

# Playing with the Trouble: Our second year

**Purpose:** reporting CUCo grant in 2023

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In this reporting we will: 1) recap on the main aim of the Playing with the Trouble project; 2) introduce the five overarching core purposes that our games deal with; and 3) provide a snapshot of the “physical library”.

## 1. Playing with the Trouble

A critical challenge for addressing urgent broad societal issues is to navigate multiple worldviews and perspectives, both within academic research contexts and at the interface of science and society. Spaces that cultivate playfulness can open up participants to express, share, question, and transform how they experience and act in the world.

Playing with the Trouble is a transdisciplinary team engaged in developing mini-games to facilitate interactions, and support diverse teams in various stages of their collaborations.

For the second year of our project, we have further developed, tested and designed a number of playful activities. This has materialised in card decks (in a printing phase at the moment) and other simple materials, with a range of flexible instructions to be used and combined. These playful activities have supported diverse projects, workshops and educational activities of the team members and beyond. This is now becoming a tangible outcome, to be shared and uptaken by a wider audience. Games produced will be shared through a website (linked to CUCo), in which more than 17 games are shared with instructions, and a physical “travelling library for transformative play”, in which 8 of the games will be displayed.

Following, we present the five core purposes that inform the logic and designs of our games. For each purpose, we provide an example of a game that seeks to address it.

## 2. Five core purposes

The games are designed around five core purposes:

- 1. Surfacing worldviews:** Differing worldviews often lie at the heart of tensions and conflicts. Without the ability to understand and engage with these differences, tensions can become suppressed or polarized, closing down opportunities for societal transformation. We have developed playful activities and materials that help us better see and discuss our hidden assumptions about ourselves, of others and the world.

**Example:** We used **Material Metaphors** at the 2023 CUCo Kick-off Event, De Ruimte, Utrecht, to prompt members of the CUCo community to materialise and share—and then collectively reflect on—their worldviews around collaboration. Using a variety of craft materials, groups constructed and ‘exhibited’ physical assemblages that revealed patterns and diversity in how people imagine and approach collaboration, some rooted in experience and others more speculative, including problems with collaboration, things that look good but don’t work, where people are trying to get to but can’t, and future dreams of how they imagine collaboration could be. Facilitated by Maikel Waardenburg, Joost Vervoort, Dan Lockton, and Joyce Browne.



*Material metaphors in CUCo Kick-off Event 2023 (1)*





*Material metaphors in CUCo Kick-off Event 2023 (2)*

- 2. Facilitating collective imagination:** In addressing societal challenges, we often focus on describing the nature of problems and where they came from. These playful activities and materials seek to counterbalance our emphasis on the past and present, with an imaginative orientation towards the future. What could more just and sustainable futures look or feel like? How might we bring them into being? And what redefined roles may this entail for us?

**Example:** We used the activity **Tentacular Worlds** at the CUCo Tentacular festival. This activity can be used to create imagined futures together and explore connections, consequences and opportunities in these co-created futures. The objective of the activity can vary from focussing on very open exploration of new ideas to identifying opportunities to “unmake systems” (see purpose 4). Tentacular Worlds was based on a combination of the Futures Wheel approach (Jerome Glenn, 1972) and Amy Twigger Holroyd’s Fashion Fictions (<https://fashionfictions.org/>). The activity contains 3 main phases: Imagining 100 character worlds connected to a chosen theme or topic, imagining the consequences connected to these worlds (and connecting these consequences to each other) and identifying opportunities in these new worlds. Facilitated by Dan Lockton and Jet Vervoort.

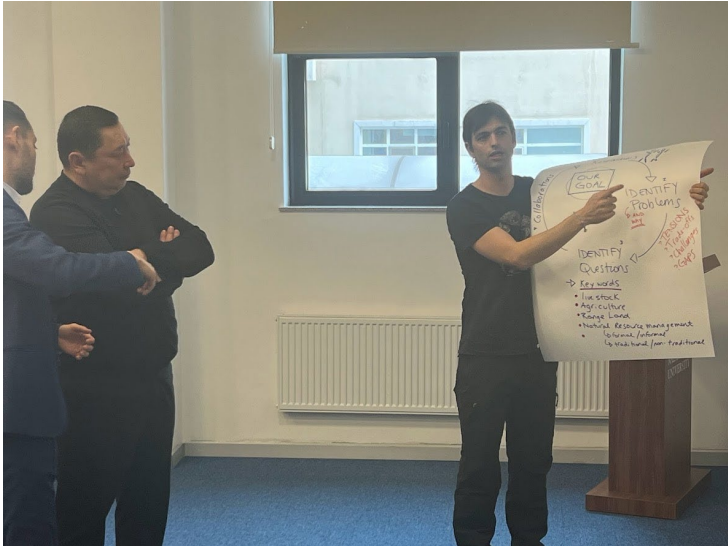


*Tentacular Worlds at the CUCo Tentacular festival*

- 3. Staying with the trouble:** In scientific and/or societal spaces seeking societal change, there can be a bias towards cognitive and rational engagement with societal problems and solutions. This set of playful activities and materials encourage us to embrace rather than suppress our discomforts with injustices we experience in the world. They focus on the power of engaging with diverse emotions such as care, fear, love, grief - to grow transformative potential.

**Example:** we used **Tension lines** in the preliminary formation of a consortium to develop a research project in Kazakhstan. Participants were from different backgrounds and disciplines, as well as different cultures. The exercise proposed participants to position themselves physically along a continuum from agreement to disagreement around controversial issues, such as: the need for transdisciplinarity in research projects, the role of society in defining research agendas, or pathways to address some of the current global challenges. While the exercise had elements of “surfacing worldviews” (see purpose 1), it also demonstrated the challenge to address those problems (even from a research consortium perspective) together and “stay with the trouble”. With respect to “staying with the trouble”, the physical outcome of surfacing our worldviews allowed us to visualize and consequently address less than comfortable issues.

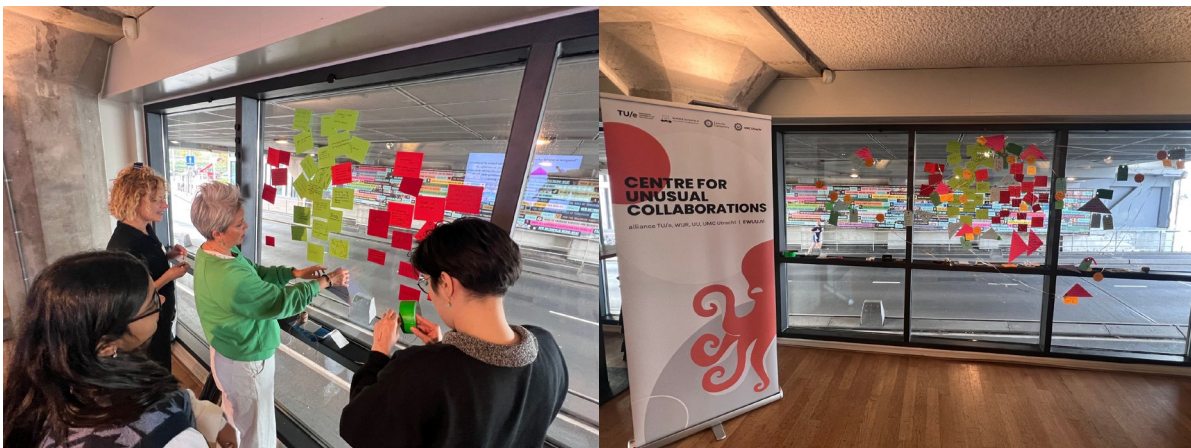




Discussing a follow-up from Tension lines in a workshop.

4. **Unmaking systems:** All work that seeks to be transformative must recognize unjust power relations and make a concerted effort to transform those relations. This requires diverse forms of collective action. Here, we explore the power of playful activities and materials to reveal, challenge, and disrupt power relations that reinforce problematic relations and injustices in the world.

**Example:** At the [Relating Systems Thinking & Design Symposium](#) at Pakhuis de Zwijger in Amsterdam, October 2023, Dan ran the workshop [Playing With Systems](#) using an adapted version of the Tentacular Worlds activity, to focus specifically on the challenges of “unmaking” systems with transdisciplinary participants from design and consulting practice, academia, and the public sector. Participants suggested their own systems they wanted to ‘unmake’, from education to design practice itself. One finding was that participants found the ‘unmaking’ quite difficult to do in more than a superficial way—the activity perhaps made it easier to create ideas for *new* systems in speculated futures (including a world where music became a primary means of communication, and another where accidents are so rare that they become intentionally staged to give people thrills), than examining existing systems critically. This feedback will help us develop the activity further.



*The Playing With Systems workshop in Amsterdam*

**Example:** Open Hearted Devils is a playful interactive meditation developed to help people use their imagination in an embodied manner to find courage, inner direction and autonomy. People are guided to imagine and embody an ‘open hearted devil’, wild spirit or creature that represents their inner wildness and untamed aspects. They imagine what it feels like to be this creature, what it could do in the world. They then go on to re-imagine their roles at work and with their superiors. Participants also make masks representing their creatures as a way to materialize and remember them. We offered this guided meditation at a number of events for early career researchers - including the Earth System Governance ECR day and the Utrecht University Geosciences PhD day. A number of participants came back to us to report that this practice had inspired them to make real changes in their projects and supervisory structures.



*Open Hearted Devils at Earth System Governance 2023*

- 5. Embracing ambiguity:** A frequent block to transformation is the desire to foreclose interpretations of what the world is like or could be. This set of playful activities and materials seeks to engage directly with this impulse to make what is potentially uncertain certain by challenging people's very notion of certainty. Why are we often so uncomfortable with unpredictability in the real world, and how can we lean into uncertainty to enable more emergent transformation?



**Example:** we have developed and tested a **meditation on food system transformation** building on internal family systems theory. We use the meditation to help participants reflect on their own desire to provoke change (and associated feelings of responsibility for being change makers). We also explore feelings of guilt associated with our everyday practices around food systems. We then bring students into reflexive dialogue with these two parts of themselves from a perspective of curiosity and non-judgement. We tested this event at a “reclaim the seed” gathering in Wageningen and are now adapting the meditation on the basis of the feedback. We have also created a reflection sheet for participants to write down their experiences so we can: a) start to analyse the outcomes of the meditation; b) follow up with participants four months later to see if the exercise had any longer-term impact. Part of the data collection and framing of the meditation revolved around the ambiguity that arises when deep seriousness and deep playfulness meet. It is in this ambiguous space that we explore the resonance of these meditations.

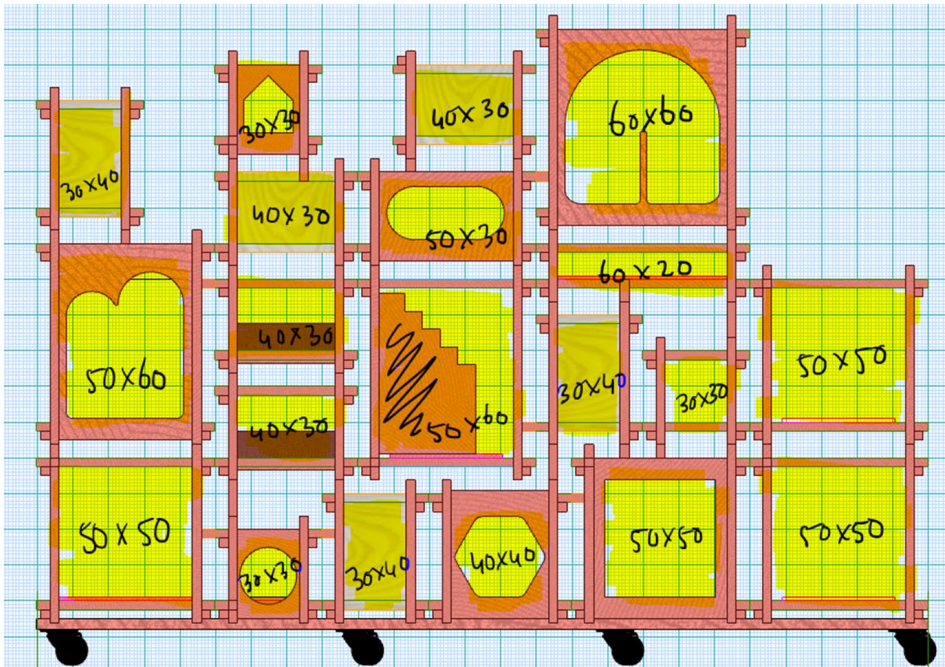


*Meditation on food system transformation activity in*

### 3. Library coming soon!!

Meanwhile, the physical library is also taking shape (see sketch below). We have designed a modular physical library that will display (at least) eight of the games designed within Playing with the Trouble.

We expect to produce five to six libraries that will be displayed in the four institutions of the Alliance, as well as in other public spaces.



*Sketch of the physical library to display the games*