

Plaything is a thing to play - or to play with. It carries an implicit power dynamic: it is something that is acted upon, manipulated, played, enjoyed, and ultimately controlled. In today's political, technological, and economic reality, the concept of the plaything takes an even darker tone. In a world seen as a playspace—gamified, commodified, and platformed—those who play are not equal, and those who are played with may have little agency.

From the marionette stages and dollhouses of pre-modern Europe and Chinese Shadow Theater to chatbots, AI influencers, videogames, or “smart homes”, the boundaries between play and control, embodiment and simulation, games and space become even more unstable. Dollhouses, once used to train noblewomen for domestic servitude, now echo in the algorithmic domesticity of smart homes. Barbie—once a vessel for white, thin, cisfemininity—has been diversified to fit market demand while paying off in profits to Mattel.

These playthings - like humans - occupy the ambiguous and contested territory between real and artificial, virtual and physical, animated and alive. Humans mold their behaviours online to better fit the machine - and become puppets too, with beauty filters, Tik Tok dances, and other performative content following daily trends. Either manifesting “main character energy” or pretending to be an NPCs (Non-playable Characters or background characters in videogames) - these patterns reflect a shifting desire to relinquish agency, to embody a character as a mode of performance or survival.

Yet playthings are not inert. Dolls, puppets, marionettes, and toys hold power too. They seduce, resist and haunt. What, then, is the doll's power? What does the puppet control, and who is pulling the strings? Can puppets pull back?

PLAY/THING

In this studio, we will explore the architecture of play not as a neutral backdrop but as an active, animated agent. From responsive environments to stage sets, from dollhouses to smart homes, we will treat spatial design as something choreographed, and performative, and imbued with power dynamics. What are the politics of spatial control? Who—or what—pulls the strings of a room that listens, a home that performs, or a landscape that scripts movement?

You will design a speculative plaything—a character, a space, a gameboard, or a world—that reflects on the entangled dynamics of agency, control, and embodiment. Through scenography, architecture, and narrative systems, your project must take a position: What are the ethics of play? Who gets to play, and who gets played? How does space perform, and who is it performing for?

You will work collaboratively in the teams of 2 toward a final speculative project that could take the form of but not limited to: a physical-digital dollhouse, an NPC character and its environment, an interactive puppet performance, a choreographed installation or stage; an interactive inhabitable structure; a speculative gameboard or digital world, or any other hybrid that challenges the roles of player, object, and space.

PLAY/THING is a transmedia studio: your final project must span both physical and digital realms. The studio will be structured around series of workshops that include but are not limited to: Critical theory readings (Haraway, Nakamura, Levitt etc.) ; Film screenings and game analysis; Hands-on prototyping (3D modeling, game engines, motion capture); Role-play and performance experiments. For the hands-on prototyping, we will work on technical skill-building including animation, and selected Blender and Unreal Engine workflows.