

Playing in the Past and Future: A Divination Game

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Keywords

Board games, Videogames, Divination, QR Codes, Future Forecasting, AI

Format of work

Game-based interactive installation

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

This interactive game installation and mobile website connect the histories of computers, games, and divination to reimagine possible futures. It invites participants to play an active role in future forecasting. Beyond offering a curious and playful interface, the aim is to provoke participants to think about how futures are predicted, monetised, and realised, and to consider the role of games in these processes.

The installation juxtaposes a replica of a 1978 Apple 1 computer with a wooden *Weiqi* game board. These objects mirror each other in size, shape, and materiality. The electronic screen of the Apple computer displays a scannable QR code, while the playing stones arranged on the *Weiqi* board also present a scannable QR code. Scanning the codes directs users to a website where they are given a divinatory fortune and an explanation of the artwork, revealing the histories of computation and divination on which the work is based. After reading the randomly assigned futures, participants are invited to contribute their own future scenarios to the mobile website.



Figure 1: The work consists of four visually and conceptually connected components: a traditional wooden Go board (right), a replica of an Apple 1 computer (left), a hybrid abacus/digital calculator (top center), and a Mancala game board (bottom center).

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Games have long served as central technologies for future prediction. From the ancient to the present, games spanning *Tarot* to the *I-Ching*, *Kriegsspiel* to the *Weiqi* board are used to calculate and evoke unknowable futures (Finkel 1995, Binsbergen 1997, Shotwell 2007, Selbitschka 2016, Bréard 2017). Visually and conceptually, this media archaeological work invites thinking about the overlapping genealogies of computation, divination, and play. The work is part of an ongoing series of objects concerned with ‘*ludomancy*’ – a denoting games as methods of divination (Davies 2022). Today, ludomantic tendencies are found in predictions both about and by AI. Games and simulations are deployed to predict stockmarkets, military strategies, and weather patterns informing real-world scenarios, decisions, and conflict outcomes. Lacking critique, these future predictions go unchallenged. As a result, divinatory games don’t just calculate futures, they become them (Davies, 2024).

Contribution to Field

This game contributes to a growing body of critical work interrogating forecasting technologies, including AI and games. In *Technologies of Speculation*, Sun-Ha Hong decries the growing emphasis on AI prediction as skeleton key to solve all problems. Hong finds AI discourse symbolic of a broader uncritical faith in techno-futurism in which digital divination opens spaces for corporations to impart their own mythologies. Those who wield divinatory technologies shape not only economic outcomes but work to determine the future in their favor by doing so.

Elsewhere, Hong and Szpunar (2019) reveal how invocations of the future through digital forecasting methods are used to justify policy and spending in US counterterrorism. Dramatically underscoring the power relations of these modes of divination, they detail how “anticipatory security practices strategically utilize the future to circulate the kinds of truths, beliefs, claims, that might otherwise be difficult to legitimize” (2019, 314). For Hong and Szpunar, the types of futures conjured constitute “not a temporal zone of events to come, nor a horizon of concrete visions for tomorrow, but an indefinite source of contingency and speculation” (2019, 310). They show how these speculative futures avoid any critical appraisal, yet are traded, militarized, and monetized thus ensuring the powers that be will remain so.

Amidst discourses framing AI as inevitable, how can those outside power structures challenge its dominance? Following Bratton, Greenspan, and Konior (2024), this work resists the finality of machine decision-making by employing playful, participatory methods to critique it. Inspired by Joshua Ramey’s call for “counter-actualization” (2016, 147), the game advocates for the “decolonization of divination” through a return to social and historical divinatory traditions and playful practices such as *Weiqi*, *Mancala*, *Tarot*, *Omikuji*, and *I Ching*.

Significance

This work is the second installment in a trilogy of game works exploring divination games and inviting audiences to engage with future thinking, rather than leaving such processes in the hands of the digital and the powerful. The first game *Omikuji*, was displayed at Tokyo Art and Space (TOKAS) in Japan (2017), and at the Centre for Heritage, Arts, and Textiles (CHAT) in Hong Kong (2021-22). The work proposed here was previously presented at the International Symposium of Electronic Art (ISEA) in Brisbane, Australia (2024).

A central element of the installation is the *Weiqi* board which – in different historical eras – has operated as an abacus, a divinatory device, a game, a computer, and the inspiration for the QR code. By illustrating the evolution from the *Weiqi* board to the abacus to the computer, the installation underscores the shared cultural heritage of games as tools for imagining and calculating futures (Davies, 2019a).

This artwork and accompanying paper provide a timely critique of AI-based divination and its presentation as a foregone conclusion. Together, they connect ancient games to contemporary forecasting, urging participants to explore alternative methods of envisioning personal and collective futures beyond prescribed digital frameworks (Davies, 2019b; Hao, 2021).

EXHIBITION

The figures below describe how the work would be interacted with at the conference detailing display requirements.

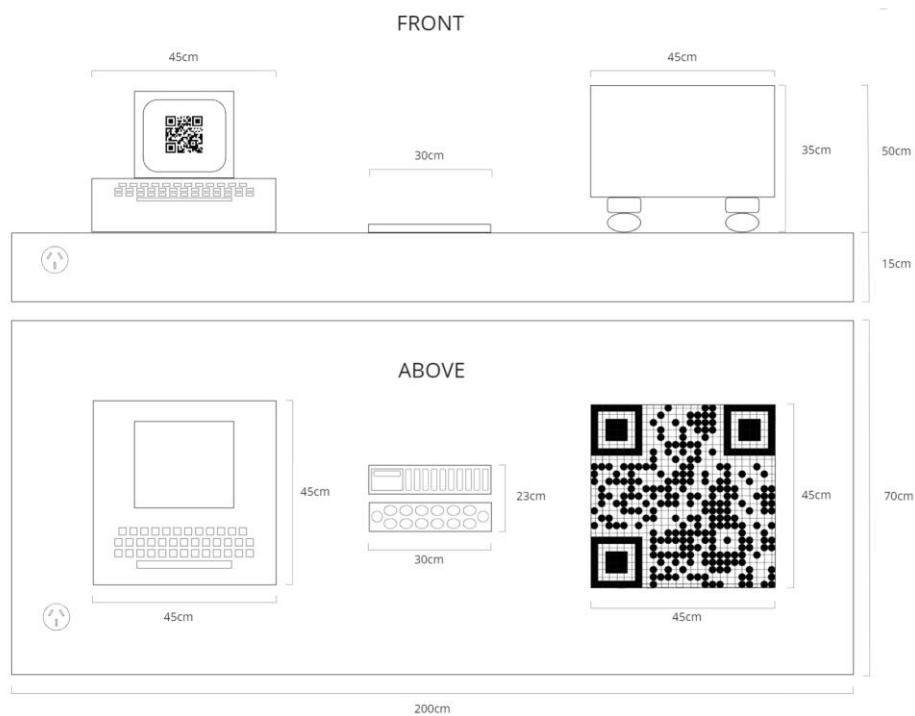
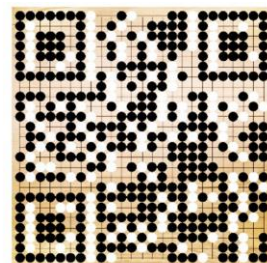


Figure 2. (Above) Dimensions of installation.



QR Code on screen



QR Code on Go Board

Figure 3: Scanning the QR codes (see above) leads to texts and images discussing the deep connections between computation, divination, and games. Individual and collective fortunes are offered, and participants are invited to contribute their own future scenarios.



Figure 4. Detail of installation components Abacus/calculator and mancala board detail.

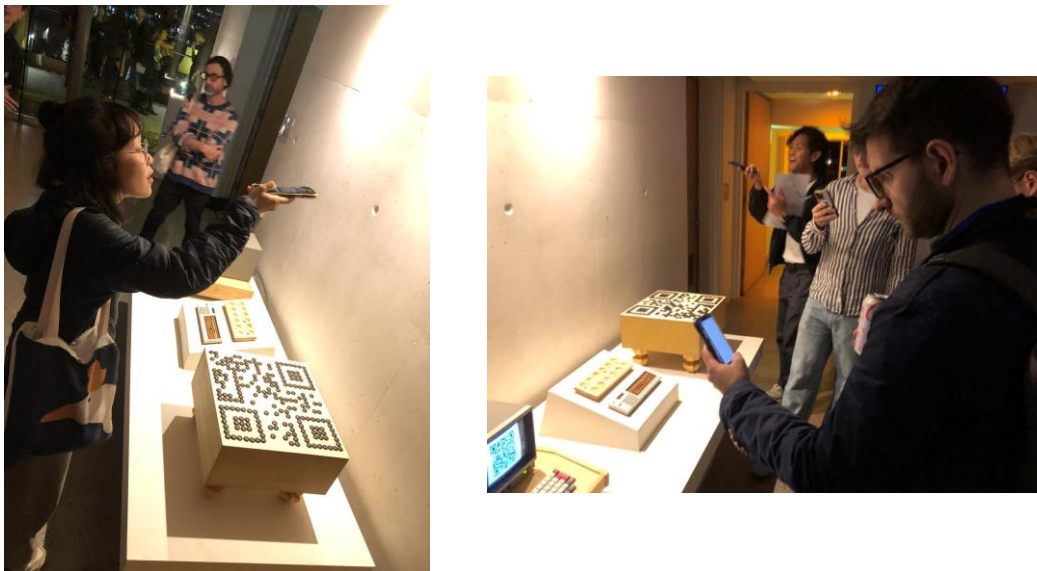


Figure 5. Participants engaging with the work at ISEA 2024, Brisbane.

BIO

Hugh Davies is an artist, curator and researcher from Australia. Davies has exhibited and curated games in Tokyo Art and Space (2017), Tank Space Shanghai (2019), and at the M+ Museum of Visual Culture, and the Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textiles, both in Hong Kong (2021 - 2022). With a PhD in transmedia gaming, Davies has co-authored two books on games. He is president of the Chinese Digital Games Research Association (CDiGRA).

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