

Press Release

HKU and Wageningen UR develop 'Pig Chase', a game for pigs and people

Over the past years, designers and researchers at the Utrecht School of the Arts (HKU) and Wageningen UR have been working on a computer game in which pigs and people can play together. The initial design is now being presented: 'Pig Chase'. A screen with light effects enables pigs to interact with a human player via an iPad.

Not just people but also pigs like to play. It was already known that pigs are capable of mastering a simple computer game, for example. The innovative aspect of this research is the idea of getting people and pigs gaming together. Thereby they might offer each other an exciting challenge.

Since 2001, European legislation has made it compulsory for pig farmers to provide entertainment in the pens to combat boredom, aggression and tail biting amongst pigs, which will hopefully eliminate the need for routine tail-docking. Farmers have been experimenting with all kinds of materials and games, but in practice it proves difficult to provide the animals with an adequate challenge.

Over the past year, designers Kars Alfrink, Irene van Peer and Hein Lagerweij - who are affiliated with the HKU research group Creative Design for Playful Impact -, the philosopher Clemens Driessen from Wageningen University and animal welfare specialist Marc Bracke from Wageningen UR Livestock Research have been working on a computer game for pigs. Their aim is to fulfil the pigs' need to play, and find out whether a different relationship can be founded with humans.

Pig farmers and their pigs have also been closely involved in the design process. This means they have been helping to create the game by reacting more or less enthusiastically to gaming elements in the test phase. The farmers were charmed by the video images to be projected on the wall. The designers then found out that the pigs were also interested in light effects and followed them with their snout. On this basis, they made a video sketch presenting the set-up of the game. The game is called 'Pig Chase'. The human players in the game can steer a light effect on the wall of the pen. The idea is to capture the curious pigs' attention and move the light towards targets.

The current game, Pig Chase, is primarily intended as a concept to be elaborated upon to produce various versions. The value of the game as entertainment for pigs is unclear as yet.

Clemens Driessen's research, which is part of the NWO programme 'Ethics, Research and Management', focuses on ways in which the development of new technology can be used to increase the depth of societal debates on animal farming issues. Moral views on animal welfare, for example, can change over the course of time, partly under the influence of new technology. A computer game provides a playful way of finding out what is interesting entertainment for pigs and the role people can play in that respect. Could this be a way of improving pig welfare?

The field of human and animal interaction by means of information technology is in its early stages worldwide, but it provides opportunities for forging relationships with animals in new ways, while learning new things about the cognitive capacities of both animals and people.

You can watch the video sketch at www.playingwithpigs.nl

Some background on the Utrecht School of the Arts

In addition to visual arts, design, music and theatre, the Utrecht School of the Arts (HKU) specialises in education and research in the field of games and interactive design. The Creative Design for Playful Impact research group focuses on innovative applications for games and play.

Some background on Wageningen University, Applied Philosophy

Wageningen University is the most important European university in the field of Life Sciences. Courses and research deal with nutrition, human and animal health, nature, climate and living environment. Wageningen University's Applied Philosophy chair group focuses on scientific philosophical and ethical issues in the field of life sciences.

Some background on Wageningen UR Livestock Research

Wageningen UR Livestock Research conducts fundamental, innovative research and seeks practical solutions for durable, profitable livestock breeding.

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