

Mini Melbourne: Participatory Game Making at the Immigration Museum

Dr. Hsiao Wei Chen

RMIT University
michelle.chen@rmit.edu.au

Keywords

museum, participatory art, games for change

Format of work

A browser-based game prototype

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

Mini Melbourne is a video game that had been created as part of Museum Victoria's Culture Makers program sponsored by the Scanlon Foundation. As part of the program, I facilitated a series of workshops over two days at the Immigration Museum and invited participants to contribute characters to the game, from designing how their character looks like to sharing their stories and experiences living in Melbourne. The key mechanics of the game involve an exchange of stories and finding commonalities with people from diverse backgrounds, which shapes multicultural Melbourne. Unlike a multiplayer game, the characters that the players created lives on to populate Mini Melbourne. The game was developed using Unity game engine, and it is available as browser-based video game.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmjnQmu6wbE>

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Museum Victoria's Culture encourages artists from diverse cultural backgrounds to propose projects for any of their museums. As a game developer, growing up as a third culture kid and coming to Australia as an international student, I wanted to explore the concepts of migration and the experiences of moving to and living in Melbourne with the Immigration Museum. I developed a game called Mini Melbourne, and facilitated a series of workshops over two days at the museum. In the workshops, we invited museum visitors and workshop participants to create characters and contribute their stories and experiences living in Melbourne to the game.

The game starts with character creation, where players can customise their character's hair style, hair color, eye color and skin color (see Figure 1). The characters are wearing overalls that the players can customise by drawing on it using different colors of "spray paint". After creating their characters, players can explore Mini Melbourne.

Mini Melbourne represents Melbourne in a cartoon aesthetic, as a player, you can walk along Flinders street, passing by Sealife, Immigration Museum, Flinders Street

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Station, Federation Square and ACMI. Mini Melbourne is populated with non player characters (NPC) created by the players.

Players can talk to NPCs and select what questions to ask them. The questions vary from light hearted, such as “if you had a superpower, what would it be” to more serious topics, such as “what are the challenges you faced living in Melbourne.” The NPC will answer the question, then will prompt the player to respond to the same question. The players answers are recorded in the database. The players answers are moderated to ensure they did not use any offensive words, but their spelling and grammar were not corrected. When the players’ character become an NPC for other players, their answers are fed back.

This project experiments with participatory game making as informed by Miller-Rushing’s (2012) contributory level of participation, where the workshop participants contributed to the characters in the game (Miller-Rushing et al., 2012). It also draws upon my own PhD research, where I facilitated game jam workshops to co-create video games with participants about their lived experiences of depression and anxiety (Chen, 2024). The participatory aspect of Mini Melbourne is the main component of the game, all of the storytelling in the game comes from the players. As the workshops were conducted at Immigration Museum, the participants ranged from 6 year olds to grandparents. There were also school groups, university students, parents, and tourists visiting Melbourne for the first time. The diverse range of participants also contributed to the unique set of characters that populate the game. Participatory game making allows game developers to work with different people, who may not necessarily be a gamers or game developers, on different aspects of the game. This can result in more authentic and diverse representations in video games.

EXHIBITION

I would like to have the game displayed at the conference on a long table using two or more laptops, so that the conference participants can play the game and contribute their characters and stories to Mini Melbourne. It is a browser-based game, so it will require wifi.

BIO

Dr. Hsiao-Wei Chen is a creative practice-based PhD graduate from RMIT, where she cocreated video games with people about their lived experiences of depression and anxiety. She is a game developer with more than 10 years of experience in programming, design and production, and was named as GameIndustry.biz 100 Future Talent, IGDA Next gen Leader and Scholar and Museums Victoria Culture Maker.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Musuems Victoria and Scanlon Foundation for the Culture Makers program, which gave me the opportunity to work with Immigration Museum to put together Mini Melbourne.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chen, H-W. (2024). *Mental Jam Co-Creating Video Games about the Lived Experiences of Depression and Anxiety as a Form of Creative Self-Expression*. [Published doctoral dissertation, RMIT University].

Miller-Rushing, A., Primack, R., & Bonney, R. (2012). The history of public participation in ecological research. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 10(6), 285-290.