

# Creating an Escape Room for Cultural Mediation: Insights from "The Archivist's Dream"

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**Abstract:** The Archivist's Dream („Der Traum der Archivarin“) is a Live Escape Room Game that has been developed by the University of Krems' Center for Applied Game Studies on behalf of the Archives of Contemporary Arts in Krems, Austria, which are dedicated to collecting pre-mortem bequests and post-mortem estates of outstanding artists. Located in the underground facilities of the archive, the Escape Room interweaves selected archival materials, historic media devices and archivist approaches to form an interactive puzzle experience. However, it is not an interactive exhibition showcasing the archives' contents; and while the Escape Room incorporates elements of educational game design, it is an example for a less common application of (Escape Room) Games: the use of game design in the field of cultural mediation (*Kulturvermittlung*). Instead of following an educational goal in the narrower sense, the Escape Room is designed to turn aspects of cultural mediation and archival practice into gameplay principles, focusing on letting players explore the tenets of archival thinking rather than on "teachable" content. This is achieved by establishing different levels of (un-)reality players have to traverse within the game: players follow a fictional archivist into her dreams, which merge with the real-life archives. In order to "escape" this dream world, players combine archival practices with dream logic to solve a secret tied to actual archival materials, while at the same time dissolving the borders between real life, dream and game.

**Keywords:** cultural mediation, serious escape room, archives, game design

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## 1. Introduction

*The Archivist's Dream* has been developed by the Center for Applied Game Studies on behalf of the Archives of Contemporary Arts in Krems, Austria.

*The Archives of Contemporary Arts* are dedicated to the collection of pre-mortem bequests and literary estates from leading Austrian artists in the fields of music, literature, and architecture. In addition to the archival tasks of preserving, indexing, and displaying the collections, the activities of this institution include conceiving and carrying out research projects and academic conferences and releasing its own publications.

The *Center for Applied Game Studies* examines the complex relationships between play, games and society in theory and practice. It conducts (i) *applied research* by developing game (or game-based) projects to experimentally expand our understanding of how game design can help address today's problems; and (ii) *basic research* on the potentials, limitations and implications of game- and play-related concepts by applying them as epistemological frameworks to various fields, discourses and phenomena.

Both, the Archives of Contemporary Arts and the Center for Applied Game Studies, are part of the Department for Arts and Cultural Studies at the University for Continuing Education Krems (Danube University Krems).

In autumn of 2019, the Archives of Contemporary Arts approached the Center for Applied Game Studies with the proposal to develop an Escape Room Game based on the archive's collection. While the concept development would be part of the project, some details were established at the beginning: the game would take place in the archives' facilities, specifically in their underground visitors/exhibition area; it would accommodate groups of about 3-6 players and would last about an hour; (reproductions of) the archives' materials could (and should) be used as part of the game; a decision would have to be made *which artists* would be featured in the game, as it was assumed that not all artists represented in the archives could also be represented in the game,

at least not in equal parts (it was later decided that the works of composer Friedrich Cerha and writers Julian Schutting and Peter Turrini would feature in the game).

Most importantly, the game's principle aim was defined: as part of the Archive's purpose as an institution for cultural mediation (*Kulturvermittlung*)<sup>1</sup>, the Escape Room was intended to be a measure of audience development in the sense of using aesthetic means to foster a curiosity for arts & culture and, more specifically, archival work in the field of arts that might later turn into "interest, audience engagement and, ideally, lasting attachment" (Hoppe & Heinze, 2016, p. 236f., free translation).

With this aim, the Escape Room positions itself at the intersection of cultural mediation and serious games.

However, this intersection is by no means clear-cut and requires some clarification.

1. The field of cultural mediation is itself multi-faceted, and ranges from the most basic means of teaching facts about arts and culture to facilitating social discourse about arts and culture in the broadest sense. For institutions in the arts and culture sector, mediation practices can include showcasing and contextualizing specific contents and materials, fostering and contributing to public debate through events and publications and involving the public in their respective activities in engaging ways. However, the primary aim of *The Archivist's Dream* was to address new audiences by creating an engaging experience that does not require previous knowledge or even interest in archival work or the artists and materials hosted by the Archives.
2. Within the field of serious games, *The Archivist's Dream* is therefore not an educational game in the stricter sense, because its main purpose is not to teach specific knowledge or skills that players gain by playing the game.

Instead, it aims to translate a theme that might not seem relevant to an audience at first into a relatable experience which, in consequence, can lead to authentic interest for the theme. Hence, it might actually be categorized as an "advergame", which might seem counter-intuitive due to the commercial connotations of the term, but when Sawyer & Smith list advergames as a category in their Serious Games Taxonomy (2008), they apply the term to such diverse fields as military recruitment, health awareness or political games, and while they do not explicitly mention the arts & culture sector - which is introduced into the serious games discourse only later (Djaouti et al., 2011) - it is clear how the use of games to make issues appealing for audiences falls into the same basic category. However, this understanding of the term "advergame" closes the circle back to educational games in the broader sense, as this kind of raising interest can well be considered an educational purpose.

## 2. Design considerations

After a first brainstorming phase, in which a number of narrative topoi and gameplay ideas were explored and rejected for various reasons, it quickly became clear that there were three main problems that had to be avoided.

1. avoiding unclear simplification: there is always some level of simplification necessary and desired when a serious theme is transposed into a game by creating an abstracted *play-version* of the original theme. However, even though this play-version is usually more accessible, often more pleasant and in some cases even safer to engage with than the original theme, the goal is to foster player interest in (or, in some cases, knowledge of) the original theme rather than its play-version. Players must therefore be helped to distinguish which aspects of their experience relate to the original theme, and which relate to its play-version. The way this was attempted in *The Archivist's Dream* was to create several clearly distinguishable layers of immersion, with the innermost layer (the *Dream*) representing the play-version, while the original theme served as an external reference point.
2. avoiding superficiality: while discrepancies between a game's fiction and the game system (cf. Johnson, 2012) are a common problem in many games, this problem is especially profound in serious games, which are particularly dependent on the coherence of their design (Mitgutsch & Alvarado, 2012). Unluckily, Escape Rooms are not usually known to be very coherent, as most of these games rely on the same gameplay features, on which a variety of different themes is superimposed on the level of fictional

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<sup>1</sup> As Moersch and Gyger (2012) point out, there is no English term that precisely and comprehensively corresponds to the German term *Kulturvermittlung*. However, the authors have agreed on the term *cultural mediation*, because it best reflects the idea of bridging a gap between public and professional discourses rather than simply communicating or educating on ideas and concepts.

setting, some of which "fit" the logic of the theme better than others. Just like in any other game design project, it is therefore advisable to first work out the theme in detail before committing to a specific format like the Escape Room. This was not the case with *The Archivist's Dream*, which was intended as an Escape Room from the beginning. However, after a number of different conceptual approaches were explored, it soon turned out that archival work was in many aspects akin to "detective work", and that the basic archival skills of attributing, deciphering and contextualizing could easily be translated into game verbs that suited a puzzle-based Escape Room experience.

3. avoiding negativity: another basic challenge for serious escape room design is the fact that an Escape Room, per definition, suggests flight as an appropriate response to the respective theme: while it makes sense to escape the burning nuclear reactor or the totalitarian prison (both may be themes of serious as well as purely recreational Escape Rooms), it might counter the purpose of promoting art, science or literature when the game's goal is to escape from a museum, laboratory or library. While the location to be escaped is implicitly framed in a negative way, it is the *strategies* facilitating the escape that are promoted as positive. However, this should not discourage the use of evocative and immersive locations just because they represent the theme to be promoted; but it is certainly wise to find ways to counteract their deterioration into negative places. In *The Archivist's Dream*, players do not simply escape the physical archive (and, by implication, the world of arts, culture and archival work), but a *dream version* of this world; as a matter of fact, escaping the dream even gets them back to the *real* archives, which are therefore framed as a desirable place. At the same time, the (abstracted) archival skills of attribution, deciphering and contextualizing are promoted as effective (and engaging) means to fulfill this desire.

### 3. Location, location, location

The Escape Room makes use of the premises of the Archives of Contemporary Arts, which offer rare opportunities for spatial game design due to their location and architectural design. The Archives are situated in a small, modern building at the northern edge of the Campus Krems, which it shares with the Center for Applied Game Studies and other institutions belonging to the Department of Arts & Cultural Studies of the University Krems. While the Archive's offices are located on the building's third floor, the depot and visitor/exhibition space extends over the entire basement area. There are two ways to access the basement: one can enter it from inside the office building, using either the staircase or an elevator, which takes one to the northern entry to the basement, and which is the way that is usually used by the archive's staff; or one can enter the basement from outside of the building, by entering the *Kesselhaus*, a restaurant and movie theater located about 20 meters south of the office building. Inside the *Kesselhaus*'s lobby, there is a flight of stairs that leads into a locker room and from there, through a glass security door, into the basement. This underground space was an obvious location for the Escape Room Game for a number of reasons:

1. the clear separation of the basement area from its surroundings (for security reasons and due to the vulnerability of some of the stored materials, access is closely monitored, and temperature and humidity must be precisely regulated), simplifies many pragmatic issues of game design. For instance, it makes it easier to tie the entering and exiting of the space to the gameplay.
2. The layout of the visitor/exhibition area also easily accommodates the needs of (Escape Room) game design: while the depot is located on the outer edges of the basement, the visitor/exhibition area is at its center and shapes the perception of the space: in its middle, there is a cube of about 10x16 meters, encompassed by a two-meter-wide corridor. Inside the cube, there are four almost identical 'work rooms', two of which accessible from the Northern stretch of the corridor, while the other two are accessed from its south, close to the glass door through which one enters from the locker room and *Kesselhaus*. Each room can be locked separately, as can the glass door. Because of these features, the visitors/exhibition area can easily support the needs of Escape Room design: most importantly, the seclusion of the area allows for a clear distinction between inside and outside, and the separate lockable rooms enable spatial game progress. In effect, there is no need to create an Escape Room space *within* the location, as the location itself can easily be transformed into an Escape Room space.
3. the architectural concept (created by the Austrian architect Adolf Krischanitz) combines the needs of working with archive materials and the demands of semi-public spaces with contemporary interior design: the work rooms are fitted with ceiling-high wooden shelves and equipped with a long table in the middle; the rooms are identical, except that each room was furnished from a different type of wood. This design, in combination with the separation of the basement area, fosters an experience of *a world apart*, which helps to create an immersive gaming experience.



**Figure 1:** The visitor/exhibition space with the cube, and the two work rooms used for *The Archivist's Dream*

The basic transformation of the visitor/exhibition area into an Escape Room space was therefore rather straightforward: in order to create a dedicated space for the Escape Room while still allowing the archive's daily activities to proceed, the area was divided: the Northern part of the corridor, from where the depot as well as the elevator and staircase can be accessed, was excluded from the game (separated by construction tape, which, contrary to more sophisticated design barriers, signaled immediately that this area was *not part of the game* through its inconsistency with the game world), leaving the long southern stretch of the southern corridor which can be reached from the locker room glass door, and from which the two southern rooms can be entered, which were now part of the game space. Also, the greater part of the western as well as part of the eastern corridor was included in the game, to create distinct spatial areas which would later serve different game purposes. The only major change was that separate keys had to be made for the two rooms and the glass door, as these doors could previously be unlocked with the same master key.

The result was a game space which could be entered from the locker room through the glass door, and which in the game's early stages only contained a U-shaped corridor, while the two rooms adjacent to the passageway could only be unlocked progressively in the course of the game.

#### **4. Serious theme, playful engagement**

Regardless of the many discussions about the implications, validity and limitations of the *Magic Circle* concept in game studies (e.g. Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Arsenault & Perron, 2008; Juul, 2008; Consalvo, 2009; Lehdonvirta, 2010; Zimmerman, 2012), questions of entering and leaving the game world are a crucial part of any game design or play experience. However, in the case of Escape Room Games, the transition into and out of the game gains additional significance because the game does not simply *take place* within the magic circle of the game world, but the game's primary goal is one of *escaping the game world* (albeit only some layers of it); the relation between inside and outside, immersion and escape, and especially the awareness of being inside of a game (sometimes a game within a game) which has to be left in order to beat it becomes part of *playing the game* rather than just *thinking about* the game.

While most games aim to combine a captivating narrative and engaging gameplay, serious game design must also relate these dimensions to whatever serious *theme* determines the purpose of the game. A serious Escape

Room must, in addition, combine these dimensions with the idea of spatial progress. And as most Escape Rooms are not solitary activities, there is also the social dimension of forming a temporal community with others with whom the experience is shared. As all these dimensions evolve around the question how the game relates to the world outside the game, the guiding question (which informs later design, narrative, and sometimes also pragmatic spatial choices) is: how do we enter and leave the game? In other words: the design challenge becomes one of *creating a magic circle* that, once entered, combines the *narrative, gameplay, thematic, spatial, and social* dimension in a meaningful way.

In *The Archivist's Dream*, special care was taken to clearly distinguish all of these dimensions by creating different transition points, resulting in an experience of *layered immersion*. While most games (especially Live Action Games) incorporate these dimensions, they are not always separated as clearly as they are in the case of *The Archivist's Dream*, where each of these dimensions is reflected in another layer of the experience, and each layer must be entered by passing a different transition point.

The first of these transition points is the *Kesselhaus* lobby, where participants are greeted by the game host and the rules of conduct are outlined. Here, participants transition into the *event* as a whole, as it can be booked by a group of people and is marked by a specific time slot and meeting point. This entry point marks the transition between daily life and the particularity of the social gathering.

The second transition point is crossed when participants are prompted to descend the stairs to the locker room where, as they are told, they will find the *game space*. From now on, participants take the role of *players*, who can expect that - within the general rules of conduct outlined before - ordinary life will be (at least partially) suspended and substituted by the affordances of the game world. However, while players are already looking for clues to what form this substitution might take, the substitution itself does not take place before the next transition point.

The third transition point occurs when players come across a laptop (at this point the only object that allows meaningful interaction), on which a simple adventure game can be played. This game is a virtual version of the campus, and the protagonist is an unnamed archivist who is absorbed in solving a specific problem related to the Archives' materials. By playing the digital game, players enter the Escape Room's *narrative*: from now on, they will follow the archivist's story, and while the archivist is by no means the players' avatar or even the primary 'hero' of this story, she serves as a meaningful reference point for the game's narrative.

However, the virtual world of the digital game is not itself a new layer to be entered, but a transitional space to be crossed: the digital game ends when the archivist, instead of going home to rest, secretly enters the locker room (where players are currently playing the adventure game) via the *Kesselhaus* stairs to continue working, but falls asleep in front of her laptop (the same laptop players have found in the physical locker room). The implication is that at the end of the digital game, the moment the archivist falls asleep, players 'awaken' in *the archivist's dream*, which occupies the same physical space they have entered earlier, but which is at the same time a representation of the archivist's mental world.

This is the fourth transition point, at which players start acting within the physical representation of the archivist's dream, and finally start engaging in the actual *gameplay* by entering the game's final layer: the physical and symbolic realm of the Escape Room in the stricter sense.

This strict separation between the games different layers - made tangible for players by the distinct transition points - is central for *The Archivist Dream's* approach to serious game design, as it enables to address the fifth and final dimension (*theme*) in a playful and meaningful way. This *theme* - archival work in the field of arts - plays into the game in two ways: in a first version, it is present as the actual professional field of archivists, which is bound by the complexities of academically sound archival practice and its responsibilities towards the artists and their work, obligated to society and its demands, committed to state-of-the-art methods and procedures and engaged in a critical discourse on art and society. This professional academic field in all its facets is the reference point for the experience as a whole, the 'serious subject' that players can address when playing the game and that provides a meaningful framework for the event.

However, the game's purpose is not to give a detailed and precise account of the professional field in all its aspects, complexities and implications, nor is it intended to introduce players to the practice (and hardships) of

*true archival work*, but to present them with an abstracted version of archival problems that urges them to employ basic archival procedures, while still allowing them to do so in a playful manner.

Hence, a second version - a *play-version* - of the theme is created that accommodates that purpose by getting players involved with basic principles of archival work and letting them playfully explore the most engaging facets of archival thinking, while not encumbering them with the more serious implications, tedious aspects and professional responsibilities of actual archival work. In other words, this play-version of archival work embodies Gregory Bateson key element of play, namely that "[t]hese actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote." (1973, p. 185f.), allowing us to address serious issues in a less serious and therefore more accessible, safe and pleasant - i.e., *playful* - manner.

While the initial real world theme of archival work in the field of arts stays an outside reference point, this second play-version of the theme is gradually accessed by players when they (i) enter the *Kesselhaus* (leaving their daily lives behind to enter an archives-related event), (ii) descend the stairs to the locker room (entering an actual, physical archive), (iii) play the digital game (shifting from the real world implications of the *archives-theme* into a dreamlogic, in which some aspects of real archival work are preserved, while others are abstracted, distorted or omitted), and finally (iv) 'awaken' in the actual Escape Room Game, which allows them to playfully engage with the theme in a socially embedded, narratively charged physical space that can be navigated through gameplay interactions .

## 5. Puzzles with a purpose

*The Archivist's Dream* primarily follows a simple sequential structure in which puzzles have to be solved in linear order (cf. Nicholson 2015, p. 17) , because it was designed with smaller groups in mind (even allowing only one or two players to have a satisfying play experience), and because the target group had to include Escape Room novices, for whom a sequential structure is easier to handle than more complex structures, and who might find it easier to focus on the specific puzzles and the ludo-narrative experience rather than the game's structure.

The puzzle design itself was guided by three basic principles: (1) the puzzles should involve an abstracted form of archival work by requiring players to attribute, decipher and contextualize in order to find the puzzles solutions; (2) they should involve (reproductions of) the archives' materials, however, these materials were to be purposefully distorted within a dream logic, in order to detach them from their actual meaning enough to foster playful engagement with a play version of these materials, while maintaining their actual significance as an external reference point. This design strategy has the additional advantage that players who are acquainted with the materials (there may even be specialist audiences) will not have an advantage over other players, and can still enjoy playing the game); (3) the puzzles should highlight that the artists are part of a *transitional generation*: the last generation to produce art without (the availability of) digital technology, working by hand, with mechanical devices and with analogue audiovisual media. Especially since the short and playful format of the Escape Room cannot adequately represent the archives' artists individually and do justice to their work in all its facets, incorporating these generational features is also a way to acknowledge the artists *in an abstract way*, by making some of their daily working techniques part of the puzzle design. Also, by creating puzzles that involve working with such seemingly obsolete devices and media, the Escape Room can draw the attention to these disappearing cultural techniques and the archives' commitment to preserve them, while at the same time showing that working with old media and technologies is a crucial archival competence.

The puzzles include:

- - *the giant*: in the archives' corridor, players encounter a seemingly oversized wooden display of a man in old fashioned attire. (In fact, it is a true to size representation of the *Riese vom Steinfeld* – or "Giant of the Steinfeld" -, a real-life 19th century celebrity on whom composer Friedrich Cerha and writer Peter Turrini based their 2002 opera of the same name). Filtering through reproduced stage design notes, costume sketches and other materials related to the original production of the *Wiener Staatsoper*, players need to isolate specific data about the giant which must then be used to unlock the door to the first room. This involves *contextualizing*-skills, because players have to understand the significance of the information in the context of the stage production before it can meaningfully be re-contextualized as a solution in the Escape Room setting.



**Figure 2:** The wooden display of the “*Riese vom Steinfeld*” and the table with the materials from the production of the *Wiener Staatsoper*

- - *little boxes*: in the first room, players find a bunch of (reproduced) materials scattered on a table and must find out which of these materials "belong" to which artist. The intended *dream logic* in this case is one of almost nightmarish quality, as it represents the archivists fear of dissolving order and loss of structure. The materials are then to be put into little boxes (which are actually specialized archival containers used for delicate papers or photographs), which results in a code to be used to proceed in the game. While the obvious skill used here is that of *assigning*, the materials were selected so that relating them to a specific artist first required to relate *another* material to this artist first (for instance, a handwritten note by Julian Schutting contains no further clues to its author, so it can only be assigned after comparing it to the handwriting to another material, whose relation to Schutting is more obvious), so that some form of *contextualizing* was also necessary for this puzzle.



**Figure 3:** The archival boxes into which scattered materials must be sorted correctly

- - *sound-shards*: players find a number of 1970's audio cassettes in different colors as well as a cassette recorder from the same period. On these cassettes, there are short segments from Friedrich Cerha's musical composition *Spiegel I-VII* ("Mirror I-VII"). Players also find a reel-to-reel tape player as well as an audio reel with the segments arranged in a specific order. The main skill required for this puzzle is a certain type of (auditive) *deciphering*: players now have to listen to the audio reel in order to put the audio cassettes in the right order, resulting in a sequence of colors that corresponds the code of a color-lock which contains the key to the second room.



Figure 4: The reel-to-reel tape player and the cassette recorder.

- - *over his head*: In the second room, players find an overhead projector and (among other things) a number of overhead slides - each showing photographs of the *Riese vom Steinfeld* stage from the *Wiener Staatsoper* production with. In preparation to the actual puzzle, players must identify the correct overhead slide by finding an ultraviolet sign that reveals which of the slides has to be used; also, they have to move the overhead projector onto a specific spot in the corridor and align it correctly. The core puzzle requires them to align the slides so the display is correctly in the context of the stage, which at the same time reveals the key to extracting a code from a number written at the back of the wooden display. This connection depends on a further hint, which also reveals that the wooden display is indeed the actual prop from the opera production, thereby placing the display at the intersection of its different *contexts*: the historical giant and its biography, the opera production and the cooperation between Friedrich Cerha and Peter Turrini, the archives' commitment to meaningfully contextualizing biographical documents, historical facts, artworks, concepts and materials, and, finally, the Escape Room in which these contexts must be considered in order to unlock the secrets of the game.



Figure 5: The slides with the stage photos, waiting to be correctly identified

- - *mirror, mirror, not my type*: Also in the second room, players find an old *Everest*-typewriter (basically the same model Peter Turrini uses, a connection which is made clear in earlier parts of the game). There is a piece of paper in the typewriter with one of Julian Schutting's poems, however, there is one word missing. Earlier, players have unlocked a note on the poem that reveals the missing word, but it is written in Julian Schutting's mirrored handwriting. The main challenge consists in *deciphering* the note, which most players find hard to read even if they use a hand mirror that can be found in a different area. The missing word must now be typed in the typewriter, which reveals yet another word, which is the key to a letter-based combination lock that reveals the next clues.



Figure 6: The Everest-typewriter in the second room

- - *show(case)time*: the final puzzle to be solved is actually a meta-puzzle that requires clues and materials found as parts of other puzzles. It is a showcase with four compartments, three of which are open. The fourth is closed and contains an envelope whose label makes it clear (with some *deciphering* skill applied) that it contains the last clue needed to finally beat the game. In the course of the game, players have found three exhibition labels which must be correctly assigned to the showcase's compartments (involving *attribution* skill), and which contain hints as to which objects must be placed inside each compartment (which requires a little *contextualizing* skill).



Figure 7: The showcase with the envelope containing the final clue

However, the hints only make sense within the logic of a dream, *and* they require that players have paid attention to the materials found in the course of the game, thereby bringing together the detached world of the dream with the meticulous attitude that is required in real archival work. Once players have identified the required objects and placed them in their respective compartments, the fourth compartment will open and allow access to the envelope, which contains the final key phrase (the solution to the problem that the archivist was looking to solve when she fell asleep in the digital game) that must be entered into the laptop, which will result in the archivist finally waking up and *escaping the dream* - and the players having beaten the game.

## 6. Conclusion

*The Archivist's Dream* illustrates the specific demands put on designers at the intersection of cultural mediation and serious games, where design decisions - contrary to game design for pure entertainment - must be based on the demands of the "serious issue" guiding the design process. This is most obvious in the choice of the *theme* itself, which is not a result of, but a precondition for the design process. While this applies to any aspect of the game's design, we have focused on the most prominent aspects of space and puzzle design in this article. The presentation and discussion of these aspects has shown how the demands of the "serious purpose" are on the one hand design limitations which inhibit designers from simply substituting game elements for others that promise more player engagement, satisfaction, or "fun". On the other hand, these limitations can serve as a clear and reliable guiding principle that not only presents additional creative challenges for game designers, but also presents a reliable framework for building an experience that is not only coherent in itself, but also consistent with the serious theme. In effect, and in addition to the separate benefits of enjoyable gameplay *or* educational gain, this can add further layers to the experience by rooting the experience of the fictional game world in real-world domains that go far beyond the experience of the game.

The success of this strategy in the specific application presented here will be evaluated in a separate user study, which will be conducted in the following months, and the findings of which will be reported at a later time.

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