
Playful Design, Playful Politics:
Making International Relations Differently?

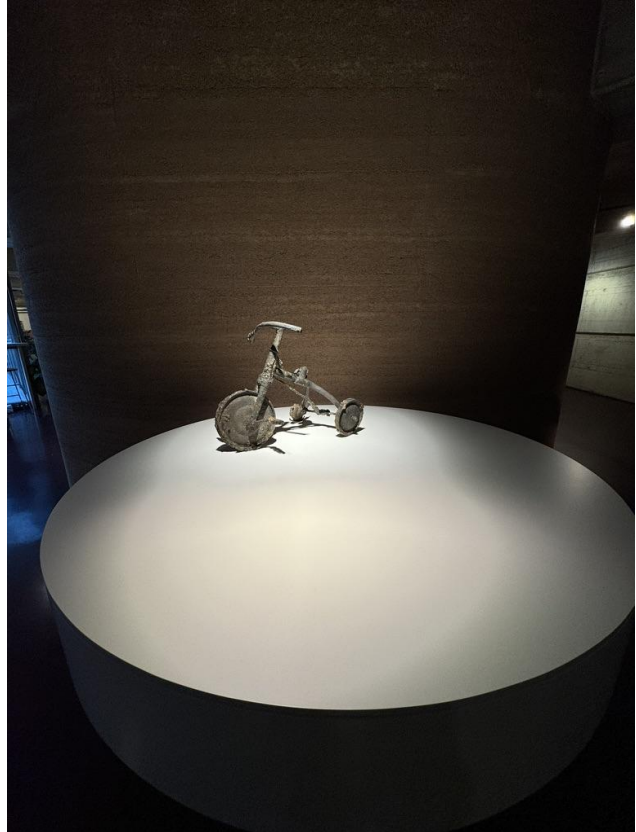
Convenors:

Lucas Perez Florentino, Geneva Graduate Institute

Anna Leander, Geneva Graduate Institute

August 28, 2026 – 09:30 – 17:30

Geneva Graduate Institute (P1-847), Geneva, Switzerland



[Shinichi's Tricycle, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum](#). // [Future Memory replica](#) at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum.
On display at the entrance of the Museum since 2024 as 'a tribute to the victims of the atomic bombings of 1945 and to the work of civil society and other members of the international community'.

When the atomic bomb hit Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, the 3-year-old Shinichi was playing with his tricycle. The boy was one of the hundreds of thousands of victims on that day. Four decades later, his family donated the damaged tricycle to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, where the artifact became something else. Redesigned by the force and heat of weaponry and by the time deterioration, the tricycle in ruins became a materialization of memories of extreme violence. Out of its altered materiality, it transmuted itself into a device for instilling horror as well as impetus for political change towards a non-violent future. As it gets material-discursively (re)configured, a childish playfulness such as this can at once unfold condemnable violences while projecting alternative imaginations for the global future for/by childhood (Tabak) and beyond (Lam et al.). Recently, [1Future](#) artists redesigned the tricycle into yet another version using data generated from the 3D scanning of the Hiroshima Museum's exhibition and collections. Through this technology, the designers obtained the digital baseline to create a melded-copper replica of the toy. For

its creators, 3D-designing works as ‘an innovative way of experiencing the historical artefacts.’ It is ‘not real, but it will help people to create new memories.’ Design plays with the material reality of a playful thing.

In this symposium, we probe the potential of such playful designs for International Relations in making less violent politics. Politics gets (re)configured as things get (re)designed (Austin & Leander). Playful configurations produce forms of being in/becoming with the world (Sicart). Plays are processually and ambiguously productive (Hirst). We play-with the material ecologies that surround us to act politically (Sicart). We play by composing, decomposing, and recomposing reality (Leander), inherently re-configuring the matters that come to matter (Barad). Artistic interventions such as Shinichi's tricycles can operate with and through playfulness to compose collages that draw attention to frictions and fissures through which we may punctuate power and generate political alternatives (Sylvester, Shapiro). However, playful design may also perpetuate established hierarchies. Necropolitical playfulness is designed into war-games and simulations of military strategists (Hirst). Militarist playfulness is designed into popular culture through toys, games and films (Stahl, Huntemann & Payne, *Der Derian*). Online space is also designed playfully. Endless scrolling screens, live streams, dancing trends, challenges, in-built question boxes and quizzes, memes, emojis, filters, AI-generated videos capture our affects with deep consequences for the political representation of social groups, from far-right to progressive forces (Desoutter, Baspehlivan). Playful designs are hailed both as promoting ‘innovation’ and ‘creativity’ and as ‘immune mechanisms’ protecting against their destabilizing consequences (Duffield, Reckwitz, and Andersen). Playful, ‘participatory’ exercises creating ‘cool’, ‘engaging’ environments abound. But what does all this playful designing do? Does it perpetuate precarity and depoliticise problems? Or, does playful design open avenues for creating relational ‘pluriverses’ (Escobar)? As scholars, too, we implement playful (research) designs. We ‘play with’ (Mol) conceptual devices. We articulate empirics through playful methods in the hope that our ‘string figures’ will help us ‘stay with the trouble’ and ‘diffract’ it (Haraway).

This workshop seeks to advance a debate around playful design in the context of international social sciences, by emphasizing its political ambivalences. In particular, it questions the prospects and limitations of playful design as a mode of re/making international relations differently, while unpacking the kinds of phenomena and politics it engenders. The workshop aims at addressing, for instance, the following tentative questions - and others:

- **Remaking?** - Does playfulness serve the reiteration of existing, ‘serious’ political, social, cultural schemes of being? Or, does it offer chances for resistance and emancipation from the non-playful habitus? How does it intervene in political temporalities and spatialities? Does it break with historical linearity and immobility? And if so, with what consequences? Does it produce justice, healing the past for the future, or is it ever more harmful in a permanent, subaltern present?
- **Playful design** - What does playful design do? How do the forms, contexts, and connections that compose playful designs in global politics emerge, change, endure, and/or end? What configurations does playful designing make real? How does matter generate playfulness in design? How does playful design distribute agency across the human and the non-human?
- **Playful politics** - How do aesthetics and affect produce playful politics through designing and in what formats? What are the limits and possibilities of approaching politics from the prism of affect in playful designs of international relations? How are playful designs articulated into specific policy agendas across communities and institutions? Can creativity, improvisation, and strategy be reconciled through playful design? If so, how? Is playfulness purposeful or only consequential?

References we 'played with' in this note:

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Programme

09:30 – 10:00	Welcome remarks
10:00 – 11:00	Session 1 Lucas Perez Florentino, <i>Re/ Creations of Nuclear Things: Playful Design as Techno-aesthetics</i> Morganne Desoutter, <i>Promoting Military AI in Popular Digital Spaces: A Collage</i>
11:00 – 11:15	<i>Break</i>
11:15 – 12:15	Session 2 Aggie Hirst, <i>Politics of Play: From International Theory to Military Wargaming</i> Monica Herz & Jana Tabak, <i>Safe to Play, Safe to Shoot: The (Auto)Deconstructive Design of the Nerf Elite 2.0 and the Politics of Toy Weapons</i>
12:15 – 13:30	<i>Lunch at the Institute's Cafeteria</i>
13:30 – 14:30	Session 3 Elsbeth Van Veeren, <i>Secrecy and the Politics of the New Authoritarians</i> Eva Johais (& Mareike Meis), <i>Memetic Politics: Mobilising Narrative, Aesthetics, and Affect in the Digital Age</i>
14:30 – 14:45	<i>Break</i>
14:45 – 15:45	Session 4 Dan Öberg, <i>Creative War at Play</i> Chika Watanabe, <i>Play to Survive: Prefigurative Design in Anticipation of Disasters</i>
15:45 – 16:00	<i>Break</i>
16:00 – 17:00	Session 5 Miguel Sicart, <i>Epistemic Capture: Play as a Method for Engaging with Generative AI Risks</i> Anna Leander, <i>Playing Politics: Creativity in the Making of the Continuity of Humanitarian Care</i>
17:00 – 17:30	Sum-up // Conclusion remarks
19:30	Dinner at Medusa Restaurant (Rue de Montbrillant 87, 1202 Genève)

Each session will have 2 presentations (15-20 minutes each), followed by a group discussion (20-30 minutes).

List of Participants

(by alphabetical order)

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