

## CALL FOR PAPERS

### Politics of indexicality in digital game production

DiGRA 2026 Workshop, June 17, 2pm-5pm, Maynooth University, Ireland

Submission deadline: May 4

**Organizers:** Jaroslav Švelch (Charles University), Wilhelmina Statham (Uppsala University)

The proposed workshop serves as the inaugural public forum of the ERC Consolidator grant *GAMEINDEX – Politics and Aesthetics of Indexical Representation in Digital Games and VR*. In line with the theme of DiGRA 2026, the workshop will explore how indexical representation intersects with capitalism, (post)colonialism, and identity politics.

Based on Peirce's (1985) use of the term *index*, digital games include indexical representations both in terms of *traces* (by using indexical techniques such as photogrammetry and motion capture) and *pointers* (by reference to individual real-world people or locations). Indexical techniques such as motion capture and photogrammetry have become critical tools for building in-game assets in digital game production (Bollmer, 2019; Statham, 2020); recorded sound and full-motion video (FMV) can also be considered indexical. Likewise, digital games often point to real-life objects such as landmarks and cities. Lately, developers in various peripheral regions have become more invested in using their local settings and cultural heritage in games aimed at international audiences, pointing to the emancipatory potential of indexical references (Eklund et al., 2024; Švelch & Houška, 2025).

The concept of indexicality is well-established in film studies, used to describe a direct causal relationship between a real-life object and its "trace" in the film material (Doane, 2007; Gunning, 2008; Wollen, 2013). In game studies, indexicality has been mostly overlooked despite its prominence in game production. Existing research demonstrates the important role of indices within digital game storytelling, such as the inclusion of tracks and traces in detective games (Fernández-Vara, 2011). Although indices have also been discussed as a part of a larger semiotics of games (Grabarczyk, 2021), literature on individual indexical techniques is quite rare (Bollmer, 2019; Menache, 2011; Statham, 2020).

By connecting digital representation to material reality, indexicality opens untapped opportunities for intersectional critique that exposes the power dynamics inherent in the production pipeline, from the extraction of data to its final commodification. The widespread use of indexical techniques and indexical pointers raises questions about what we might call "indexical justice": Which people and locations get indexically represented? Does indexicality challenge or reinforce stereotypes about peripheral

locations or disadvantaged communities? How are traces of these places and locations commodified by the game industry? How (un)fairly is the indexical data extracted and used?

To start answering such questions, we are looking for participants who will contribute their theoretical, empirical, or practical knowledge on one or more of the following topics:

- **Material Histories of Indexicality:** Critically mapping the history of indexical techniques (e.g. rotoscoping, digitized photography, FMV, sound recording, motion capture, photogrammetry, 3D scanning) and their perceived values.
- **Troubling Pleasures of Indexicality:** Interrogating discursive conceptualization and player reception of indexicality. To what extent is the pleasure of high-fidelity realism reliant on a Western/Global North definition of immersion and authenticity?
- **Labor Behind the Index:** Examining the politics of capture and the digital extraction of performers' bodies (mocap, voice, music) into assets. What are the labor conditions of performers, operators, and others involved in indexical techniques?
- **Indexical Bodies and Identity Politics:** Analyzing the relationship between indexical techniques and the diversity of representation. How can indexicality expand or restrict the visibility of diverse body types, ethnicities, and accents?
- **The Extractive Gaze:** Interrogating indexicality as an example of the "tourist gaze" (Urry, 2002) and colonialist approach to "exotic" and peripheral locations.
- **Contested Ownership of the Real:** Navigating the legal and ethical frictions of commodifying real-world trace data and property (motion capture, voiceover, photogrammetry) for commercial exploitation.
- **Emancipatory Indices:** Exploring how peripheral, diasporic, and indigenous creators use indexicality as a tool for cultural resistance to represent local places, sacred sites, and heritage.
- **Traces of Infrastructures:** Focusing on the (un)intended indexical traces of production processes (glitches and artifacts) in finished products as expressions of both control and creative subversion.

## Submissions

If you wish to apply to participate in the workshop, prepare the following:

(a) a **250-word non-anonymized abstract** outlining the content of your presentation (with up to three references if relevant, which do not count towards the word limit)

(b) a short explanation of your approach to indexicality (a couple of sentences about why this topic is relevant to you)

(c) a short CV (of about one paragraph)

Submit this information along with your personal details into this online form: <https://forms.office.com/e/rVZxt2LcCy>

If you have any questions about the workshop, please contact the workshop organizers: [jaroslav.svelch@fsv.cuni.cz](mailto:jaroslav.svelch@fsv.cuni.cz) & [wilhelmina.statham@speldesign.uu.se](mailto:wilhelmina.statham@speldesign.uu.se).

The deadline for workshop applications is **May 4**.

The workshop will open with a concise presentation of the GAMEINDEX project. This will be followed by short (around 10 minutes) individual presentations by participants, where they will introduce their approach to indexicality in games or their existing research. This will be followed by an open discussion where participants will debate priorities of future research, the methodologies and tools that can be used, and possible collaborations and publication venues.

As an optional part of the workshop, we will invite participants to a walk around Maynooth during which we will engage in critical making by using freely available photogrammetry tools in their mobile phones. Participants will be encouraged to create 3D models of buildings or landmarks to get hands-on experience with indexical techniques and experience the affordances and frictions of indexing a space. Participants interested in this activity should install RealityScan Mobile (free to use) beforehand, available for [Android](#) and [iOS](#).

We expect to accommodate up to 9 active participants. Presenting participants will be selected by the workshop organizers based on the relevance and quality of their proposals. We will aim to represent a diversity of approaches and topics and include both senior and junior scholars with diverse backgrounds. Other DiGRA participants may join as audience members and contribute to the discussions, up to room capacity.

## References

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- Eklund, L., Gluzman, R., Jørgensen, K., Kayali, F., Roinioti, E., & Pnueli, V. (2024). Games for the Pluriverse: Exploring the Use, Opportunities, and Problems of Drawing from Local Cultural Heritage in Video Games. *Games and Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120241234126>

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- Urry, J. (2002). *The tourist gaze* (2nd ed). Sage publ.
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