

The evolution of language? There's an app for that

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Excerpt from the promotional video for the Color Game app. Credit: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History

Researchers at the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History in Jena, Germany have just launched the Color Game, an app designed to provide a new way to study language evolution. The game asks players to communicate specific colors to each other using only a series of black and white symbols. It allows large numbers of players to interact freely and build shared visual languages. The data is already helping scientists understand how human communication systems evolve.

A game designed for scientific research

"Linguists have used data from pre-existing online games before, but building a gaming app specifically to research [language evolution](#) is new," explains project leader Olivier Morin.

The Color Game is designed to resolve some of the issues inherent in laboratory studies by experimenting on [language](#) at a large scale, while allowing large numbers of participants to interact in real time as often as they choose and with a wide variety of partners, as Morin and his team explain in a recently accepted paper in the *Journal of Language Evolution*.

One player is presented with a target color, that they then attempt to communicate to another player without using any words. Instead they make use of a defined set of black and white symbols that have no associations with a particular shade of color.

Studying how languages evolve

Difficult as this may sound, players are able to reach the correct result more often than would occur by chance. Players also get better at it, as once-neutral symbols acquire meanings that they lacked at the start of the [game](#). Players are creating a language together, in the very act of using it.

"The Color Game is not a puzzle game, it's not about decoding symbols," explains Morin. "The only code that has to be broken is the language that you and the other players will invent."

More information: The Color Game Website: www.colorgame.net

Provided by Max Planck Society

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