



## **Practitioner report: Play between worlds: *Inchcolm Project***

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PRACTITIONER REPORT:

## **Play between worlds: Inchcolm Project**

MONA BOZDOG & DAYNA GALLOWAY

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*Inchcolm Project was a proof of concept that aimed to make apparent the connections between video games and performance, and to blur the lines between physical and virtual worlds and bodies. In designing the two-hour experience on Inchcolm Island in the Firth of Forth we drew on both theatre and game design methods and brought the world of a video game, Dear Esther (The Chinese Room, 2012), to life on Inchcolm. What resulted was an interplay between two islands, one real and one virtual, and three experiential worlds, the world of the performance (Dear Rachel), the world of the game (Dear Esther) and Inchcolm Island, as a world in and of itself, its physical presence in constant tension with the visiting worlds.*

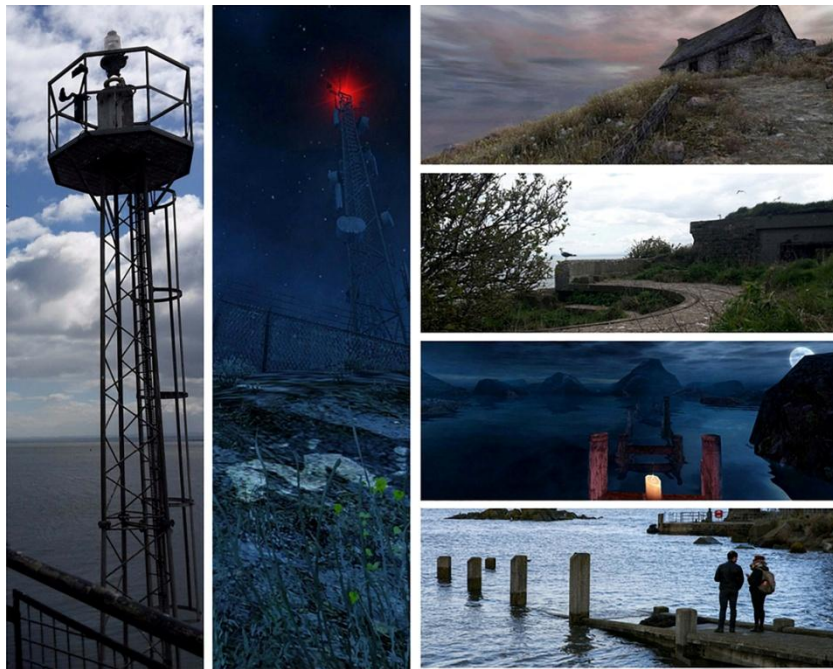
*Keywords: islands, video games, walking simulators, promenade performance, site-responsive design, game-responsive design, video game adaptations.*

Games are growing, breaching into other spaces to define their own territory. Theatre is doing the same, snatching at its neighbours, testing its barriers. They make spaces of their own but the overlap is quietly growing. Standing in a room, whether in a game or a performance, you still search for story. You have the same desire to explore (McMullan, 2014).

*Inchcolm Project* was the first stage of an applied collaborative research project and was showcased as work in progress on 16 October 2016 on Inchcolm Island, in the Firth of Forth, for an invited audience of 50 guests (two consecutive runs), from both performing arts and game design backgrounds. The team consisted of Mona Bozdog (PhD researcher, writer, director), Kevin Murray (sound design), Ana Inés Jabares-Pita (set and costume design), Andrew Dyce and Craig Fairweather (We Throw Switches) who curated the gameplay installation, and Luci Holland, David Jamieson and Mantra Collective who arranged and performed live Jessica Curry's soundtrack for *Dear Esther*. They were supported by Abby MacMillan and Adam Thayers on stage, production and technical management alongside a team of seven set and stage design assistants.

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The live performance, *Dear Rachel*, was a direct response to the game, to the site and to island spaces: physical, symbolic and virtual, thus engaging with the three dimensions of site-specific work: 'site-as-symbol, site-as-story-teller, site-as-structure' (Wilkie, 2004, p. 69).



Dear Esther (copyright The Chinese Room, 2012) and Dear Rachel.  
Photos by Erika Stevenson.

The Forth Belle lands on Inchcolm on a drizzly Sunday afternoon releasing 50 participants, ears muffled by headphones, maps in hand, Sonic Maps digital application running on their phones.



Participants arrive on Inchcolm.  
Photo by Erika Stevenson.

The boat slowly casts off. For the next two hours, the participants are stranded on the island. As they take their first steps on the island, steady but unknown ground under their feet, the twelfth-century abbey filling their view, they trigger the first audio file. The voice of a man (the narrator is voiced by Sandy Welch) starts confessing in their ears, nestling itself comfortably in between the rustling of the wind and the lapping of the waves.



*First encounter with the island, the performance and technology.  
Photo by Erika Stevenson.*

*Dear Rachel,*

*We have all found refuge on this island: kings and hermits,  
shepherds and soldiers, sinners and holy men.*

*We are all equally real and equally imagined.*

*This island, the abbey, those blocks up on the hill, they pose  
no threat to our imagination. They just put it on and wear it  
like a life-jacket.*

*Humans, gulls and ghosts have lived and died on this island.*

*We are the last in a long line of refugees: the walkers,  
stepping on the consecrated ground that burns our feet.*

*We have shunned the world and in so doing the world has  
shunned us back.*

*We walk the shores, the caves and the hills, broken like the  
waves that hold us.*

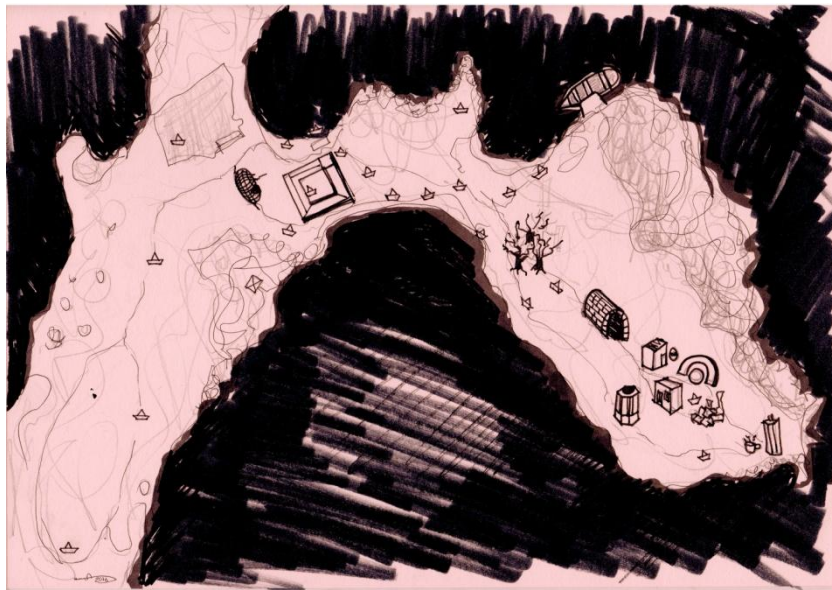
*There is no salvation here.*

*Only walls.*

Mona Bozdog. *Dear Rachel*. 2016

This is their first contact with the worlds of the performance  
and Inchcolm.

From here onwards they are free to explore the island with  
the help of the abstracted topography depicted on their  
maps, and the application running on their phones. The  
Sonic Maps application tracks the participants' location and  
reveals the audio hotspots that are in their proximity as they  
approach them. It does not, however, offer a complete view  
of the island; thus, facilitating a non-linear experience  
through exploration, and a gradual sense of discovery.



Inchcolm Project map. The paper boats mark the audio files.  
Art by Ana Inés Jabares-Pita.

These simple design constraints support the participants in choosing their own paths, leading to the unearthing of some of the 10 installations and 22 audio logs. The time for exploration is limited to an hour and they can play as they choose. They can rush to get all the audio files or they can stand still, listen and observe. The limited abilities of the software brought along this unexpected constraint. The audio would only play in the tagged area, moving out of the small circular area stopped the playing of the audio file. Nature added additional stakes: the tide and wind shifted and covered some of the audio files, the thickness of the abbey and tunnel walls destabilised the GPS, forcing the audience / players to stretch, reach out, hold onto, climb, crouch and wait. The environment was piercing through, forcing them to explore the boundaries of their physical prowess to discover and engage with the narrative. In return, the changing light, the clouds, the shadows, the rain, the wind, the sea were constant variables, which meant that the environment was constantly dynamic. The sound, atmosphere, lighting, mood and vistas were, at least partly, randomly generated.



*Emerging lighting on Inchcolm.  
Photos by Erika Stevenson.*

Patterns emerged from the combination of the designed, the natural, and the human elements. The players / audience were constantly on the move, scattered around the island, standing still on edges and shores, looking out at sea, ghostly and silent, creating tableaux of unexpected encounters and emergent landscapes. They were an active part of the landscape, contributing to each other's narratives. This echoes Jenkins' call for game design as narrative architecture through forms of environmental storytelling that engage with the full array of the space's abilities: evocative power, storytelling abilities, and potential for emerging narratives (2004, pp.118–130).

The audio was designed by Kevin Murray, as a layering of site-recorded sound, studio recorded voice-overs, and music from Jessica Curry's award-winning soundtrack. Musicians from Mantra Collective were performing instrumental solos, on a loop, in set key locations around the island. The instrumental solos were isolated from the tracks *Always* and *Ascension*, which were later performed in their entirety by

the ensemble as the final part of the performance. The text takes its epistolary and fragmented form from *Dear Esther*, which makes similar use of location-triggered audio to stimulate exploration, and an intentionally lacunary narrative to sustain player engagement. *Dear Esther* marked the beginning of a new video game genre, the walking simulator. Walking simulators are first person exploration games, which place players in believable, often beautiful environments that require minimal levels of gaming expertise to experience and uncover the secrets of the rich narratives embedded in their objects, spaces and landscapes. The explorable, atmospheric spaces of walking simulators are varied in their visual aesthetics, though it is common for them to feature specifically composed music for establishing and supporting an intended narrative and mood. When compared to other games they have limited gameplay opportunities in terms of actions afforded to the player, as well as duration and dimension of the world. This arguably contributes to a more immersive narrative experience, as they can be played in one sitting and do not require navigation of menus or complicated control schemes, combinations of buttons, restarts or frequent interruptions from loading screens. They reward exploration by either an advancement in the narrative, new sensory pleasures (vistas, soundscapes), discovery and surprises (hidden areas, hints) or a sense of completion or closure. As with site-specific promenade performance, the experience of the player / audience is designed through an orchestration of the environment and its affordances. The motivation resides in the desire to explore the physical, sensory and narrative potential of the designed space. Dan Pinchbeck, the designer behind *Dear Esther*, has defined these as 'experience vacuums', by which he means replacing in-game stimulation with different types of experiences, experiences that require interpretative and emotional effort (2012). Vacuum space is not filled with boredom but with head space, Pinchbeck argues, and as such this space and time for thought, emotion and imagination needs to be designed into games. This is echoed

in Upton's call for anticipatory play: 'Instead of defining a play experience entirely by what the player is allowed to do, anticipatory play allows us to focus instead on what opportunities any play experience provides for elaborated analysis, contemplation, and reflection' (Upton, 2015, p.76). Due to their dependency on environmental storytelling, walking simulators can offer valuable design lessons in guiding navigation seamlessly, stimulating the desire for exploration, building tension and anticipation, and engaging with the narrative potential of an environment in multiple and various ways. In designing *Dear Rachel*, we engaged with some of these game design heuristics directly.

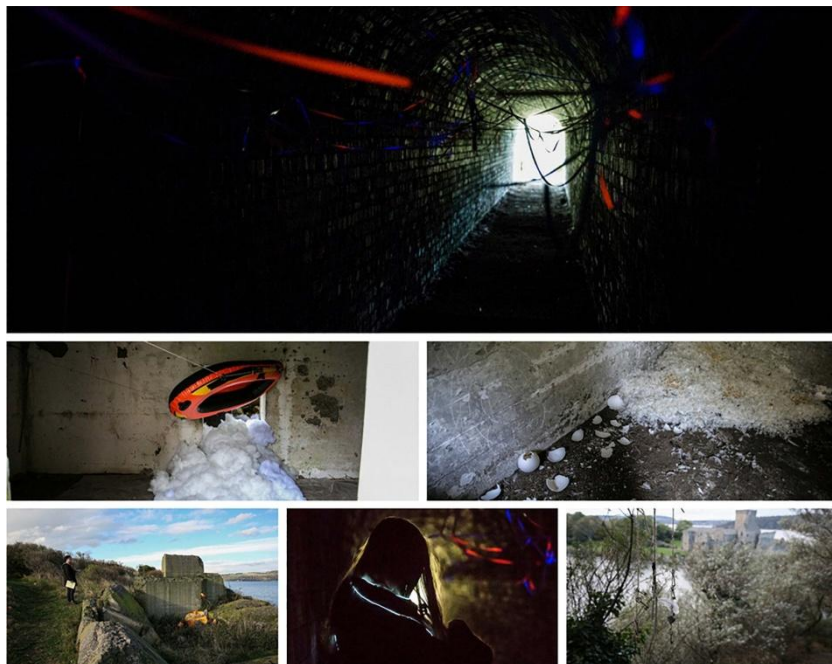
The story of *Dear Rachel* responds to the game's themes: dealing with guilt and loss, forgiveness and redemption, while simultaneously engaging with the wider ongoing debates surrounding refuge, safety and humanity. The man in *Dear Esther* is coping with the loss of his wife, Esther, to a tragic accident for which he feels responsible. The man in *Dear Rachel* is tormented by the images of a capsized boat, a mother and her infant child sinking under the weight of their fake life jackets.

The traumatic event is projected onto the environment, a violent disruption of the natural landscape. This event is visually represented through recurring colours, displaced and misplaced objects, unnatural assemblages of natural and man-made materials. In *Dear Esther*, the island is gradually coated in fluorescent green writing, paint, car parts, emergency-room paraphernalia, chemical symbols and ultrasounds alongside bird nests, broken eggs, feathers and bird bones.



*Environmental storytelling in Dear Esther (The Chinese Room, 2012).*

In *Dear Rachel*, Inchcolm is overgrown with parasitical fluorescent orange rubber and tape, dinghies, buoyancy aids, barbed wire, metallic wind chimes, fishing nets, life jackets, wire birds alongside bark, feathers, egg shells, twigs, shells and sea weed.



*Installation spaces on Inchcolm.*

*Design by Ana Inés Jabares-Pita, photos by Erika Stevenson.*

Pearson discusses McLucas's distinction between host and ghost, the 'co-existence and overlay' of the found, existent architecture of the site, and the temporary, purposely designed one brought to the site by the artists (2010, p.35). 'The site itself became an active component in the creation of performative meaning, rather than a neutral space of exposition' (Pearson, 2010, p.36). The relationship between them, be it of harmony or tension or both, was our playground. The site's physical presence was a constant resource of creative constraints. The design concept had to be flexible enough to adapt to the constantly changing environment. Upton defines play as: 'free movement within a system of constraints' (2015, p.15) so perhaps a play-full design is a more accurate description. The numerous site visits allowed us to observe the spaces at different times of day, in different weather and light conditions and in different temperatures and levels of humidity. Some areas would flood after a wet spell, which meant that we had to be prepared to bring wood pallets to allow traversal. The walls of the tunnel would only hold the fluorescent tape if they were not moist, which meant that we had to know every nook and cranny of the walls so that we would be prepared to set up anchors. We had alternative locations for the musicians in case of rain to protect the performers, costumes and instruments. We needed to know our temperamental host in order to design the ghost.

We were limited by the three-hour window for set-up, and by the heritage status of the island. Access to the island is only possible by private tour operators, which is a costly endeavour for a large team. All the props, tools and costumes could only be brought on the day before the performance. All of these constraints shaped the design which increasingly became a direct response to the site and its physicality.

In terms of physical presences, the island in *Dear Esther* is also haunted. Elusive silhouettes can be seen in the distance, always out of reach. In designing the performance, I wanted to use the ghosts as an additional connector to the world of the game. Inchcolm, throughout its troubled history, has been inhabited by holy men, prisoners, soldiers, the unwanted, the sick and the dying. Its abbey was a pilgrimage destination and its consecrated soil a coveted burial ground. In response to the site's history, the ghosts look for absolution, redemption and forgiveness. This is achieved through the performed and repetitive act of walking as penitence. It is the main mechanic of both the game and the performance, and, in addition to its purely functional purpose of progressing the narrative, it is also tied into the fiction. The ghosts on Inchcolm are the walkers, people who need to journey through their pasts to understand and forgive, and by making peace to find freedom from the island. The walkers are the audience / players, the two narrators, one performer and the five musicians. The musicians were performing instrumental solos from the video game's soundtrack, composed by Jessica Curry and arranged by Luci Holland and David Jamieson. Anna Fraser (violin) was stationed at the battlement, Luci Holland (vocals) and Luisa Brown (violin) were stationed in the tunnel, Michael Ready (flute) was stationed in the Hermit's cell, Atzi Muramatsu and Gracie Brill (cello) were stationed in the Abbot's house and Douglas Kemp (accordion) was stationed near the Cloister. Using live music was another design choice. The game has non-diegetic, location-triggered music but diegetic sound. We opted for diegetic sound throughout. The environmental sound and music originated in the physical world and would constantly pierce through the non-diegetic, mediated, voiceover narration. The live music was also used as an additional buoy for guiding navigation, and the musicians could be heard before they could be seen. The musical puzzle was completed when they performed the tracks as an ensemble.

John Bruin was a silent performer as the distance and the sound of the waves would have drowned any musical instrument. He was stationed on a cliff edge, a tea party for one, only visible from the top of the staircase. The eeriness of the tableau was reinforced by the distance. He is out of reach, and in return he does not reach, see, or acknowledge others' presence.



*The ghosts on Inchcolm.  
Photos by Erika Stevenson.*

*Dear Rachel,*

*I see them sometimes.*

*Shallow tormented eyes flickering in the immense solitude.*

*Their footsteps louder than thunder in the depths of stillness.*

*They begin their ascent here.*

*Looking for redemption in the heights.*

*The waves don't offer them any solace.*

*And so, they climb.*

*Like moths drawn to the light.*

*They stand on the edge and look out over the sea.*

*Over the shore.*

*Over the borders.*

*And forests.*

*And fields.*

*They look out to unseen places.*

*They look back to long-gone times.*

*They look forward for homes left behind.*

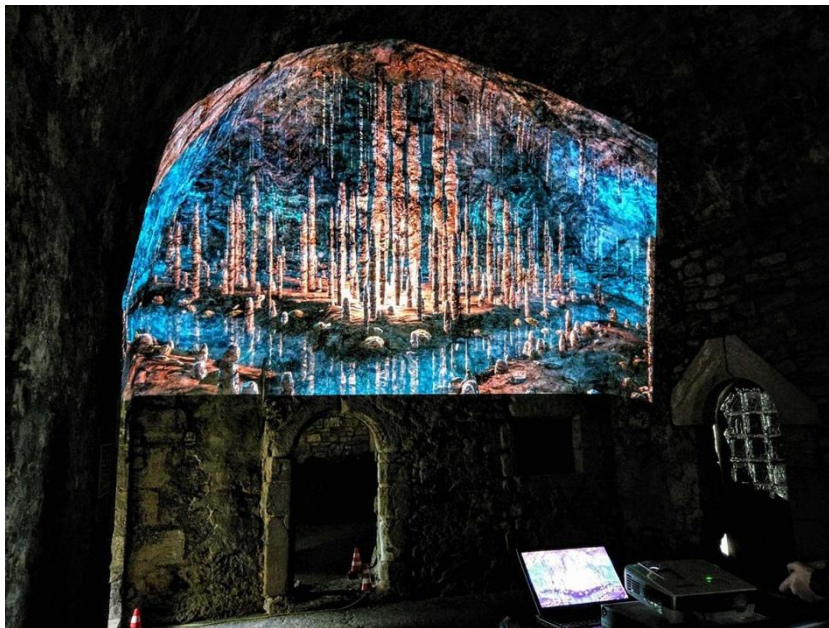
*And then they scream.*

...

*There's nothing here but salt and sadness.*

Mona Bozdog, *Dear Rachel*, 2016

After the performance, the audience gathered at the abbey. They were then guided to the Refectory where a projection of the game was set up.



*Dear Esther playthrough projected in Inchcolm Abbey.  
Photo by Craig Fairweather.*

The Refectory is a space for communion, for coming together and for sharing meals, stories and knowledge. It was an ideal space for gathering after the solitary experiences on the island.

*The horn cries*

*And an invisible hand pulls us to the abbey.*

*High and higher, up the steps,*

*To the refectory.*

*Our cursed steps echoing in the walls.*

*And there we wait.*

*In the refectory, the holy men would share their bread.*

*We share their silence.*

*We share our guilt.*

*In this place of communion, we make our atonement.*

Mona Bozdog, *Dear Rachel*, 2016

The arched wall created a three-dimensional illusion and the fissures and dents in the wall were distorting the graphics while at the same time adding texture to the projected image. We decided that we were not going to use a screen as we were more interested in the potential of this coming together of image and textures, and of what the site-specificity brought to the gameplay, than we were in preserving the graphic quality. We embraced the overlay of 'ghost' and 'host' (Pearson, 2010, p.35).

The game was played live by Craig Fairweather of We Throw Switches. Because of the limited time on the island, the playthrough was only of the two final chapters of the game. As the character climbs the aerial, jumps and takes flight

from the island, Luci Holland starts singing the last part of *Ascension* in unison with the game, and leads the participants to the Cloister where the orchestra are assembled.

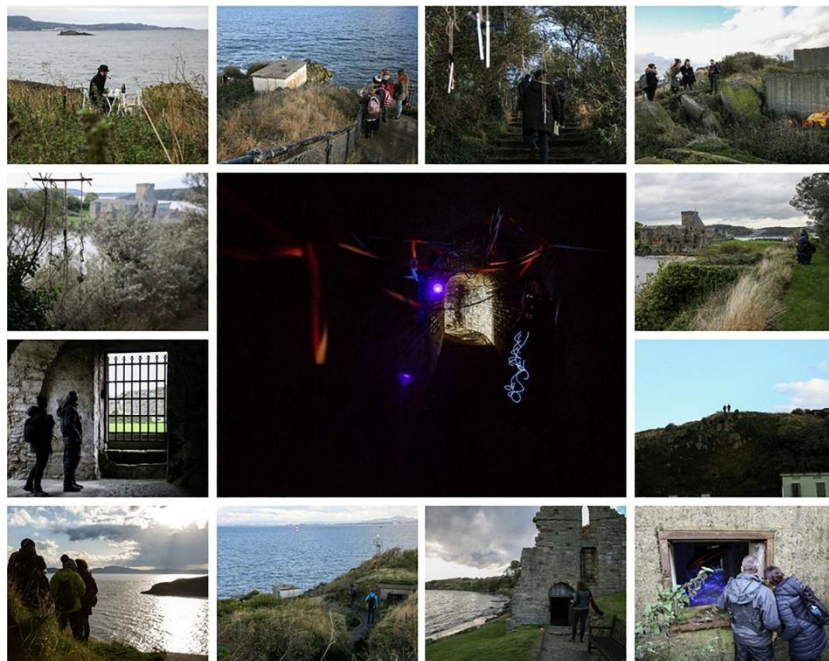


*Mantra Collective in Inchcolm Abbey, Michael Ready – Flute, Luisa Brown – Violin 1, Anna Fraser – Violin 2, Atzi Muramatsu – Cello 1, Lewis Shaw – Double Bass, David Jamieson – Keyboard, Doug Kemp – Accordion, Luci Holland – Vocals, Gracie Brill – Cello 2.*  
Photo by Erika Stevenson.

They perform *Always* and *Ascension* from the game's soundtrack, composed by Jessica Curry and arranged by Luci Holland and David Jamieson. The paper boats are there for the taking, for writing a guilty memory or heavy thought, and the participants are encouraged to release them into the sea. This is a direct reference to the game, where the letters to Esther were folded into paper boats and launched at sea which frees the character from the weight of the past and allows him to begin his final ascent and leave the island. The participants return in silence, the audio remains, like a mist that lingers on their foot-prints, on the grass and rocks, haunting the island, awaiting new walkers.

The game and the promenade performance share the same fictional island, and the two stories were perceived by most

of the participants as a continuation of one another. The two islands and three worlds coexist, overlap and tease each other, taking turns at being centre stage. In designing the journeys, installations and sounds, we played in between the worlds, the natural and the made, the fictional and the real, the physical and the virtual, elements constantly transgressing and trespassing. We played with perspectives, vistas and details, shadow and light, proximity and distance revealing natural materials bended into unnatural shapes, virtual objects materialising on the island, invisible traces made visible. Some environments were responding to audience movement, some to stillness, some were designed to be played with, some were designed to be observed, micro and macro playgrounds. We celebrated the contrasts, juxtapositions and layerings of environments and meaning, the bleedings, the piercings and the slippages. We blended design methods from both video games and site-specific promenade performance to create potential for journeys, discovery and encounters.



Inchcolm Project, 2016.  
Photos by Erika Stevenson.

The project was a work in progress and a proof of concept, aiming to tease out the possibilities of applied interdisciplinary study in the fields of performance and game design. The recorded post-show feedback offers a promising starting point for progressing the research towards the second stage of development: designing a video game and a performance that are developed as a holistic experience, which perfectly complement each other, are part of the same storyworld, have narratives that unfold across both environments (physical and virtual) and capitalise on the unique abilities of both virtual and physical bodies.

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## About the authors

MONA BOZDOG is a theatre maker currently undertaking an applied PhD that focuses on the interdisciplinary study of video games and performance. The research draws on both fields to develop hybrid forms of storytelling that engage with the unique abilities of virtual and physical environments, bodies, and experiences.

DR DAYNA GALLOWAY is Head of Division of Games and Arts within the School of Arts, Media and Computer Games at Abertay University. Dayna's research focuses on the structures, dynamics and aesthetics of video games, and in particular the emergence of new interactive forms and experimental game design practices.