



Workshop @ DiGRA 2026

Unveiling Racialised and Hostile Urbanism through Interactive Storytelling

Call for Participants

Overview

Originally, urban planning emerged from the need of preventing disease outbreaks, but over the years there's been a progressive disconnect from the fields of urban planning and public health (Corburn, 2004). This disconnect has contributed to health disparities facing low-income populations of colour; especially in North America, where there is a history of residential segregation and discriminatory housing practices (Corburn, 2004; Winling & Michney, 2021). Stemming from his book *The Black Butterfly* (2021), Dr. Lawrence T. Brown created the board game *Urban Cipher* (Black Butterfly Dream Lab, 2023) to demonstrate through asymmetrical gameplay how racial segregation in Baltimore, as well as other American cities, is a purposefully designed system. After all, games, due to their innate interactive nature, can help players engage with and reevaluate their understanding of current systemic inequities (Harrison & Kumar, 2019).

In the case of urban planning education, using city-building games to challenge students has become a common practice (Commeey, 2023). However, these games tend to overlook racial issues, as the addition of specific racist systems would add complexity and realism at the expense of entertainment value (Bereitschaft, 2016). In order to prevent the deprivation of minorities, and guarantee equitable and inclusive environments for all, anti-racist urban planning approaches must also embrace intersectionality, addressing how overlapping identities shape how people experience the city (Jackson et al., 2023; Ross & Green Leigh, 2000). If game worlds fail to represent these patterns of urban inequity, players may come to disregard them in real life (Bereitschaft, 2016).

In October 2024, for the 48-hour *Fair Play Jam*, I co-developed a minimalist city-builder critical of abusive urban planning techniques and segregation. Players unassumingly placed tiles on a board in an attempt to reach the highest score possible. In the end, however, it was revealed to them that they had been planning a city's layout all along, receiving more points for segregating residents by their income and race. The game proved to be effective in its use of misdirection and suddenness to make players think critically about the urban environments that surround them.

During this 3-hour workshop participants will be invited to:

- Analyse the current state of urban representation in games.
- Conceptualise new systems to better portray racialised urban planning techniques.
- Reflect on the use of interactive storytelling as a solution to different design problems.

Structure

- Part 1: *Introduction & Case-Studies* (30 min)

The workshop will begin with a brief introduction on the topic, looking at past research, as well as case-studies of digital and board games that display urban planning malpractices.

- Part 2: *Design Sprint* (60 min)

Participants will form groups of 3 or 4 people, and will then design small-scale paper prototypes that use interactivity and play as a means to exemplify said malpractices.

- Part 3: *Presentations & Discussion* (60 min)

After a 15-minute break, the room will be open for participants to present and playtest their prototypes as the organisers moderate the ensuing discussion.

- Part 4: *Next Steps* (15 min)

The workshop will conclude with a conversation surrounding future research on the topic. The expected outcomes are to create a strong network of academics interested in the topic, as well as begin development for a framework that ensures an accurate representation of urbanism in games.

Submission

Interested participants must send a brief statement (max. 200 words) stating their background, as well as any preliminary ideas for the collaborative design sprint. Please submit your application at oriol.viu-i-duran.3294@student.uu.se before the 31st of May.

References

- Bereitschaft, B. (2016). Gods of the City? Reflecting on City Building Games as an Early Introduction to Urban Systems. *Journal of Geography*, 115(2), 51–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221341.2015.1070366>
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- Commey, J. (2023). *City Building Games as Pedagogical Tools in Urban Planning*.
- Corburn, J. (2004). Confronting the Challenges in Reconnecting Urban Planning and Public Health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 94(4), 541–546. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.94.4.541>
- Harrison, R., & Kumar, S. (2019). *Gaming the System: Teaching Socioeconomic Inequity through Roleplaying and Discussion Using an Educational Board Game*. EDULEARN19 Proceedings, 7681–7690. 11th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies. <https://doi.org/10.21125/edulearn.2019>
- Jackson, A., Yerena, A., Lee, C. A., Garcia-Zambrana, I., Chrisinger, B., Harjo, L., & Harwood, S. (2023). Anti-Racist Futures: Disrupting Racist Planning Practices in Workplaces, Institutions, and Communities: Introduction to the Special Issue. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 89(4), 411–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2023.2244850>
- Ross, C. L., & Green Leigh, N. (2000). *Planning, Urban Revitalization, and the Inner City: An Exploration of Structural Racism*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08854120022092719>
- Winling, L. C., & Michney, T. M. (2021). The Roots of Redlining: Academic, Governmental, and Professional Networks in the Making of the New Deal Lending Regime. *Journal of American History*, 108(1), 42–69. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaab066>

Organisers

Oriol Viu i Duran is a final year student of the MA in Game Design at Uppsala University - Campus Gotland. His research interests include interactive storytelling, world-building, and social awareness through play; his recent academic work on counterfactualism in resource management games for social commentary was recognised with honours. He has developed and self-published a wide range of games, and has worked in professional indie game development with the Belfast-based studio Can You Eat It?; he also has experience as a teacher trainer in educational robotics. Upon graduating, he plans to continue his games research journey and begin lecturing at university.

Dr Eoghain Meakin is a lecturer and researcher in Game Design at Ulster University, Belfast. With a BA in English Language and Literature and an MA in Film, his research focuses on narrative, storytelling and meaning making strategies in interactive media. He is currently part of the Future Island-Island project, an AHRC funded project that brings together community members, academics, and practitioners to co-create design-led research for a greener, more sustainable Northern Ireland economy. He has produced digital theatre as part of an XR Network+ funded collaboration with local theatre company PrimeCut and formally he has been a member of ViRal, an industry facing VR research lab and The Writer's Guild of Ireland. His academic work has appeared in journals Digital Creativity, Game Studies and Journal of Games Criticism. He is also a co-founder of the game studio Can You Eat It? who are working on their first, locally sourced, punk-powered title.

Dr Naoise Collins is a game designer and lecturer at the Institute of Art, Design + Technology (IADT), where he co-developed and coordinates the BA in Game Design. He has lectured in computing, design, education and psychology departments across numerous Irish universities. His research sits at the intersection of games, immersive media and education, and he has authored more than a dozen peer-reviewed publications on game-based learning, experiential learning design and simulation training. He completed a PhD at Technological University Dublin on immersive gaming environments for Irish-language learning and previously held a postdoctoral research position in simulation-based education at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). He is Principal Investigator on the CO-DIRECT project bridging immersive design across SETU NAIT Polytechnic Canada and IADT and serves as Creation Bridge Lead for Screen fostering industry links between creative industries and academia. His work combines research publication, teaching and production practice, focusing on how interactive experiences can function as tools for learning, training and engagement.