

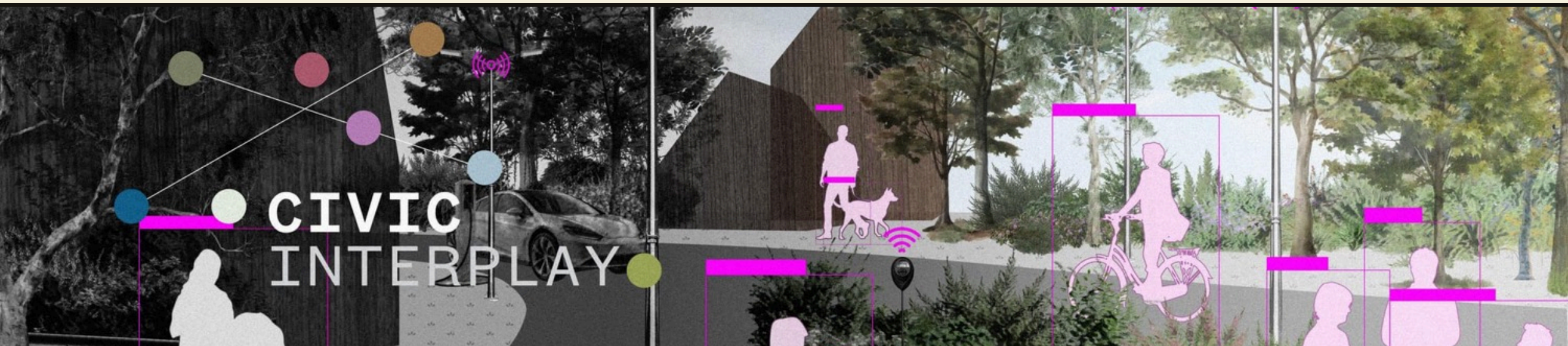
+ the Civic Interplay +

Rethinking AI governance from the ground up

(from an antipodean perspective)

DR SARAH BARNES · RMIT CENTRE FOR URBAN RESEARCH · CIVICINTERPLAY.IO ·
SARAHBARNES.COM

UNIVERSITAT POMPEU FABRA BARCELONA 8-10 SEPTEMBER 2026



Where I speak from

An Australian of European descent, where the question of **sovereignty** remains **unsettled**.

Negotiating a 2025-06 pivot towards infrastructural services for hyperscale-AI.

2025 **Amazon/AWS A\$20bn for data centres** to 2029 announced in June
National AI Plan released in December **A\$460m** + social media ban, each speaking the register of sovereign capability.

APR 2026 **Microsoft announces A\$25bn for** AI infrastructure, security, and skills by end 2029. NSW Gov Investment Delivery Authority endorses 15 projects (**\$51.9bn**) for fast approval in March.

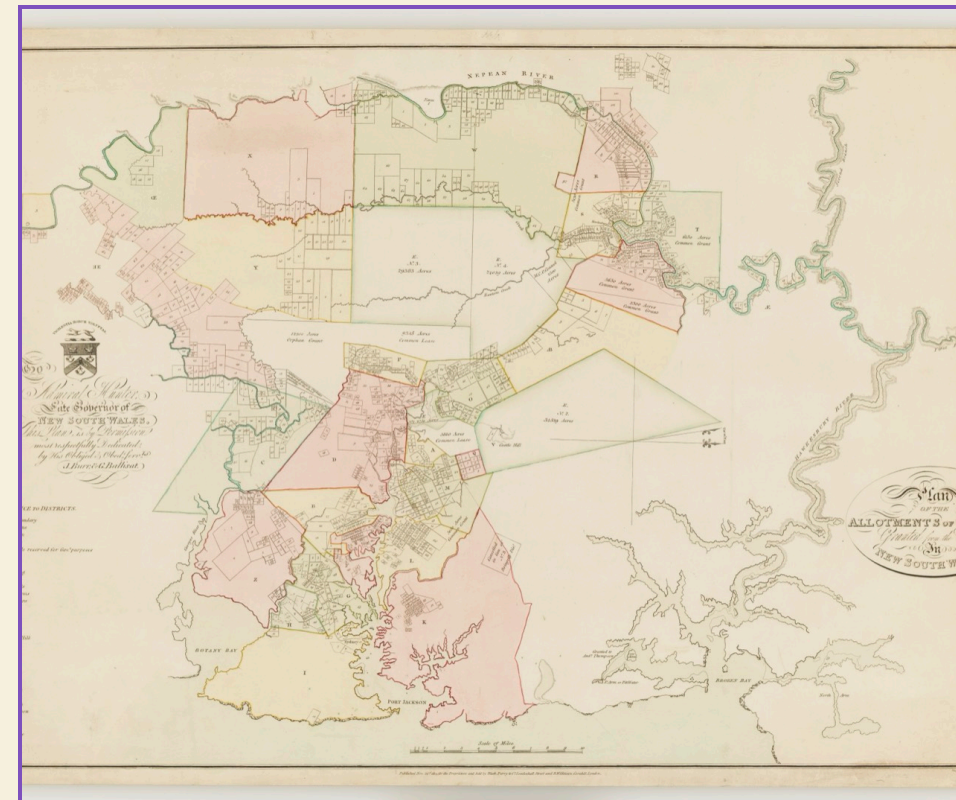
APR 2026 A **MOU** signed in Canberra with **Anthropic** on AI development, infrastructure, safety. Australian Government positions data centres as strategic assets underpinning AI adoption and digital economic growth.

JUL 2026 **Google pauses A\$20bn investment** over tax treatment of locally generated value.
Anthropic offers A\$21.6bn investment to make Australia its 'second home' for training its AI models and wants to buy any available capacity that can be delivered by mid 2027. Conditional on **clarity on copyright** settings with text and data mining exceptions ruled out in Oct 2025.

DUE 2027 **Fast-tracked data centre approvals** designed to 'secure investment in Australia's energy grid' and promote economic resilience and safety

Between April and July 2026 the Commonwealth signed a memorandum of understanding with a frontier model developer, welcomed the largest single technology investment in the country's history, and saw a second commitment paused over the tax treatment of locally generated value.

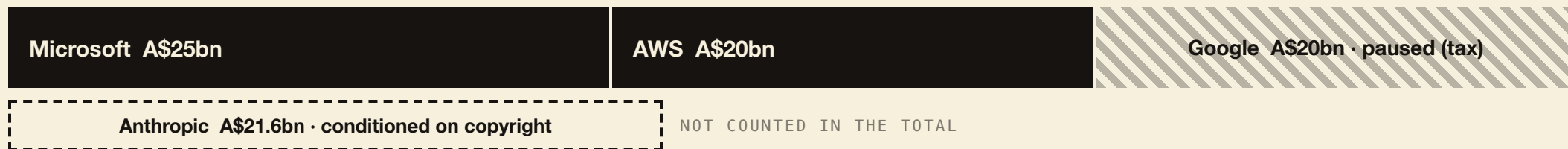
Each was narrated in the register of **sovereign capability**. None of the approvals that followed records what the facilities draw, or for whom.



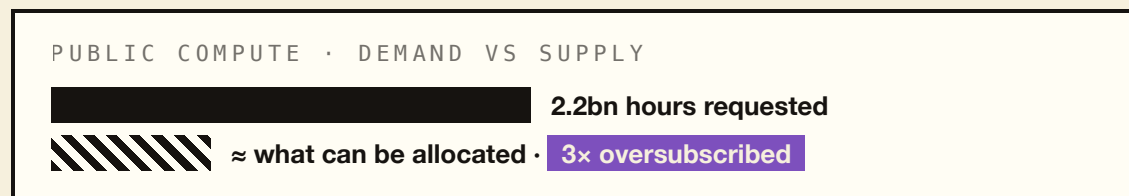
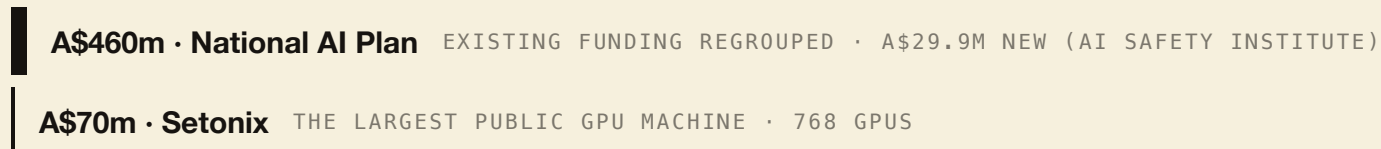
NSW LAND GRANTS (PLAN OF ALLOTMENTS, 1814).

Announced private commitments **roughly 140 : 1** against the public plan

PRIVATE · ANNOUNCED A\$65BN



PUBLIC · SAME SCALE



MEANWHILE · EU AI FACTORIES

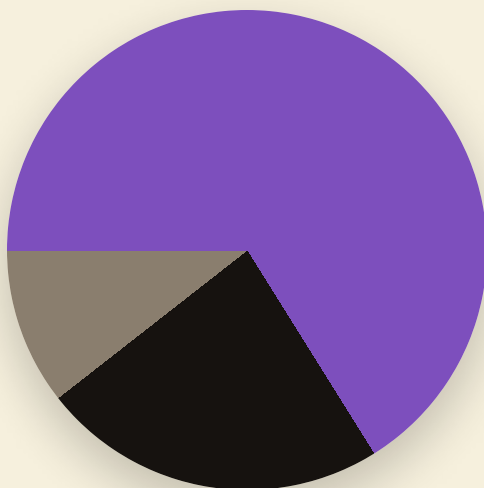
19 factories · 13 antennas · €2.6bn public, a €30bn gigafactory call open.
Countries without compute get access to compute hosted elsewhere.
Compute as a public capability programme. Hosting and benefiting, decoupled.

Compensatory performance, quantified.

PRESS-SOURCED WORKING FIGURES

THE INVESTMENT LANDSCAPE · THREE RATIOS

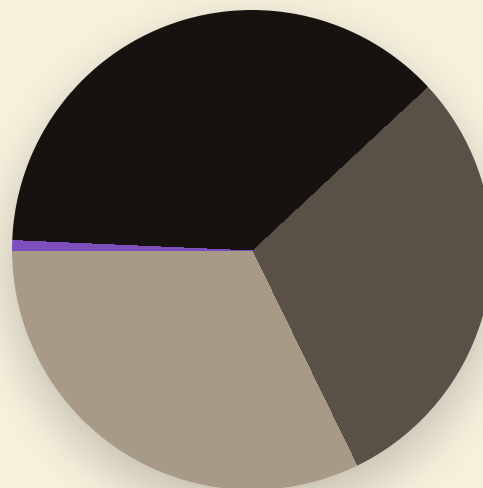
FAST-TRACKED SINCE 2023



66% Ministerial

- Ministerial fast-track · 31 projects · NSW IDA 15 + VIC
- DFP 16
- State significant development · 11
- Local council · 5

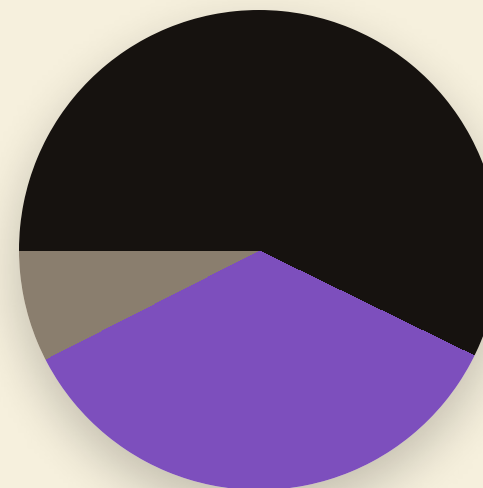
ANNOUNCED DOLLARS



0.7% public

- Microsoft · A\$25bn
- Amazon · A\$20bn
- Anthropic · A\$21.6bn (conditional)
- Public · National AI Plan · A\$0.46bn

WHO OWNS THE CAPACITY



57% foreign-owned

- Foreign-owned · 5,380 MW
- Australian-owned · 3,302 MW
- Joint venture · 700 MW

PIE 1: CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE TRACKER · PIE 2: PRESS-SOURCED · PIE 3: CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE TRACKER

Poor data transparency on data centre impacts

INVESTMENT INTERFACE

Certainty on land, energy + water

Faster approvals through the DFP door

Engaged: operators, utilities, agencies

"System-wide" water demand management

Disclosure at 100 ML/yr, post-hoc

Governance: internal coordination



No commitment on what enters the public record



12 of 12 planning records disclose nothing



Not engaged: councils, communities, water users



Managed on numbers no permit ever shows



A 1.2 GW campus declares 22.4 ML/yr



Exhibition documents removed after approval

PUBLIC INTERFACE

Victorian State Government public disclosure rates on data centre are poor

Sovereignty is increasingly performed

Under these governance imaginaries the state **appears sovereign while remaining structurally dependent on external compute capabilities & platform governance.**

"Over 85% of restricted teens still access major platforms by bypassing weak age-verification checks, creating false accounts, or migrating to less-regulated alternative apps."

ESAFETY COMMISSIONER · JULY 2026

Social media regulation appears strong; implementation is weak when platforms do not implement age detection measures. What restrictions can be enforced?

Dependency on hyperscale compute

An AI stack, from the ground up

THE LAYER

AGENTS + APPLICATIONS · Claude, Copilot, Gemini (Aus has highest use per capita of Claude)

MODELS · trained offshore, licensed back. Public AI enablement promotes hyperscale AI models

COMPUTE + CHIPS · imported, one dominant vendor

DATA CENTRES · 57% foreign-owned, positioned onshore "sovereign"

ENERGY + WATER · local grids, local water catchments

CRITICAL MINERALS · mined here, refined offshore (growing on-shore processing capabilities)

LAND + COUNTRY · multiple public agencies, including unceded Indigenous sovereignties

Contested sovereignties arrive in place-based communities

WHO OWNS IT

FOREIGN

FOREIGN

IMPORTED

57% FOREIGN

LOCAL

EXPORTED

UNCEDDED

THE INSTRUMENT THAT GOVERNS IT

AI standards · promised for 2027

Copyright Act · Text and Data Mining exception contested / refused by Attorney General

US export controls · no Australian instrument

Planning fast-tracks · tax law · FIRB · SOCI ownership register is closed to the public

Grid connection rules · water permits, no Federal obligations for reporting

Mining approvals · Critical Minerals Strategy

Native title · heritage acts · Indigenous data sovereignty, CARE, still outside the stack's law

The risk

The current approach to AI Governance establishes a performative approach to AI sovereignty that does not exist.

Technocratic statecraft: the **state is heavily reliant on investment funding and compute from hyperscalers, facing escalating community and creative backlash and growing environmental pressures.**

Does it have to be this way?

Reimagining AI governance

Making visible relational **practices of interdependence as civic acts**: local, planetary, and agentic.

1. Activating civic agencies & intelligence

2. Prioritising shared and local value-creation

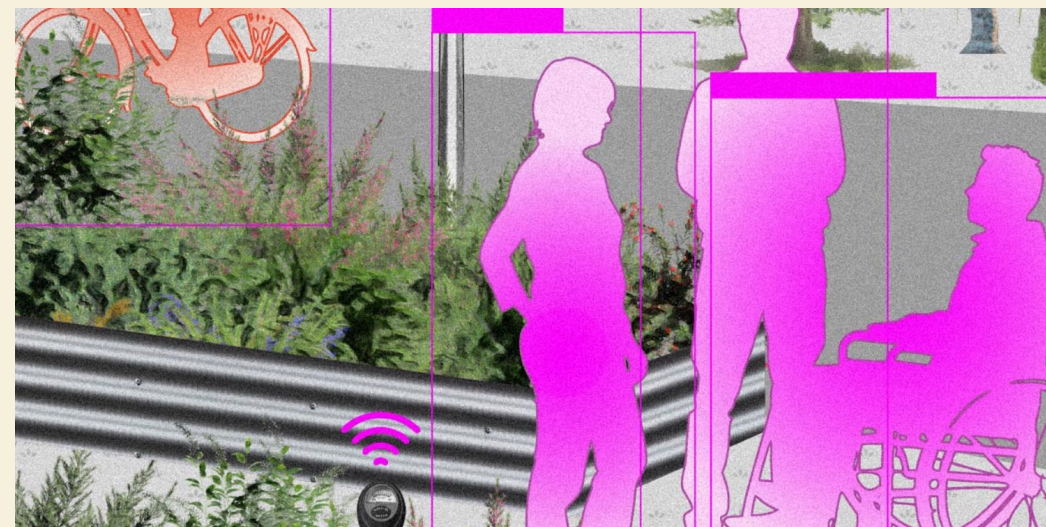
3. Making legible planetary interdependences & governance

1. An agentic-deliberative praxis

What relations of interdependence can be made visible, through shared civic acts?

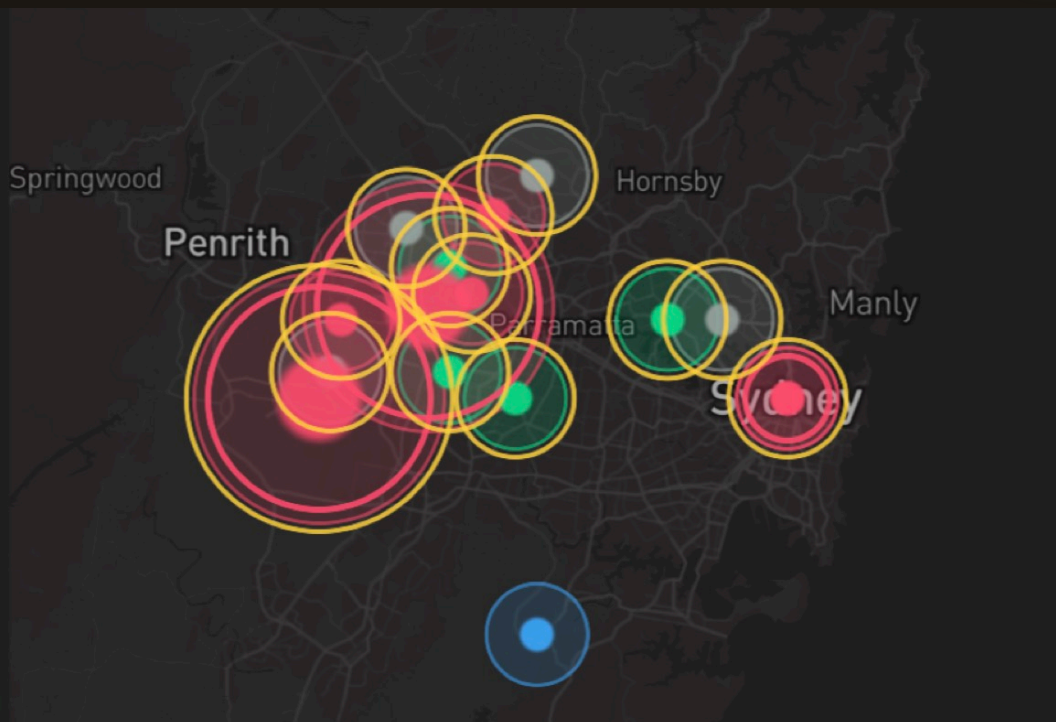
We are the interface: the living, sensing connection between the world as it has been and the world as it might become.

Training grounds for micro-political acts.



WHAT KIND OF CIVIC INTERFACE ARE WE BECOMING?

Data Centre Transparency Project



- ▶ SITES TAGGED · OWNERSHIP
- ▶ PUBLIC FUNDING · PLANNING PATHWAY
- ▶ WATER RISK · ENERGY DRAW
- ▶ THE CLAIM VS THE OWNERSHIP
- ▶ LEGIBLE · SITE BY SITE
- ▶ TRACKS ITS OWN COMPUTE COST



DATACENTRES.CIVICINTERPLAY.IO · SCAN FOR THE LIVE MAP

2. Enrolling civic agencies: AI Precincts

QUESTION 01

**Who owns the compute?
(where does value flow)**

QUESTION 02

**Who generates value?
(from resource extraction to shared
beneficiaries)**

QUESTION 03

**What local benefits can be captured &
coordinated?
(alignment between place-based needs and
resource flows)**

QUESTION 04

**Who enforces?
(what governance capability does the
enforcement or regulatory layer actually
have?)**

Shared goals: Place-based community benefit

3. Informed by transparency

Recursive, code-based scans of multiple sovereign registers.

INVESTMENT MODEL

Ownership · owner country · capital type (hyperscaler, PE/infra fund, listed/REIT, state-owned) · relationship to sovereign wealth or super fund

RESOURCE USE

Water risk · energy source, from on-site renewables to coal or gas heavy grid

PLANNING PRIORITY

State fast-tracked, no formal community input · contested by local community, tracked through submissions, council minutes, appeals, petitions, media and FOI

DEVELOPMENT STATUS + INFRASTRUCTURE TYPE

Operating · in-pipeline by stage · data centres, with mines and refineries emerging

GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAIN

Flows from each site to where its inputs are made or processed. Green rings mark onshore processing.



■ CLOSE

+ Civic interplay +

Everything is a draft.

■ REHEARSAL · IN PROGRESS

CIVICINTERPLAY.IO · DATACENTRES.CIVICINTERPLAY.IO · SARAH.BARNS2@RMIT.EDU.AU