SPIKE DELUXE GUIDE TO AI

MARGARETE JAHRMANN

DO-NOTHING GAME

A pioneering experimental game artist, Margarete Jahrmann's multimedia installations disclose the secret plots we un-consentingly act out and all the forms of play we didn't imagine we'd enjoy. Her advocacy of "ludic activism" is an enticement to hijack tech from its profit drive and to interface with digitalization via critical pleasure. *An interview with Mindy Seu*

MINDY SEU In your early AI installation, *Deep Dream Area 7 lab: I WANT TO SEE MONKEYS* (2017), a face-detection algorithm finds likenesses and images taken by web-cam, then organizes them into categories via a deep-learning network pre-trained on 1.3 million images of objects and animals. However, because humans were not among the pre-trained categories, their faces were classified as various species of monkeys or apes. It seems to be an apt parallel for how data is culled from us for use in the data sets of the newest AI. As unknowing participants in these systems, how might we begin to rethink involuntary subjects, consent, extraction, and mis-categorization?

MARGARETE JAHRMANN Normally, you agree to play a game, and in social relations, a game happens as long
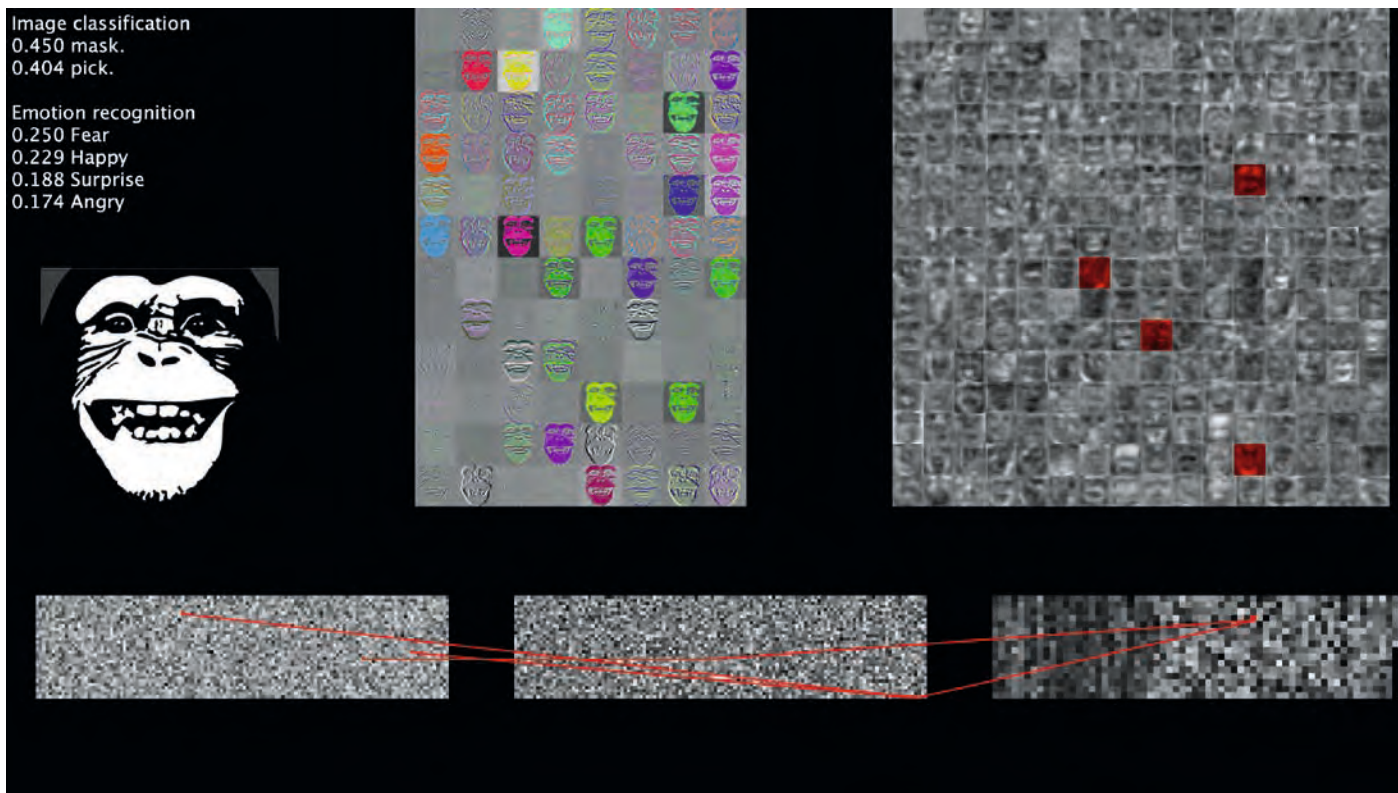
I WANT TO SEE HAPPY MONKEYS, 2017

as that agreement is mutual and fair. If it is involuntary, then it is a transgression of borders. The 2017 installation used a state-of-the-art AI-training and classification system, AlexNet, that was based on mass-data collection that is not voluntarily agreed to. At the Ars Electronica AI festival in Linz, visitors in front of an image-capture mechanism were offered a game catching dots on a screen, as in an early space game, which took all their concentration. As a prerequisite to the joy of pressing buttons and getting a good score, though, you needed to agree to something in return: By participating in the game, your face was classified. In the second part of the installation, I role-played a scientist, together with my partner, Stefan Glasauer, who is an actual neuroscientist. We were there to tell the "participants" that their score was not the actual "result" — the real outcome was that they had been classified as apes. Visitors would ask, "Why I am a monkey?" And we would answer, "Because the system sees what we train it to do." So that work was about early AI discrimination and involuntary participation in training a system that has bias. I think it's important to experience this AI bias and data storage in an art show, not an educational context. It is more of an emotional approach: You are put into a situation where you can experience an "aha!" moment — users are not stupid, but quick learners. Of course, this also relates to current, everyday phenomena of data extraction, such as accepting cookies, and dark patterns in game design.

MS *I WANT TO SEE MONKEYS* confronts the free energy principle, which suggests that the brain reduces uncertainty by making predictions based on internal models that imply data or outcome biases. The artwork becomes a performance in observation of the observer. How can this type of game become a source of knowledge about ourselves?

MJ Artistic research like this is a form of knowledge generation that can be coupled to different fields, especially psychological and cognitive sciences, as well as psychophysics. I see my practice as a wish to actively contribute with "experimental systems" or "experiments in the wild" that scientists can make use of. I should add that I want to see not only monkeys, but happy monkey.

MS Jumping to a different project: *Kopfgeld* (2021), which translates as "head bounty," is a game-scores installation generating a ludic currency as an alternative to energy-intensive tokens, with an AI determining someone's value based on their facial scan. How does AI serve the interest of capitalism, and how might we use it to the opposite effect?

MJ Though AI serves capitalism very radically, I think that different economic forms, of values beyond a classically capitalist logic, are also possible. That's why we should question concepts like money in a radical way.

"Kopfgeld" is a sum paid for killing or capturing someone, which is exactly what we are paying with our data in all the face capture-and-recognition systems we live in. The biometric info and the labor we give away freely all the time are our capital. Ironically, in this game, the player gets some sort of individualized money — as opposed to the actual world, where we get nothing.

But AI is also an opportunity and, if I think about visual art, a great one at that. AI won't make the artist or creative work obsolete; it only means that applied work can take different forms, such that artists can focus more on conceptualization. Similarly, this might be the chance to rethink the systems of the economy. Why do we need to accumulate capital? Why isn't it better to make a flow of merits that fluctuates all the time? What if money lost value, the more that you held? Money should be generated and used in the present, I think.

Kopfgeld somehow asks all these questions through a playful experience. I really enjoyed how it was exhibited in Berlin in 2023 at re:publica, one of the world's largest conferences on digital culture, which was on the topic of cash. There, the tokens were really worth something: You could buy a drink with them. And like all money, it was play money.

MS In your projects, play is experienced as an instrument of problem-solving. I use "play" in two ways here, as something observed, as in theater, and as something interactive, like in traditional games. Do you think games must be participatory, or can they also be solely observed?

MJ This is a very important question for experimental game cultures (as well as the name of a new department for artistic games that I lead at the University of Applied arts in Vienna). Are there passive forms of play? Can we make a "do nothing" game? Is it still a game if we do nothing at all? We are in an environment where games happen *with us*, so do they really need to be interactive? There is a radical but growing field of low-interaction games, where you only have to execute one click or so. Its goal is to reduce, as well as to bring the concept of active play into question. Observation takes place, of course, as in a theater — but nobody would say, "I play a theater piece if I watch it." These games don't just involve watching, but that you're a player doesn't mean that you have to be productive. However, you do have to be present in the deepest sense, which might only be meditation.

MS Like your game *Zero Action at the Savings Bank* (2021)?
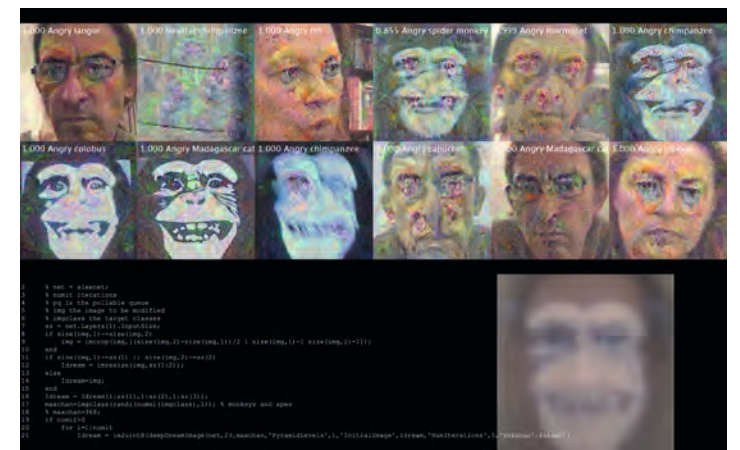
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Are there passive forms of play? Is it still a game if we do nothing at all? We are in an environment where games happen *with us*, so do they really need to be interactive?

MJ Yes, it was a little do-nothing game with two "hyperscan" EEGs that took place in Vienna at the Postsparkassenhalle, this art-nouveau *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Otto Wagner's. The artist Žarko Aleksi and myself each wore a headset and laid on two beds in the middle of this big historic bank, where there used to be transactions of money, but which is no longer active. We were observed by five cameras, and the data from our live brain scans was visualized on a screen. You could see that our brains synchronized, although we did nothing but lie there for an hour. It was a "lunchbreak" performance — the schedule was not a coincidence. If you bring your brain to a resting state, a lot of activity still takes place.

MS Are these all forms of protest?

MJ Not protest, but activism — a form of ludic activism that gives more agency than pure protest, and more playful enjoyment besides. —

MARGARETE JAHRMANN (*1967, Pinkafeld, Austria) is an artist living in Vienna. Recent presentations took place on the occasion of re:publica conference, Berlin; "A MAZE. 12th International Games and Playful Media Festival," Berlin (both 2023); "14th Havana Biennal"; Parallel Art Fair, Vienna (both 2022).

MINDY SEU is a designer, educator, and technologist living in New York City. Her latest publication, *Cyberfeminism Index*, was published in 2023.