can never be fully separated from real world influences and dynamics. Our awareness of our body and the

emotions we experience in the virtual space connect us back to the socio-politics of the physical world.

Porpentine's *Howling Dogs* draws the player into an unstable and oppressive dreamscape, which seems to shrink and confine you. Recalling intense emotions of real trauma experienced by the artist herself, this game reminds us that not all prisons are physical. Whereas, Larry Achiampong & David Blandy's *FF Gaiden: Control* uses avatars and gamescapes for inmates in Liverpool prisons to express and re-imagine their identities, away from their actual confines. Porpentine, Achiampong and Blandy show how games can be sites of freedom and possibility, as well as limitation and fear.
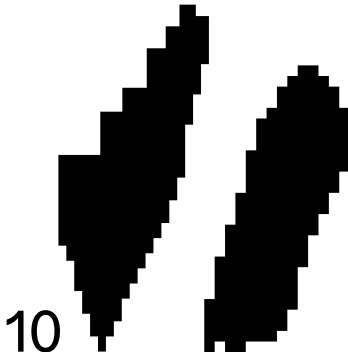
ARE VIDEOGAMES JUST ABOUT ESCAPE?

"Playing old videogames never failed to clear my mind and set me at ease. [...] There, inside the game's two-dimensional universe, life was simple."[1]

"It's not really a choice between illusion and reality… there are fictions which already structure our reality. If you take away from our reality the symbolic fictions that regulate it, you lose reality itself."[2]

1 Wade in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*
2 Slavoj Žižek on *The Matrix*, Pervert's Guide to Cinema

Game worlds offer alternative versions and visions of reality, often perceived as a means of escape for the player, an immersion into another world. But, today, the 'make believe' is increasingly hard to separate from reality. Fact and fiction have always been blurred, but in our 'post-truth' era, how truth is established and by whom is increasingly murky. The virtual is also more intertwined with our bodies – from the smartphones to which we are so attached, to our online avatars and prosthetic devices. Interplay between real and virtual is inescapable.

The design of the exhibition *Roleplay Reality* is intended to create an environment that plays with the feeling of not quite knowing what is real. Experiencing the friction between worlds (and the works on display) isn't always comfortable, but it can be beneficial and unexpectedly fruitful. Video games may often be tied to the same biases as our everyday, but the works here have an almost magical potential to flip these dynamics and imagine what the world might look like, or what it *does* look like, for others.

In *Papo & Yo*, which explores a child's imaginary world – created as an escape from an abusive parent – you get a sense of the agency and autonomy which the construction of an imaginary space offers. Within his 'reality', this child is totally at the mercy of the adults in his life, but in his mind (and in the game) he can reconstruct whole

worlds on a whim, as well as work through social dynamics which affect his relationships in the real world. Plot-driven single-player games like *Papo & Yo* allow the player to transform the everyday version of him or herself. As the disembodied voice of Delilah from *Firewatch* says, "escaping isn't always something bad".

The roles we play in video games allow us to leave behind daily restrictions, challenges and uncertainty. We become unfettered protagonists bending the virtual environments according to our desires, motivations, mistakes and achievements. The escapism provided by games should not be underestimated – and nor should its impact. Their dynamic narrative form and user-led nature can be utilised to force complicity, create empathy, and illicit moments of genuine emotion which last far after the end credits have rolled.

HOW DO THE VIDEO GAMES WE PLAY REFLECT AND SHAPE OUR IDENTITIES?

"There is no place for trans women in this culture… there are temporary and disposable roles to play… but if this world is not my home then it has no right to judge me."[1]

"...games, as with all works of art, contain the values of the people who make them. Which is why more than a single group of people should have access to the means of creating them."[2]

There is widespread debate about the types of games we play, from the use of sex and violence in many titles to the sheer lack of adequate representation. The range of perspectives in the

1 Porpentine and Neotenomie, game developers
2 Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*

exhibition show how games can be both liberating and limiting spaces in which to reflect and reimagine the world, and how differing visions of the world can oppose one another.

The games we play can affect our sense of self and the ways we relate to the world. Rindon Johnson's *Away With You* highlights the racial bias evident in many games. This bias manifests itself through invisibility and absence; a lack of black lead characters, or game design that fails to accurately depict black faces, bodies and hair. Players are forced to play a persona that is far removed from their own life, or serves as a poor imitation of their reality.

In Achiampong (British-Ghanaian) and Blandy's (British) *Finding Fanon* series, *Grand Theft Auto V* – a game franchise criticised, among other things, for cultural appropriation through its emphasis of racial stereotypes – is turned on its head. As the artists explain, *GTA V* becomes a place to "... think about the nature of identity in the digital age, how we reconcile a history of violence and exploitation, of colonialism and cultural appropriation, with a present-day reality, a friendship between two people – one white, one black".

Other artworks consider how factors like gender and class, or our social experiences reflect and shape our identities. *Sovereign*, by Werkflow, draws on the experience of male adolescence in working-class suburban Britain. Patriarchal definitions of manhood are contrasted with subjective realities of growing up, such as the quest for inclusion and acceptance. Porpentine, a transgender woman, creates games which address difficult topics and uncomfortable emotions that others may rather avoid. Her worlds deliberately celebrate what others dismiss, from trash, slime and sludge, to insectoid empresses and deadly angels.

It may be slow-going – especially in the commercial games industry – but games are evolving and the stories

being told are becoming more representative of diverse narratives, from ethnicities or beliefs, to gender, abilities and sexual orientation. Some inequalities can be addressed through structural changes, such as a commitment to more diverse workforces, but a deeper understanding of socio-political complexities is key to helping ensure games are relevant and do not reinforce existing inequalities.
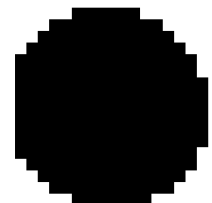
HOW DO THE DIGITAL REALMS OF GAMEPLAY ALLOW FOR, AND AFFECT, MEANINGFUL EXCHANGES AND ENCOUNTERS?

"Often when we guess at others' motives, we reveal only our own."[1]

"I want to be as honest as possible. I want to write characters that feel really raw and real; I want to show my flaws and the good things and the bad all at once — because that's what people are."[2]

Not only are games becoming more critical and reflective, but they are also pushing the boundaries of what is both possible and permissible. The worlds which we create to lose ourselves within will always uncannily mirror that of our own, but they also exist as an almost parallel realm, augmenting our experiences, relationships and exchanges.

Massive online multiplayer games like *Counter-Strike*, *League of Legends*, or *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* are often talked about as nothing more than glib combat games, promoting isolated periods of violence and fuelling toxic exchanges. But, for many, these communal battles promote connectedness and shared experiences which are impossible in the real world, geographically or otherwise. Playing as a team, you learn to work together. The opportunity for conversation is ever-present within the format of the game – something that is not always easy without the backdrop of a shared goal or purpose. The violence becomes secondary to the communal endeavour, and an almost meditative tempo is established.
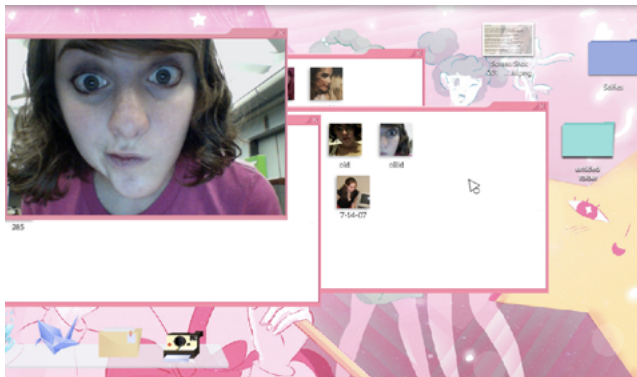
In a similar way, the early stages of romance portrayed (in uncomfortably real detail) in Nina Freeman's *Cibele* highlight how gaming serves as a platform for human exchange. It also shows how, in some ways, the virtual is preferable to physical when it comes to the complex realm of intimacy. Once the dynamics of real life and sex present themselves, the romance begins to crumble.

The positive possibilities of relationships established between assumed roles and shared play can be seen in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* when the main protagonist Wade discovers his play-partner is actually a woman: "I realised that we already did know each other, as well as any two people could. We'd known each other for years, in the most

intimate way possible. We'd connected on a purely mental level. I understood her, trusted her, and loved her as a dear friend."

HOW DO THE IMMERSIVE ENVIRONMENTS OF GAMES ALLOW PLAYERS TO EXPRESS THEIR DARKER SIDE?

"And like a dream, it can at times bleed into something more frightening, when things that had appeared benign become threatening, and places that were beautiful seem suddenly ominous."[1]

"...To shock and confront the audience, to go beyond words and connect with the emotions: to wake up the nerves and the heart... Theatre should be an act of 'organised anarchy'."[2]

"You've been wrong about every single thing you've ever done, including this thing."[3]

Counter to widely shared assumptions, most games are not made for – or played by – children. As video games

become more immersive and expansive, there is more scope to probe the lesser tested areas of our imagination, and our own boundaries. This brings with it darker themes and tropes, such as violence, exploitation, and the fetishisation of trauma. Looking at the state of games today gives us an insight into our truest nature and culture – both the positive, and negative.

Experimenting with ways of being – through roleplay – can be liberating, but how do we balance the expression of, say, primal or violent emotions with the wellbeing of ourselves and those around us? Jon Rafman's work highlights how our online existence is intertwined with our subconscious. The visceral experience of watching *Open Heart Warrior* underlines the mental impact of violent imagery and antagonistic behaviours in film and video game culture.

Designers and artists are using new technologies (facial tracking, mixed reality, haptic feedback etc.), alongside complex structures and ambiguous framing to reflect the moral complexities of our lives. The highly ambiguous and controversial VR experience *Real Violence*, by Jewish-American artist Jordan Wolfson,

1 Steve Dinneen on the game *Rime*, The Guardian
2 Natasha Tripney on Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*
3 GLaDOS, *Portal*

immerses us in an abhorrent scene of abstracted violence carried out to the chanting of a Hanukkah prayer. With no context provided, we may examine our own position (and complicity) in relation to real acts of violence – palpably close for some, while abstract for others – at a time when the Far Right is rising again in many countries.

The framing of characters in some AAA games is also becoming less clear cut, and more unsettlingly real. In *The Witcher 3*, or the *Bioshock* series, dialogue choices and moral decisions rule how you play the game, who you kill, and how. The reasons for you to act appear clear cut, but as you progress, you realise how little you know, and the justification for your actions begins to disintegrate.
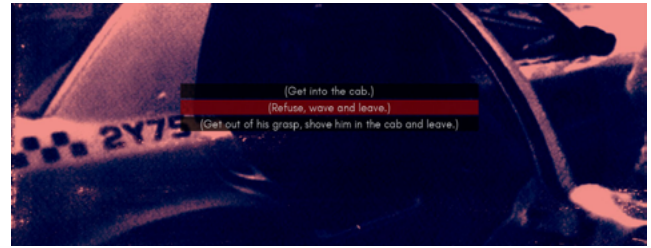
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HOW DO VIDEO GAMES REFLECT, AND HELP US MOVE BEYOND WIDER ISSUES OF THE WORLD AROUND US?

"Our fundamental delusion today… is not to take fictions seriously enough. You think it's just a game? It's reality. It's more real than it appears to you."[1]

"I was literally watching the chat room as the site posted my address and the conversation moved to places that threatened my personal safety."[2]

The instability of the gaming world is set against a wider backdrop of uncertainty and an ever increasing convergence between the real and virtual, fact and fiction. The Gamergate scandal (which exposed deep-rooted sexism in the industry), and the volatile real-
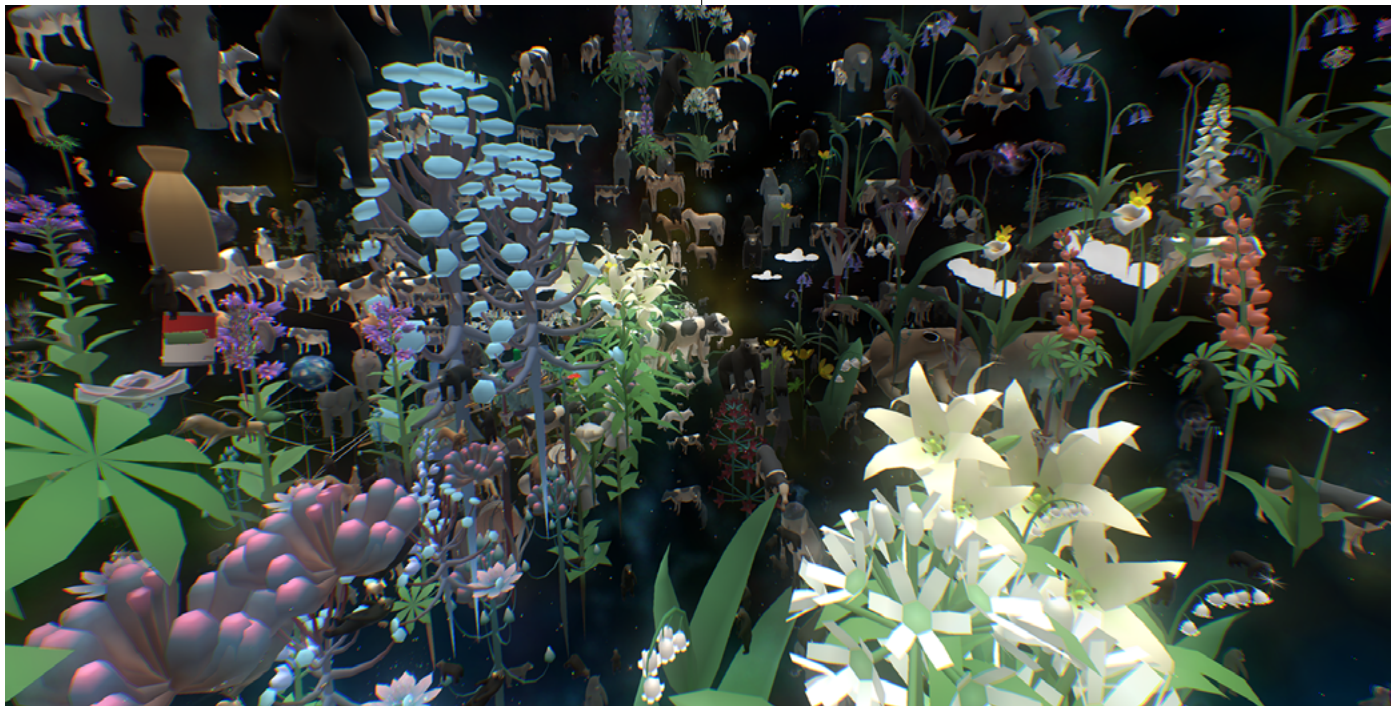
life exchanges which accompanied it, exemplifies this instability. It marked the point where the 'gaming world' and the 'real world' collided.

Debate surrounding the scandal drew links between the rise of disenfranchised men in America and the alt-right movement, as well as criticism of so-called 'social justice warriors'. Much of the media analysis of Gamergate focused on polarising generalisations, which it is important to move beyond. Angela Washko's work focuses on creating new forums for discussions of feminism in the spaces most hostile to it. Washko shows how we can move beyond binary thinking through her presentation of the practices of several prominent seduction coaches (pick-up artists, or PUAs) in *The Game: The Game*. Initially, the player may be disgusted by PUA language and aggressive behaviour, but as the game continues the

complexity of social behaviours around dating emerges. We may question if practising 'the game' is inherently wrong, or whether it can be practised in a way that levels the dating playing field in favour of those who are otherwise socially or physically disadvantaged.

The encounters we have within gaming and roleplay allow us to move beyond stereotypes and fixed positions, occupying other perspectives in ways that polemic debate can't. Some of the most satisfying games can be those that create a mirror of our everyday behaviours, and strive to subvert or manipulate that image. In acknowledging the two-way exchange between the fictions we create and our everyday lives, we begin to better understand our own roles and motivations, and those of our fellow players.

WHY ARE GAMES ATTRACTIVE TO ARTISTS AS WELL AS GAME DESIGNERS?

"Being playful is the engine of innovation and creativity: as we play, we think about thinking and we learn to act in new ways"[1]

"...it is essential today that 'the virtual' not be seen as an escapist technology promoted by Silicon Valley, but also reclaimed as a way to mobilize a new political imagery."[2]

1 Eric Zimmerman
2 Myths of Marble, ICA, University of Pennsylvania and Henie Onstad Kunstsenter

Artists working with new media have continually returned to video games, creating work that is expressive, thought provoking and socially impactful. They use the structures and cultures of games to create new experiences and reflect on the medium.

Many artists delve into the relationships we create with video games, as well as the cultures and machines associated
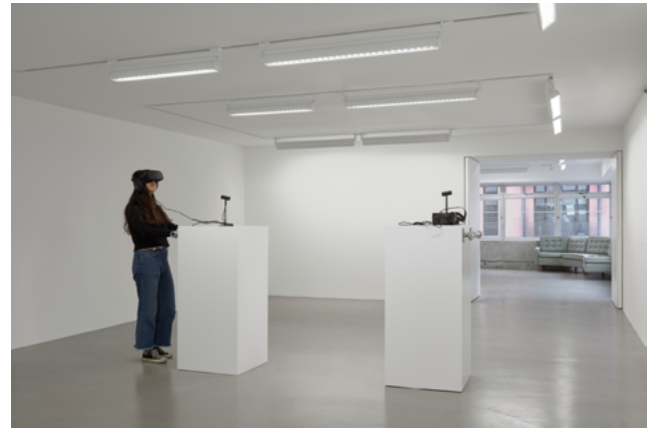
Installation view of Jordan Wolfson, *Real Violence*, 2016. Image courtesy of the artist and Sadie Coles HQ.

with them. Lynn Hershman Leeson's work *Lorna* uses the dynamics and interactivity of video games to explore identity formation, image culture, and surveillance. More recently, *Factory of the Sun*, by Hito Steyerl creates a simulation which strongly draws on the tropes of video games to consider the politics of labour and the possibilities for collective resistance. These speculative spaces allow us to better analyse the moment in which we currently find ourselves, and explore more radical, or critical possibilities.

Lawrence Lek's simulated environments are at once fantastical and mundane. These de-populated worlds highlight dysfunctions in 'real' life and contemplate unsettling near futures.

Conversely, Ian Cheng's *Emissaries* series hands complete control over to artificial intelligence, creating "games which play themselves". In giving over this space to the AI, which normally serves as a secondary character to our

stories, we may find new ways to relate to our own chaotic existence.

There is also a strong history of artists interrogating video games and their role in society, from Joseph De Lappe's *Dead In Iraq*, to much of the work of the late Harun Farocki. In *Parallel I-IV*, Farocki asks the viewer to reposition themselves in relation to video games, and to reflect on reality, representation and simulation. Similarly, Sondra Perry uses recogniseable visual language (i.e. games or horror films) to expose the oversimplifications or omissions which are woven into the computer programs and systems which pervade our lives.

The two-way exchange between contemporary art and games is mutually beneficial. The game world is only made deeper and more critical by the alternative approaches found in the art world, and vice versa. This exploration of the role which video games play (and the roles that we play within them) is a shared endeavour in *States of Play: Roleplay Reality*, one which is impossible if either the games, or the works by visual artists, are removed.

RELATED EVENTS

Accompanying the exhibition is a wide-ranging programme of talks, live events, workshops and residencies, offering a variety of approaches into the themes and subjects covered by the exhibition.

Events include a film programme including: a screening of *Ready Player One* and the films that inspired it, in collaboration with Picturehouse; specially selected film picks from the exhibition curators, alongside a tour of the show to contextualise their choices; and a double-bill screening of films by Lawrence Lek, as part of the Jerwood/ FVU Awards tour. There will also be a series of talks and workshops, including a continued partnership with Grrrl Power Liverpool around their *Don't Touch Me* campaign, inspired by Angela Washko's work and exploring emotional and physical self-defence. Alongside this a symposium will explore how games reflect the issues of the world around us.

On On Light Night (Friday 18 May), FACT will open its doors to Liverpool's thriving hub of games developers, studios, and e-sports enthusiasts for a one-off gaming event, alongside an ambitious new performance commission, and late-night gallery opening. *FACT Lates* will also continue on the first Wednesday of every month from 6-8pm, with a specially-curated programme of evening events and *Open Labs* in the Learning Space, alongside late opening of the galleries.

FACT's Learning team have developed a wide range of resources for both formal and informal education, as well as for continued education programmes with adults. These include: a partnership with The Studio School in Liverpool to develop ideas both within the exhibition and the accompanying programme; *Prototype* half-term camp (for ages 7 - 15), focusing on game design, development and the space between the real and the unreal; regular *Do Something Saturday* drop-in sessions for families; education guides co-designed with both teachers and students; events exploring the use of gaming within formal systems, and its impact on the development of identity; and an academy with Liverpool Girl Geeks teaching young women to code, and introducing them to game concept design.

For more information on related events, visit fact.co.uk/roleplayreality.

States of Play: Roleplay Reality
Exhibition Guide
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Exhibition open:
22 March — 17 June 2018
Tuesday — Sunday, 11am - 6pm
Free admission

Curators: Lucy Sollitt
and Lesley Taker (FACT)

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Chiara Stephenson
Graphic Design: The Rodina (NL)
Typefaces: Clip and Lars by Bold
Decisions (NL), Times

FACT (Foundation for Art
& Creative Technology)
88 Wood Street, Liverpool

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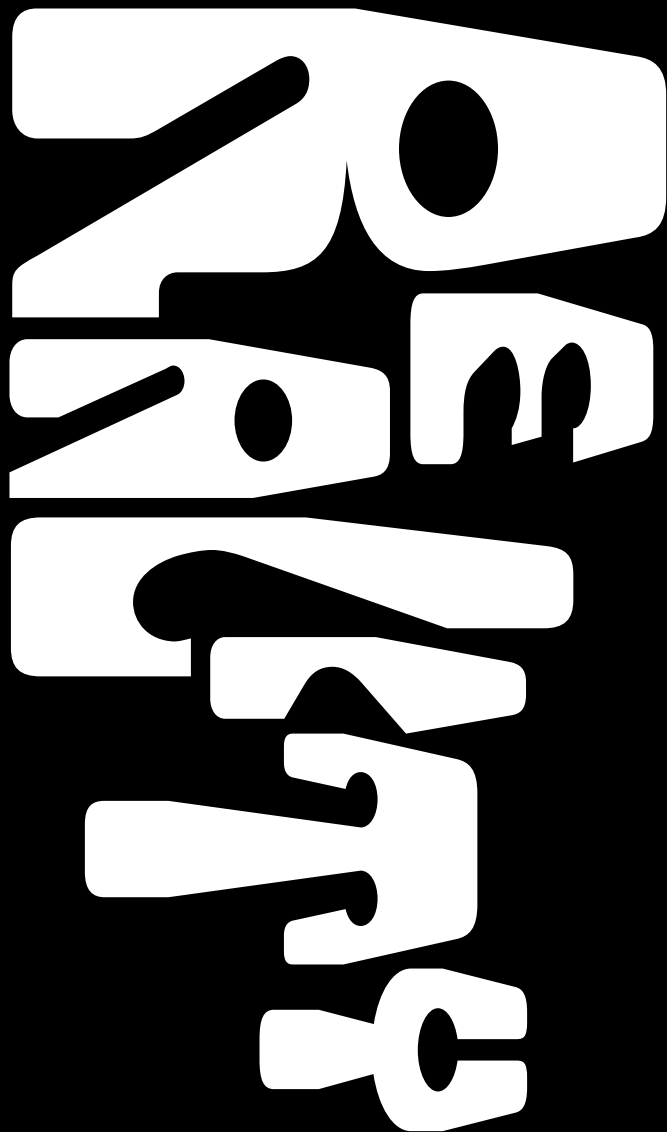INSTITUTE
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