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THE MINISTRY OF STRANGE AFFAIRS

An exploratory case study on activating play in adults within the arts

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Dissertação

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Declaração de Autoria

Eu Aurélie d'Incau, declaro que a presente dissertação intitulada "Ministry of Strange Affairs: An exploratory case study on activating play in adults within the arts", é o resultado da minha investigação pessoal e independente. O conteúdo é original e todas as fontes consultadas estão devidamente mencionadas na bibliografia ou outras listagens de fontes documentais, tal como todas as citações diretas ou indiretas têm devida indicação ao longo do trabalho segundo as normas académicas.

A Candidata

Lisboa, 29 de outubro 2023

Resumo

O objetivo desta dissertação é estudar ferramentas estratégicas para a ativação da brincadeira em adultos na nossa obra de arte participativa, em forma de 'roleplaying game', *The Ministry of Strange Affairs* (MOSA).

Embora a brincadeira tenha um papel importante na história da arte, para além de estar intrinsecamente ligada à educação artística, dispomos de muito pouca pesquisa académica relativa aos métodos práticos que ativam a brincadeira num público artístico adulto. Este trabalho visa, portanto, construir uma ponte entre o conhecimento científico racional existente sobre o tema e a natureza improvisatória e intuitiva da pesquisa artística. Com efeito, esta dissertação propõe, nos primeiro e segundo capítulos, analisar extensivamente a literatura de disciplinas como psicologia, sociologia, neurociência ou design de jogos sobre a brincadeira em adultos, para depois aplicar esse conhecimento à nossa obra de arte. Os terceiro e quarto capítulos concentram-se então na apresentação e análise do estudo de caso exploratório sobre o 'roleplaying game' MOSA, testado com cinco grupos de amigos, composto por três a quatro participantes adultos, em uma ou duas sessões de 'playdate' por cada grupo. Dado que criámos um conjunto de propostas artísticas, esta investigação incluiu também a perspectiva como pesquisadora-participante, e, adicionalmente, como 'game master' durante o MOSA. Além disso, porque defendemos a arte e a brincadeira como parte da mesma natureza e vemos a nossa arte como um espaço para o crescimento mútuo e a busca pelo conhecimento, achamos mais representativo escrever esta dissertação na forma de uma entrevista com as três personalidades criadas para o efeito, com as quais esta pesquisa foi conduzida: Lili, a artista, Sylvia, a educadora, e Aurélie, como pesquisadora. Esta escolha não só ilustra as complexidades de pesquisar este assunto, mas também pretende guiar o leitor através de uma jornada lúdica de leitura.

No segundo capítulo, defendemos a brincadeira (play) como livre de regras externas, intrinsecamente motivada, imaginativa, exploratória, improvisatória e, acima de tudo, orientada por processos, em contraste com o "jogo" (game) que é baseado em regras, competitivo, sistematizado e repetível, articulado através de autores como Zimna (2014), Huizinga (1949) e Caillois (D'Afflon, 2012), e Bogost (Chicago Humanities Festival, 2017). Para a análise da experiência da brincadeira do participante durante o estudo de caso, usamos a definição de Gray (2013) e Brown and Vaughan (2010), de "brincadeira como um estado de espírito": estar mergulhado numa atividade escolhida

por si, perder o sentido do tempo e da autoconsciência, um desejo de continuar ou repetir a atividade. Além disso, olhamos para a brincadeira como um processo psicológico emergente, como proposto por Eberle (2014), que permite ao jogador flutuar entre uma variedade de emoções em vez de procurar um estado constante de absorção num jogo, ou 'flow', como descrito por Csikszentmihalyi (2009).

Além disso, mobilizamos autores como Arnett (2000, 2003), Goffman (1982, 2022) e Deterding (2017) para ilustrar a natureza dos adultos em relação à brincadeira. Mostramos que todo o comportamento adulto é colorido pela sua própria definição da identidade adulta, um desejo por atividades significativas, e sua própria ideia de comportamento apropriado e inadequado, influenciada pela interação ordeira e pelas emoções sociais aprendidas na infância. Com base nisso, ilustramos que eles são restritos pelos sentimentos de responsabilidade e de dever, assim como pelos seus valores, e são menos flexíveis a brincar do que as crianças, com a exceção de pessoas com uma personalidade brincalhona, como explicado usando Proyer (2013, 2017, 2011). Esta dissertação argumenta em nome dos benefícios de brincar mais livremente como adultos para um melhor bem-estar.

Com base em autores como Deterding (2017) e Walsh (2019), estabelecemos várias ferramentas estratégicas para ativar a brincadeira em adultos. A escolha dessas ferramentas estratégicas baseia-se no seu potencial para criar uma realidade alternativa imaginária onde o peso das responsabilidades adultas da vida real é abolido, a imaginação e a alegria são despertadas e inibições como o medo do comportamento inadequado são diminuídos para que os adultos possam entrar numa brincadeira mais livre. As ferramentas estratégicas são: grupos, instalações de arte, narrativa, trajes, missões e estruturas de jogo. Dentro destas ferramentas, identificamos também dois elementos adicionais que não foram premeditados. Estes elementos são o desenho de um mapa com alimentos como parte da narrativa e o papel do 'game master' como uma parte da estrutura da brincadeira. Antes da apresentação dos resultados, apresentamos a metodologia qualitativa holística (sondagens, conversas de avaliação, observações, autoavaliações, fotografia, vídeo) usada de modo a permanecer flexível e de mente aberta no estudo de caso exploratório. A seguinte análise da experiência do participante representa, também, a natureza exploratória do projeto de pesquisa e é de natureza qualitativa.

Esta comparação da experiência dos participantes com a definição de brincadeira como um estado de espírito mostrou que todos os catorze participantes obtiveram

bastante prazer, mesmo para surpresa de alguns participantes; o tempo foi geralmente percebido como passado rapidamente, e a maioria deles queria voltar a brincar novamente. Mostra que a experiência dos participantes nunca foi uma brincadeira a cem por cento, mas sim flutuando dentro e fora de emoções de brincadeira definidas por Eberle (2014). Além disso, demonstra também que o MOSA não eliminou sentimentos de vergonha e até mesmo sensações de tédio, stress, ansiedade e outros.

Quanto à avaliação da eficácia das ferramentas estratégicas utilizadas para ativar a brincadeira, são apresentadas na sua complexa interligação e na sua relação com a natureza ambígua da brincadeira e a experiência subjetiva da mesma.

Primeiro, envolver grupos de amigos na atividade é mostrado ser uma ferramenta eficaz para reduzir a inibição por causa da partilha da experiência, divertirem-se juntos, e a possibilidade de se esconderem dentro dos grupos. Em segundo lugar, a instalação provou ser um espaço de incentivo às brincadeiras - ajudou os participantes a afastarem-se da realidade cotidiana. Em terceiro lugar, no que diz respeito à narrativa, demonstramos que, embora a história tenha sido bem recebida pelos participantes, o meio através do qual a transmitimos não foi igualmente envolvente para todos. Em quarto lugar, explicamos como as pequenas transformações da realidade em realidade alternativa imaginária foram as mais eficazes em termos de narrativa. Fazer um mapa com alimentos foi um ótimo método para transformar duas atividades bastante funcionais (recordar o dia e fazer comida) em partes integrais da história: a criação da realidade alternativa da brincadeira e a alegria geral da experiência. Observamos ainda que o segundo dia da brincadeira precisa de melhorias, pois não ofereceu o suficiente desse tipo de transformação da realidade. Em quinto lugar, demonstramos que os trajes foram ferramentas extremamente eficazes para afastar a vergonha ou outras inibições dos jogadores. Embora os trajes também possam causar vergonha inicialmente, estes são encarados como desculpas ou motivações para se comportar de forma diferente e fora do normal, ou até mesmo para fazer os jogadores mais corajosos saírem de sua zona de conforto. Em sexto lugar, as missões deram aos participantes um propósito e eram vagas o suficiente para os grupos encontrarem o seu próprio modo de brincar dentro delas, embora às vezes gerassem ansiedade por causa da seriedade do tópico. Por último, mas não menos importante, apresentamos a dificuldade de avaliar a estrutura do jogo em si mesma. Enquanto facilitar a brincadeira aos participantes foi a abordagem geralmente correta, o estudo de caso mostrou ter espaço para melhorias quando se trata de ativar a brincadeira livre e incondicional, e mostra

que o segundo dia em particular foi problemático. A análise termina com uma avaliação do nosso papel como 'game master', sendo que identificámos este papel como sendo o dinamizador da estrutura da brincadeira. Mostramos os efeitos negativos da nossa própria falta de estado de espírito de brincadeira, devida à pressão de conduzir esta pesquisa. Explicamos como esta pressão, como participante de pesquisa, também levou alguns participantes a sentirem-se, de vez em quando, igualmente pressionados, e isso retirou-os do estado de espírito propenso à brincadeira.

Em suma, a dissertação conclui que o MOSA não é um espaço que apague totalmente e completamente qualquer inibição e embaraço, ansiedade ou tédio nos adultos, nem oferece um auge contínuo de brincadeira. Pelo contrário, este estudo sugere que o MOSA tornou-se num lugar onde sentimentos desconfortáveis e inibições podem ser enfrentados, e num espaço para a exploração do eu brincalhão, de comportamentos divergentes, de diferentes perspectivas sobre a realidade, e, muito simplesmente, um espaço para o crescimento.

Palavras-Chave:

adultos, brincadeira, artes visuais, jogo narrativo, educação artística

Abstract

Play has been an essential part of visual arts throughout history and is intrinsically connected to art education, yet there is close to no research on practical methods to activate play in the adult art audience. In this exploratory case study, I analyzed how I can activate play in adults in my participatory art work "the Ministry of Strange Affairs" (MOSA). Through a thorough analysis of literature in philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, sociology and game design, including authors such as Goffman, Brown, Proyer and Deterding, I demonstrate that the challenges adults are facing concerning play come from their own ideas of adulthood, proper behavior and fear of embarrassment. Building on authors such as Deterding and Walsh, I then established several strategic tools for adult play activation. They are: groups, art installations, storytelling, costumes, missions, game structures and game masters. I, as a researcher-participant, then explore the effectiveness of MOSA in activating play with 5 groups of 3-4 adult friends across one or two playdate sessions. In sum, this thesis offers a qualitative analysis of the complex intricate functioning of play in this role playing game, presented as a dialogue between a journalist and Aurélie the researcher, Lili the artist and Sylvia the educator.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Journalist:

Welcome to the 'Where-is-Ana-Paula' talk show. Today we are welcoming Lili the artist, Sylvia the educator, and Aurélie the researcher on the couch to talk about their research on the artwork *the Ministry of Strange Affairs* (MOSA) as an activator of play in adults. They share one body and one mind and complement each other, yet they don't always share the same points of view.

Figure 1

Sylvia, Aurélie and Lili on the Talk Show couch

Note. (l.) Sylvia the educator, (c.) Aurélie the researcher, (r.) Lili the artist. (Photos and collage by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

1.1 Background

J: Lili, you were the initiator of this project. How did this research come about?

Lili, the Artist:

'Aw, cute, I should bring my nieces, they would love this' or 'ah, you work with play, so you work with children?' are some of the well-meaning adult's typical reactions when they approach my art works. Adults prefer to talk to me about play rather than actually play, they prefer to understand my work conceptually before experiencing it. I was frustrated, because I was convinced not only that play would enable adults to experience the art work on a deeper level and enrich the art work, but also that play is the vehicle to learn on all levels: rational, para-rational, physical and even metaphysical.

Motivated by this frustration, I wanted to find out why adults don't play, and what they need if they are to enter into a play relation in my art? Do I even know what kind of play I am talking about when I talk about play in adulthood? And why is it so important to play in adulthood in the first place?

Nevertheless, I couldn't do this alone. Therefore, I invited Sylvia, because she always makes us believe that education and art are inseparable once play is involved. I also asked Aurélie to join me because she is more clear-headed, more rational than I am. I asked her to join to help with the how questions. How do we define play? How do adults behave and, above all, how do they play? She also helped to organize the methods and the data collection. I myself was responsible for the fun of things; for the artistic development of MOSA the game and for being the game master or facilitator within the game. Later on, we will explain this better.

J: Sylvia, why did you choose to take part in this research?

Sylvia, the educator:

In the last 10 years of working as an art educator, Lili and I have worked a lot with children and adolescents, and sometimes with adults. Many times, adults did not understand that we are an artist and educator in the same body and that one does not need to annul the other. To us, our activity as an educator is complementary to our artistic practice, and they nourish each other. Play and participation are the vehicles of our educational practice as well as our artistic practice.

In French, the word 'formation' means 'training' but also means the process of being formed or of forming something or someone else (Meisel, 2022, p.5). As Paulo Freire (2000) said, "no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world" (p.80). Along those lines, we see collaboration and participation in art as a vehicle to get into a learning-creation collaboration within which we form and create each other.

Of course, we are not alone on this mission. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, Robert Filliou (1970), on the border of education himself, approached teaching as well as learning as a form of performance art. In Lygia Clark's work too, the work of art and the body as a vessel of knowledge and memory become one. (Meisel, 2022, p.229). Many other artists, such as Joseph Beuys and Allan Kaprow also combined their art and the process of 'formation'. They were convinced of the importance of free time, of unproductivity, and, through these, of the 'formation' of the self. (p.5).

What we like about these artists is their shared idea that education and play are a means to free ourselves from the capitalist relation we have to knowledge itself. Education, and especially art and education can be spaces for 'deculturalization', 'non-education' and 'anti-knowledge' (p.6) and help us to combat alienation caused by our obsession with specialization, self criticism, loss of creativity and absence of 'art de vivre'(p.39). In other words, we like the idea that these modern artists used play and participation as a conscious 'strategy', like a revolutionary weapon for social and personal change. (Zimna, 2014, pp.95-96).

Lili, the artist:

Nevertheless, I don't believe that we are that militant with play. Rather, I see us as part of a lineage of artists whose works are labeled by Nicolas Bourriaud as 'relational aesthetics'. A relational artwork is more about interpersonal relationships and social settings, and not so much about protected symbolisms in white cube art spaces. (Zimna 2014, p.95). Fluxus works such as Happenings set the tone for how interpersonal and social relations could be the very form of art. Contemporary artists often refer to these previous forms but also expand into participatory art, which is less militant and less disruptive. It is what Zimna calls a 'tactic of play', in contrast to the aforementioned 'strategy of play', with a focus on the present reality instead of big revolutions. (pp.96-98).

Part of the tactic of play is the use of role-playing games in art, which are often "guided trips' to 'real' life" (p.101), where participants are both creators and observers of the story told (p.100) and the artist is the game master, facilitator, and "'an entrepreneur/ politician/ director' (Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. p108)" (p.112) but also collaborator, play partner, and creator. This is where MOSA finds itself most at home, alongside artists such as Maina Joner (*Forecasting Landscape | Maina Joner*, n.d.), Nora Wagner (*Le Théâtre Et Son Double*, 2021), Massimo Furlan (*Le Cauchemar De Séville (2018) - Massimo Furlan / Numero23Prod.*, 2022), the collective project Ambassy of the Northsee (Ambassade van de Noordzee, 2021), Øfferings (*UnitePlayPerform*, n.d.) and many more.

1.2 Problem statement & Justification

J: Zimna seems to be one of your major references and gives us an understanding of what play is supposed to achieve within these kinds of art works. However, does it also tell you anything about how these artists define play, let alone how they activate play in adults?

Aurélie the researcher:

In fact, whether or not play happens in these instances is an obscure question. Zimna (2014) stresses even that

"Adopting play models, in either twentieth or twenty-first-century art, should not be confused with playing. Play as such can occur during the process, but the 'strategy' and also the 'tactic' of play belong to the notion of work as a goal-oriented activity. I would even say that the tactic of play can be seen, paradoxically, as a 'marketing' tool today; it makes the art process/product more 'user-friendly', more accessible, more ideologically transparent, popular, fun and so on" (p.99)

So our question for this research is: how can we know whether play happens or not? What do we need to include in the artwork for it to activate play?

In fact, the search in literature for a sort of comprehensive set of instructions on how to activate play in art proved quite fruitless. We thought, well, maybe we have to

learn from other disciplines. Therefore, we turned to music, dance, theater, clowning, and even pagan traditions. We stopped by clown and educator Anthony Trahair's podcast Playfulife (n.d.) (he talks about the importance of play in life) participated in carnivals, and read about the power of masks as transformation of self (Berg, 2019). Furthermore, we participated in dance classes (Forum Dança, Lisbon) where we worked through the 6 Viewpoints method (originated by Mary Overlie (*Overview — the Six Viewpoints*, n.d.) for the activation of improvisation in dance and theater. We explored the written scores of Pauline Oliveros (2013) (an experimental composer working a lot with the power of the listener instead of the musician) to see how we can become the creators of music by just working on focus and meditation.

Keren Rosenbaum (2000), experimental composer and developer of the 'active listening playground' has also been an especially great inspiration to us, and we have had the chance to play her scores. (Annex T)

Nevertheless, although these methods were very interesting, there is something magical about participating in play that we cannot really grasp intellectually, let alone reproduce in written form. We didn't really understand how it worked.

Journalist:

How did you overcome this gap? Where did you then find answers to the question of how to get adults to play with your artwork?

Aurélie:

The topic of play in the arts might not be new, especially in twenty-first century art, but the literature on play as a key concept of art is. (Zimna, 2014, p.1) In philosophy of aesthetics, developmental psychology, gamification, pedagogies play is also discussed at great length, but when it comes to the adult player going through the process of play in the arts, we encounter a gap which still needs to be filled.

In fact, perhaps it is impossible to know with our minds what artists know through their bodies. The intangibility of the topic might be the reason why it is hard to find literature on the subject.

J: Nonetheless, we are all humans with a psyche, and play is a psychological process, isn't it? Did you look into psychology or other fields such as game design and try to derive the methods of activating play from there?

A: Indeed, we needed to go back to the basics. We aimed to understand first what play even is, illuminating what kind of play is important to us, and then to understand the psychological process of play within adults before we could apply this knowledge to our artistic work and, as researcher participants, explore the effects of our choices together with adult research subjects in the case study.

The scientific knowledge comes from research by authors such as psychoanalyst and neuroscientist Stuart Brown (2009), artist and theorist Kataryzna Zimna (2014), psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000, 2003), play study scholar Scott Eberle (2010), psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2009, 1971), sociologist Erving Goffman (1982, 2022), Game design researcher Sebastian Deterding (2017), active learning and gamification scholar Andrew Walsh (2019), sociologist Lise Kjølsrød (2018), author Anthony DeBenedet (2018), psychology scholar René Proyer (2013, 2017, 2011) and many more.

Through these and many other authors, we argue that play is an inherently important element of human life, not just in childhood, and that art can be the space where adults explore their playful selves again without the pressure of performing. This research project shares the view of many Fluxus and participatory artists, that of art being a space of mutual growth, of mutual learning, and claims play to be the driving force thereof.

This project proposes to fill the gap there is in the literature on hands-on artistic methodologies for the activation of play in adults, by applying research from disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, gamification, and game design to the artwork and role-playing game *Ministry of strange affairs*. Through a qualitative evaluation of the exploratory case study on this role-playing game, we then aim to assess positive and negative aspects of the experience and shed light on the effect of several chosen 'play-activating-strategies' on the play experience of participants.

Only this way can we build a bridge between the magic of the arts and the intelligibility of science. We, on the one hand, explore ways to use scientific knowledge of the adult human mind for the more conscious activation of play in otherwise abstract,

mystical art works. On the other hand, we intend to fill the gap in the literature on methods to activate play in the adult art audience.

J: Is this why you chose to have an interview and a conversation between the three of you instead of writing a classical academic paper?

Sylvia:

Yes, when we realized that we were actually 3 different personalities within the same body, it was a way to understand the complexity of our threefold role better. After all, we learned from plato (Kraut, 2022), that we can reason better in dialogue. Another reason for this choice was that we believe that only in play, we understand play. Therefore we chose to also make our own experience of writing and your experience of reading an experience of play. In the end, we believe that our various points of views - that from within the action of participant researcher, that of the outside rational academic view on the subject, and that of the empathic educator, who sees the interconnections between participants, material worlds and concepts - work in favor of understanding the complexity of the subject better.

1.3 Structure

Journalist:

Before we go into detail, let me just illustrate the menu of today's 'Where-is-Ana-Paula-Talkshow'. Our guests will take us on a chronological journey through their research, starting with the theoretical backbone of the practical exploratory case study which will be discussed in the second instance.

In Chapter 2, they will start the discussion by defining the core concepts. They will illustrate the complexity of the topic of play and argue in favor of free, improvisational play as against rule-based competitive game. Further they will analyze play as a psychological phenomenon, introducing the process within the player's mind and all the different emotions involved. Then, in order to understand how this information about play as a psychological process works within adults, they will need to identify defining elements of adulthood, as well as changes in our behavior and attitude that make us more inhibited and consequently more reluctant to play than children.

Finally, we will want to get some clarity on how adults prefer to play and what conditions are needed for adults to enter play beyond their usual comfort zone.

In Chapter 3, Lili will present the game *the Ministry of Strange Affairs* which she developed using the knowledge from Chapter 2. We will get a guided tour through the entire functioning of the game, followed by an explanation of her strategic choices. Then, Aurélie will take over to explain the qualitative methods used for the exploratory case study conducted with five groups of adult participants. She will explain why we used a multifaceted approach to data collection, opting for surveys, conversations, and observations, among others. Last but not least, we will get to know the fourteen research subjects, their motivations to join the project, their general personality traits and how they were recruited.

In Chapter 4, we will finally get an extensive insight into the play experience of the participants. In this chapter, their experience will be compared to the definitions of play as a state of mind in Chapter 2. Questions such as 'did they play?', 'how did they play?', 'What about the experience helped them to enter a play mindset and what was counterproductive?' will be tackled. The strategic play-activating choices implemented in the game (group, installation, storytelling, pizza map, costumes, missions and game structure/game-masters) will then be analyzed more thoroughly to see not only if they were effective in activating play in the participants but also how they affected their experiences in general.

Last but not least, we will finish off this show with an extensive conclusion where Aurélie, Lili and Sylvia will give us a comprehensive account of their general judgment of *The Ministry of Strange Affairs* as a play activator in adults and their suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background

2.1 What is Play?

> **Journalist:**
>
> **What is play? Do you mean playing games, fooling around, or**
>
> **playing with colors?**

> **Aurélie the researcher:**

That is a very tricky question, and the short answer is: it can all be 'play'. The common understanding of 'play' is child's play, playing a board game, sports, or playing music, and indeed, all of those activities can be 'play'. Play is actually known with many more connotations in all kinds of fields of life, but what they have in common is that play is the opposite of work, that it is not serious and unreasonable (Ryall et al., 2013, p.1). Someone might say, 'ah, you are just playing' and the other one goes, 'no I'm serious, I'm not joking'.

The word play is indeed so deeply anchored in our lives and in our language that we all know what it is, yet can't really pin it down with one single definition. As Nachmanovitch (1991), a musician and philosopher, said, "Play cannot be defined, because in play all definitions slither, dance, combine, break apart, and recombine." (p.43) As much as a little word like 'play' may seem benign and casual or as mysterious and slippery, its ubiquitous presence in life must express a deeper importance for the human species.

In fact, borrowing Friedrich Schiller's words, it can only mean that *""man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays" (NA XX, 359/E 131)." (Moland, 2021)*[1]

In other words, play is part of our very nature. And play has ever since been proven to be an essential part of our existence, not only for the human species but for all mammals, birds, and reptiles too. (S. Brown, n.d.).

> **J: This realization that human life has to be thought of in direct**
>
> **relation to play does not make it very easy for us to know where to**
>
> **look for, at least an approximative definition.**

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[1] Original quote by Schiller: "der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt." (Schiller, 2013, p.114)

A: Indeed, due to its ambiguous nature, play shares the shelves with empirically cryptic concepts such as 'aesthetics', 'creativity' and even 'God'. Philosophers such as Schiller (2013), Gadamer (1977) (Vilhauer, 2019), Kant (2019, 2000), Nietzsche (1994), Wittgenstein (1968), Bogost (2016) and many more (Russell et al., 2019) have tried to decipher play from an ontological perspective. However, not only philosophers try to understand play. Sociologists and anthropologists such as Caillois (2001), Goffman (2022), Huizinga (1949), Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) etc looked to define play and find the meaning of play in and for culture as well as for the very existence of our species. Furthermore, for psychologists and neuroscientists such as Freud (Holowchak, 2011), Donald Winnicott (2005) and S. Brown and Vaughan (2010), play is especially interesting within the development and psyche of the human being, which then of course also concerns educators and pedagogues such as Piaget (2021), Rousseau (2010), Montessori (1912, 2010), Steiner (2003), Vygotsky (1967, 1978), and many more (Dansky, 1999, p.394).

It is in fact impossible to find one overarching definition and explanation of the meaning of play, and the discourses very much depend on different rhetorics (Zimna, p.18). Each of the scholars offer interesting insights into the meaning of play; however, they all wear professional glasses through which they see the world:

"a biologist (which means that play is explained as genetically disposed or composed of neurological adaptations or even neurological plasticity), a sociologist (describing play as social skills and gamesmanship), a psychologist (offering multi-functional skills usages), a philosopher (framing play realities as in deterministic, chaotic, existentialist, or as a form of desire), or, finally a folklorist (giving us play as ancient or traditional)." (Sutton-Smith, 2015, p.110)

It is far beyond my capacity and the intention of this research to create an encompassing understanding of play. On the contrary, by acknowledging the variety and complexity of the definition of play in humans, we might even be pointed in the direction of its real nature: that it is free, above our rational capacities, and maybe even a little magical. In this paper, I thus propose that the nature of play might not be understood through our minds alone, but that art can lend a hand to all the other above-mentioned thinkers in order not to understand it but to know it better through our human experience.

J: Keeping this limitation in mind, can you, however, highlight a few defining elements of play so that we know from which basis you start your investigation?

A: First, let's talk about a possible definition of play from a socio-cultural point of view. Johan Huizinga (1949), the father of Play theoreticians defined play, as a

"free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means." (p.13)

Wearing his cultural anthropologist glasses, Huizinga was alluding to all kinds of nonproductive activities and festivities that are seemingly unnecessary for survival. These activities can be carnaval and sports games, but also traditions and rituals, which belong to the higher forms of play. He does not refer to primitive forms of unregulated, intuitive playfulness such as child play. (p.7)

Play as a social and cultural endeavor is bound to intricate interpersonal agreements, and in the case of successful execution, they create what Huizinga calls 'the magic circle' (p.10). The 'magic circle' is the agreement of all the involved players to respect this alternative reality and not disrupt it with anything from the reality outside of the game. If one, however, does disrupt it, they will 'spoil' the game, and it will end (p.11). Therefore, in order to protect the game from ending, it is imperative for the players to adhere to this agreement.

Nevertheless, the 'magic circle' does not necessarily need to be a game, nor do the rules have to be articulated in order for it to function. Sometimes the magic circle is created through play itself, exists alongside real life, and still includes these 4 elements. For children, for instance, this is easily achieved; just imagine a school teacher taking them on a field trip, telling all these exciting stories about bugs, trees, and mountains, and in passing teaching them all these very real things that build their knowledge for real life.

J: Excuse me for asking, but it seems that you are using the words play and game interchangeably. Are they synonyms?

A: It is true that game and play are very closely linked. In essence, the difference actually lies more within the form than the nature of each. In common language, 'game' is often understood as organized play activities where all players know the rules by which they play. 'Play' is often understood as an activity connected to childhood and carries the connotation of freedom. Let me explain the difference between them better.

First, games can be understood as systems made up of rules that define the possible play within them (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p.50) Philosopher Ian Bogost defines game and play in the following way: "if literature is the aesthetic form of language, games are the aesthetic form of material constraint, of limitation. [...] Play is the process of manipulating the capacities [...], working within the constraints and limitations that it provides." (Chicago Humanities Festival, 2017, 2:31) In this definition of 'game' and 'play', they are inseparably linked, and 'play' is the activity whereas the 'game' is the framework. In other words, the more rules there are, the less space there is for play.

A second way of approaching the terms, is that they can be understood as a dichotomy. Roger Caillois calls the opposites 'ludus' (game) and 'paidia' (play), while James P. Carse would call them 'finite game' and 'infinite game' (D'Afflon, 2012, p.41). According to Caillois, play is prerational, fun, instinctual and disorderly actions ('paidia') and games are rational, organized and skilled ('ludus') actions (Zimna, 2010, p.28).

Furthermore, while they seem like opposites, both game and play have a degree of rules or freedom, and cannot be seen as black or white, rather like a spectrum. The closer we are to the 'ludus' (game) side of the spectrum, freedom is ever more restricted by rules and a common understanding of goals and purpose (D'Afflon, 2012, p.42). On the very extreme we have games which establish a hierarchy, define the possible outcomes and create competition with winners and losers (Zimna, 2010, p.27).

Subsequently, 'games' are repeatable and also much more recognisable, and thus are easier to systematize and integrate into our culture, in the manner of sports. Although rules can be changed even in very extremely strict games like football, they usually stay the same. (ibid.) Logically, in game, rules need to be conserved because otherwise it would be a different game.

In contrast, the closer we get to the paidia (play) side of the spectrum, the freer the play will get. Free play or 'pure play' is independent from imposed rules and external reward, rather it is, according to Peter Gray (2013, 2023) "(1) self-chosen and self-directed; (2) intrinsically motivated; (3) guided by mental rules; (4) imaginative; and (5) conducted in an active, alert, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind.". In free play, play is not premeditated, play is immediate and impulsive improvisation (Zimna, 2010, p.28).

Sylvia the educator:

In fact, in play, we are more concerned with the continuation of the play rather than the winning of it. For example, to Socrates a good companion for dialogue was someone who was just as happy to lose an argument as to win one (Dixon, 2019, p.69). As a result, the player is, although not structureless, more independent of fixed rules, and is free to explore different or new structures. In other words, "Play is grounded in the concept of possibility" (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971, p.45), we let each action lead us to the other, not judging it's worth, not creating perspectives on our action; always keeping the possibility of changing routes, or even of failing, open. Ultimately, play is thus always a creative experience (Winnicott, 2005, p.67).

2.2 How does play manifest in the player?

J: So, if I understood correctly, you are looking more for 'play'
than 'game' with MOSA, because of the creative nature of play?
How then does play manifest itself in the player?

Sylvia:

Indeed, we are looking for play because it possesses the potentiality of change, of growth, of creativity. Nevertheless, play is not something that is black or white, they are always linked. There is no game without play and no play without rules. In fact we will use the word 'game' to talk about the structure that frames the play activity. Furthermore, we cannot say 'painting a wall is not play' or 'fixing a car engine is not play' because in the end play happens in the player's mind and emotions.

Play manifests itself in the mind and emotions of the player. "Play is a state of mind rather than an activity. [...] provides enjoyment and a suspension of

self-consciousness and sense of time. It is also self motivating and makes you want to do it again." (S. M. Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p.60). Or in a more nuanced way "Play is an ancient, voluntary, 'emergent' process driven by pleasure that yet strengthens our muscles, instructs our social skills, tempers and deepens our positive emotions, and enables a state of balance that leaves us poised to play some more." (Eberle, 2014, p.231).

When players are in such an incredibly engaged mindset, they are in 'the play state'. In a state of play the player experiences something similar to a spiritual awakening. Gademer describes it as "play draws him [the player] into its dominion and fills him with its spirit. The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him' (ibid.: 109)" (Ryall et al., 2013, p.26). This play state can also be compared to the state of flow, described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2009). Flow is experienced by the player when they have "a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand" and like in a state of play one has a lower self-consciousness, the sense of time changes and "self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. [...] people are willing to do it for its own sake, [...] even when it is difficult, or dangerous." (p.71).

Nevertheless, play is not a continuous high of flow. We are rather always striving towards flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p.75). Play is a never-ending process that is driven by positive emotions, mainly joy and the will to be absorbed by that beautiful energy.

Scott Eberle (2014) defined six different emotional steps of play: "anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise." (p.15) These six steps cannot be seen as a linear process, but rather like a spiral, with each element driving the others (p.29).

Anticipation is the emotion just before the play starts; it can be compared to flirting; there is a tension that is pleasurable, and we look forward to seeing where it goes (p15). Synonyms are desire, curiosity, readiness, openness, and wonderment.

Surprise is the next step. Jokes are a good example of this step: we expect our expectations to be fooled. Even if we know what will come, we are still enjoying this moment of discovery. Someone in a "state of anticipation may be "remembering" a future pleasure" of being surprised (p.16). Synonymsare stimulation, excitement, discovery, and thrill.

Next up is pleasure, one of the indispensable elements of play. Without pleasure,

there is no play; pleasure drives play and retains play; it is what makes us want play to continue or reproduce itself (p.17). Synonyms of this step are satisfaction, joy, happiness, fun, and delight.

Then comes understanding, which, as well as the next two elements, is a reward of play. Understanding can be in a physical, intellectual, social, or emotional way. Playing can thus result in skill, knowledge, mastery, and, especially when played with others, tolerance, empathy, or mutuality. (p.18)

In the best-case scenario, play generates a feeling of strength and, furthermore, poise. Strength is what comes from understanding. It gives us a feeling of drive, of devolution, and of stamina. It makes us courageous, proud, and resilient to life's challenges. (p.19)

Last but not least, players will feel poise, if they are lucky. "who experience increasing dimensions of dignity, grace, composure, ease, wit, fulfillment, and spontaneity." (p. 21). Poise can even be physically seen. A player who has reached poise is literally more balanced and can move with ease. (p.21). I believe that it is a feeling of not having to prove anything to anyone—a feeling of being at peace.

Contrary to these rather positive emotions a player goes through, there are negative states of mind, which we call the anti-play emotions. These are terror, obsession, excess (addiction), indifference, heedlessness, and abstraction. (Eberle, 2014, p.26) Furthermore, anxiety, sadness, boredom, stress, panic (Panksepp & TEDx Talks, 2014) self-conscious guilt (S. M. Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p.60), or even depression (p.126) are also anti-play emotions.

2.3 When are we adult?

J: When you talk about adults in this research, what do you mean by that?

Aurélie:
When we talk about adults, we might have a general idea of what that means; nonetheless, it is partially a socially and culturally constructed idea and varies from person to person and from generation to generation. For some, it means financial independence; for others, it means being 18 years old or having children.

Nevertheless, in order to establish the basis for adult play, I'd like to define adulthood through Jeffrey Arnett (2000). According to his findings, emerging adults in industrialized countries of the late 20th century and early 21st century take up until the late twenties to establish the basis for their adult roles they will keep for the rest of their lives. The reason for this is partly due to a delay in parenthood compared to previous generations. (Arnett, 2000, p.469)

Furthermore, he explains how most 'emerging adults' do not feel that having a stable job, marriage, children, or even a stable housing situation are crucial to the definition of being an adult. (p.472). Those criteria that are more important are "accepting responsibility for one's self", "making independent decisions" and "becoming financially independent". Moreover, while being a parent is not defining for being an adult, most parents see their becoming parents as a moment of transition into adulthood (p.473).

Other defining elements of adulthood can be: less freedom to explore, more duties or being limited by duties, a personal worldview independent of their family's worldview, and less engagement in risky behavior. (p.475)

For this research, we propose to go by this approximative definition which describes adulthood as a very subjectively perceived stage of life. And yet, adulthood has to do with a transition towards responsibility and a stronger sense of self, core values, duties which come with a reluctance to explore uncharted territory, especially when it comes to the notion of one's own identity.

J: You just touched upon an interesting point, which seems really important in how we view ourselves as adults. How does our social behavior change when we become adults?

A: While it is accepted that children will sometimes behave out of order or norm, or fail to control their emotions, or behave irresponsibly (Arnett & Galambos, 2003, p.96), it is expected of an adult that they know exactly how to behave in different situations. Growing up, we develop social skills and, alongside them, social emotions (embarrassment, guilt, shame, jealousy, envy, elevation, empathy, and pride) which are the regulators of our social behavior (Deterding, 2017, p.03; Goffman, 1982; Goffman, 2022, p.40). A good development of these emotions in people regulates our social interaction order and is essential for a healthy, civilized society.

J: Do you mean that, if we don't develop these social emotions and we don't learn the codes of conduct, we will be seen as incapable members of society?

A: That is exactly right. In fact, that is partly the reason why adults are so cautious about stepping out of the 'proper' behavioral patterns in social interactions: so that they don't appear incompetent.

Erving Goffman, a sociologist from the 20th century, used the metaphor of 'the Stage' to explain how social interactions are regulated. According to Goffman (2022), we act differently, depending on the situation (theater play) we are acting in. The variables which influence our performance are other people (audience) and the physical surroundings (theater & decor), but also beliefs, emotions and who we believe to be. These variables create a 'frame of reference' (p.16) which includes rules of conduct specific to that frame of reference.

Through the analysis of all signs (symbols or identifiers) present, the 'actor' knows which play they are in and then adopts their role, dressing and acting upon the situation with their idealized impressions of themselves (p.18). We would for example not pick our nose in a job interview, or put our feet on the waiting room table, but, in our living room, we would. We thus put a more or less artificial mask on, or what Goffman calls 'face', in order to be perceived as what is expected of us as well as what we expect of ourselves (Goffman, 1982, p.5).

However, every so often it happens that we get embarrassed and 'lose face'. Embarrassment happens when our performance has been exposed as unauthentic or when we end up not identifying with the projected self anymore (Goffman, 1982, p.8). We imagine that we are judged and depreciated because of our apparent ignorance of how we are supposed to act. (Deterding, p.2) Because we all know this emotion of embarrassment, in these situations, "everyone is torn into self-conscious awareness of the disruption with no ready script how to "move swiftly on," restore lost face and get interaction going again." (Detterding, p.3) It is thus to everyone's advantage to protect the unspoken agreement between all people not to embarrass anyone else.

J: Right! So, social interactions are a bit like a game; they have rules that we follow in order for the game to continue and function well. We automatically inhibit our behaviors according to the frame (or game) we act in.

A: Indeed, the average adult doesn't want to be the spoil-sport or the cheat. Nevertheless, it is not like a fixed game ('ludus') at the end of the play-game spectrum. There is play in the rules and the ambiguousness of frames of reference also allows for the rules of conduct to be challenged. Historically, society renegotiated rules all the time. If it did not, we would still be stirring our tea trying not to make any noise with our teaspoon[2]. Some people, such as artists, act to challenge and influence the frame of reference to leave room for the creation of new frames of references.

In fact, today, with our daily use of social media and our representation on the internet, it is quite easy and safe to explore divergent rules of conduct and presentations of self. However, the big issue in this situation is that "in this game, [...] We are no longer interested in what the other can be to us, her difference, her negativity; her otherness has been neutralized to become a provider of evidence of our customized, though volatile, uniqueness." (Miras Boronat, 2018, p.237). We would never do the same things in real life without a phone pointed at us or any other excuse.

J: Because when I walk around in the streets making weird movements with my arms and legs like Monty Python in their Ministry of Silly Walks (Park Exclusive, 2017), people will think I am mad?

Sylvia:
Exactly. In fact, schizoid people are often described similarly to children (Winnicott, 2005, p.90). Nobody wants to be seen as an insane person who did not learn to regulate their emotions and act their role. It is, however, important to say that what we see as socially acceptable and what we see as insane behavior also depends on the cultural framework (Phil Borges, 2014). It is not my place to get into the details of different cultures and their frames, but it is indeed important to be aware of the fact that this research is placed in western European culture.

We believe that playing and exploring other ways of being in real life can help us challenge our eurocentric view of how things are supposed to be, and we hope that it will also make us more humble in our expectations towards others.

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[2] In Victorian times, it was considered improper behavior to make noise while stirring the tea, so the ladies learned to stir the tea without touching the teacup.

2.4 How do adults play?

J: This brings us to the next question. Adults have all these inhibitions when it comes to behaving in society. How can we then imagine them playing?

Aurélie:

When we talk about play, we often refer to children's free play. However, children are still in development and in the best case scenario, children have no responsibilities that could keep them from freely playing. Adults play, although rarely freely because they have real life responsibilities (S. Brown, n.d.) and their play therefore is also conditioned by their adult inhibitions and fear of behaving wrongly.

First of all, adults can be found playing in activities where the behavior, meanings, and norms as well as the individual's role are clearly set aside from everyday behavior, such as in games and sports (Deterding 2017, p.3). Not too much improvisation or creativity is forced on them, and they understand the rules of conduct and their role within that specific frame (p.9). Usually, these play situations therefore happen in closed private or designated spaces where the possibility of being judged is avoided (Walsh, 2019, p.6, p.9), like homes, gyms, dance classrooms, etc. Indeed, public spaces are more ambiguous in that respect, and it is harder for adult players to let go of inhibitions and dive into play (Deterding, 2017, p.9).

What's more, the interests and kinds of play activities we choose to engage in are often deeply rooted in our very personalities. We develop these interests from early childhood onward and further develop them as we get older. Stewart Brown and Vaughan (2010) defined eight play personalities: the collector, the competitor, the creator, the director, the explorer, the joker, the kinesthete, and the storyteller. No one is purely one of the play personalities, but we tend to be more one than another. (pp.65-70).

Often, these play personalities also determine what profession people choose, especially noticeable in people who love their job (S. L. Brown & Vaughan, 2010), but it can also be a hobby. These activities can help us to learn a new skill or become better at an old one, create bonds with a community, be physically fit, create great art, or even gather new knowledge. Specialized plays like bird watching, mountain climbing, photography, role playing, or even video gaming, etc. all give players the feeling of

being accepted for their idealized self, and able in their roles as such. (L. Kjølsrød, 2018, p.20).

**J: Adults thus like to stay on the 'game' side of the
game-play spectrum, which you explained before? When it comes
to silly, purposeless, and exploratory play, let alone free play, it is
thus harder to find adults engaged in that?**

A: Yes, however, if we frame the situation right or signal the situation right, it is possible for us to enter play. Adults need a sort of excuse or motivation to do it, especially if divergent behavior is part of the play. (Deterding, 2017, p.2) Deterding calls this 'the alibi', Walsh (2019) calls it the permission to play.

If we have this "motivational account that deflects negative inference from displayed behavior to a person's identity" (Deterding, 2017, p.9), we can sometimes see spontaneous, improvised, uninhibited adult play, even if it is in public space. Having a phone pointed at us is one way to excuse certain behavior. Another common example is rough and tumble or pretend play with children or dogs. In these situations, adults do not exit the frame of the 'adult in public space', but adopt physical signs that allows them to behave in a different way for a short period of time. (Deterding, 2017, p.3).

Children and dogs are, of course, easy alibis because they carry the essence of play. Nevertheless, other adults can also help us adopt divergent behavior and cause embarrassment to vanish (Walsh 2019, p.8). The bigger the group, the less the individual is identifiable, which is especially useful in public spaces. Other similar 'awareness management' strategies can be to wear masks or costumes or create avatars as they take away or distort one's own identity (Deterding, 2017, p.14).

Furthermore, some people can be motivated to behave in a playful and silly way because they know reasons there are for doing so. Knowing the science behind play or just the presence and explanation of a workshop leader or game-master can help them play differently than they would in their usual comfort zone. (Walsh, 2019, p.7)

What people do not like, however, is being forced into unstructured activities where they are surprised by a sudden expectation to play, improvise, or be creative. Instead, in unstructured play situations, it is important to adults to be slowly led towards freedom.(p.11) Something that can help too is when there is a story or a narrative that

takes them on a journey, which makes the play easy to get into and also helps to drive it forward. (p.12)

J: Simply put, we like to know what is going to happen in play?

A: Yes, but there is an exception to that: people with a playful personality are not so inhibited. We all know that one playful colleague or friend who brings light into any situation and is the first to jump into an 'embarrassing' activity. Playful people can be identified by their "gregarious", "uninhibited", "comedic", and "dynamic''behavior (Barnett, 2007, p.957). In essence, playful people are able "to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment" (p.955).

In fact, playfulness can even be an intelligence of sorts. In his book on playful intelligence, DeBenedet (2018) identifies five defining characteristics of playful intelligence: imagination, sociability, humor, spontaneity, and wonder (p.15). Playful people are flexible when life brings on challenges; they don't have as many inhibitions, which makes them more flexible and open to acting and playing within situations they might not be so used to (DeBenedet, 2018). What we most love about them, however, is that they are good team players, and many have a high level of creativity. (Proyer and Ruch, 2011, p.2; Proyer, 2013, p.85)

J: What you are saying seems to me to be that they are more in tune with their inner child. What can we learn from them?

A: Playful people are in fact sometimes seen as more childish because they are less conscientious, have low self-regulation, and are likely to be less careful in their behavior (Proyer, 2013 p.86). However, being playful does not entail being ignorant of the seriousness of life, as DeBenedet (2018) so brilliantly explains through many examples of how playful people approach difficulties in their lives and make them more bearable. In other words, it is not an antithesis of adulthood; it is essentially more of an attitude than an action. Practicing playful intelligence means not taking everything so seriously, being open to new situations, and being able to find the opportunities in the most grim moments of life.

J: However, not everybody is a naturally playful person. How should we see lightness in dark moments if it is already hard enough to be playful in a play situation. Why should we practice playing?

Aurélie:

Simply put, play is an all-in-one package and is the basis for anything we do. (Microsoft Research, 2016, 42:11; American Psychological Association, 2013, p.438) and that is already the main reason to to practice playing, especially if we are not naturally playful people.

Although research on adult play has been gaining momentum only recently - in the last 10-15 years - there is more and more research on the effect of play in adulthood (Van Leeuwen & Westwood, 2008, p.153; Proyer & Ruch, 2011, p.2, Proyer, 2017) and there is no doubt that play is needed throughout life.

First, play is the brain's favorite way of learning; this is also true for adults. (S. Eberle & Tedx Talks, 2010, 11:31). Who wouldn't rather learn something which is actually exciting.

Second, play encourages imagination and problem solving (Nørgård et al., 2017, p.274) which in turn enables us to practice what is about to come and stay agile for the future (Luostarinen & Schrag, 2021, p13, Brown, 2009, p.34). In other words, play enables creativity, not just for creating physical things but also for discovering and creating ourselves. (Winnicott, 2005, p.73).

Third, this agility acquired through play makes it inherently therapeutic (Winnicott, 2005, p.67). The magic of play remedies not only mental but also physical sufferings (DeBenedet, 2018, p.85).

Above all however, play is not only therapy for ourselves but it is therapeutic for the community. In play we practice empathy and insight because "Play with others requires mutuality and sensitivity" (Eberle, 2014, p.18) and therefore creates community. Because of all the above, play "lowers the level of violence in a society and increases communication" (Brown, 2009, p.198).

Now, are you not motivated to invest more time and headspace to make your life all that?

Sylvia:

Be that as it may, I need to jump in here. We live in a society where productivity and the pressure to be everything at once: a good mom, a good worker, a good partner and friend, looking good, and happy all the time, are very high. Saying, that we must play, can generate even more pressure and even underline this pressure. I mean, this is what happens to us in this project constantly. It is thus important to stress the fragility of this topic. In fact, this project is not about teaching or preaching anything in particular, but we wish to look at art as a playground, a safe space for adults, including ourselves, to enter into play without any other responsibilities than to play.

Chapter 3: Case Study Presentation

3.1 Game description: The Ministry of Strange affairs

Journalist:
Aright, so your challenge was to create that safe space for play. Lili,
you were the artist who created this experience. How would you
describe your creation?

Lili, the artist:

Indeed, *The Ministry of Strange Affairs* is a participatory performance piece in the form of an immersive role-playing game, especially designed to activate play within the adult audience. Participants were called upon by character *Yrukrem*, judge of the *Universal Court of Planetary Speed*, to become agents of strangeness in order to save the world from stiffening up and falling out of orbit. Each agent is invited for a two-day office period.

In this game, players go out into the world and intentionally look for connections that they would otherwise not see. While outside of the game, they would either consider the signs insignificant or the connections between them rather strange, as agents of MOSA, they would look at strangeness with the same curiosity as children and start to appreciate otherness, inexplicable happenings, unusual friendships, and improbable interconnections. In the best-case scenario, they feel pride in their work as agents of strangeness and want to come back for more.

J: How can we imagine MOSA, is it online or is it a real place?

L: MOSA has a physical office that changes locations from time to time. For 2 playdates, it was located in Graça (Lisbon), in the shared studio space 'Aberta Studio' and 3 playdates happened in the shared studio of 'curious carrots' in Campo de Ourique (Lisbon). You might think it is a typical Ministry building: it has an entrance with a doorbell, a roof, a receptionist, a waiting room with a TV, a changing room, and an office with all the usual tools such as a stapler, pens, paper, and a stamp. The only difference is that it does not look as gray as the usual ministries: the doorbell talks, the receptionist is a fish, the entrance has a foot bath and slippers just like a spa, the waiting room is colorful and comfy, and instead of magazines, you have 'the book of lies' and a

TV reporting on strange affairs in a strange language (see fig. 3, Annex O, p.161) The changing room does not have the usual 'uniformal' uniforms; instead, it includes a wide range of multicolored and multiformed costumes. And last but not least, the office does also include strange objects that might or might not be useful to the agent's job, such as chopsticks, a watering can, nails, chalk, and many more.(see fig. 5, Annex P)

J: This sounds like a fun and weird place to go. How can I imagine the functioning of the game?

L: Let me, in the following pages, guide you through the journey of the average agent through the different acts of the game: Harvest, Feast, Wrench, Groom. These acts are split into two days, with day one reserved for Harvest and Feast and the second day for Wrench and Groom. Furthermore, each playdate lasts for about 5-6 hours, including breaks, talks, drinks and food. The game is led by myself, dressed up as fictitious characters who act as game masters: *Missfish*, the receptionist, *Silly Sally* the famous cook in *Silly Sally's fabulous cooking* show; and *It*, the intergalactic journalist. (fig. 2)

Figure 2

The Game Masters

Note. (l.) Silly Sally. (Photo by Nora Wagner, 2022), (c.) Missfish. (Photo by Anna Ablogina, 2023), (r.) *It.* (Photo by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

J: Alright, let's imagine my 3 friends and I applied to become agents at the Ministry of Strange affairs. You invite us to come to the Office on a Saturday. What happens then?

DAY 1

1) **THE HARVEST**
   a) **arrival**

L: When the clock strikes 2 in the afternoon, you and your friends arrive at the physical office of MOSA. You open a mysterious door and wonder what awaits you on the other side. You open the door and walk into a calm, colorful space. Relaxing spa music can be heard in the background, and a strange blue fishy being called Missfish is welcoming you with a warm smile.

   b) **initiation ritual**

You are then asked to take off your human shoes, and Miss Fish explains to you what needs to be done. *Hands and feet are indeed the tools you use to collect many human deeds.* Therefore, you need to wash off your human reality so that it doesn't contaminate your work at the ministry. She then asks you to step into a foot bath and put on some strange house shoes. Stepping in front of Missfish, you then get your hands cleaned with a sprinkle of intergalactic purified water. In order to start with a clean slate, you also need to purify your body with a shot of the same water.

Arriving at the waiting room, you are invited to clean your mind by writing down all your human worries and placing them in the book of lies (fig. 3).

   c) **waiting room**

Comfy and excited to see what else is about to come, you now sit in the waiting room. A reporter on TV reports on the strange affair where Missfish, a normal receptionist, found an inconspicuous crumpled up piece of paper in the trash, which hid a very important message for humanity: the world is slowly losing speed, and in the case of a complete stop, the planet will fall out of orbit and might cause the collapse of the universe. (for full story see Annex O, p. 161) It seems that the reason for this evolution is the stiffening up of humans and their inability to see and celebrate strangeness. Missfish explains that in order to save us all from the universal disaster,

agents need to go on a mission to find out what moves the world and to find a way to contribute to the animation of the same.

Figure 3

Different stages of the arrival and initiation ritual
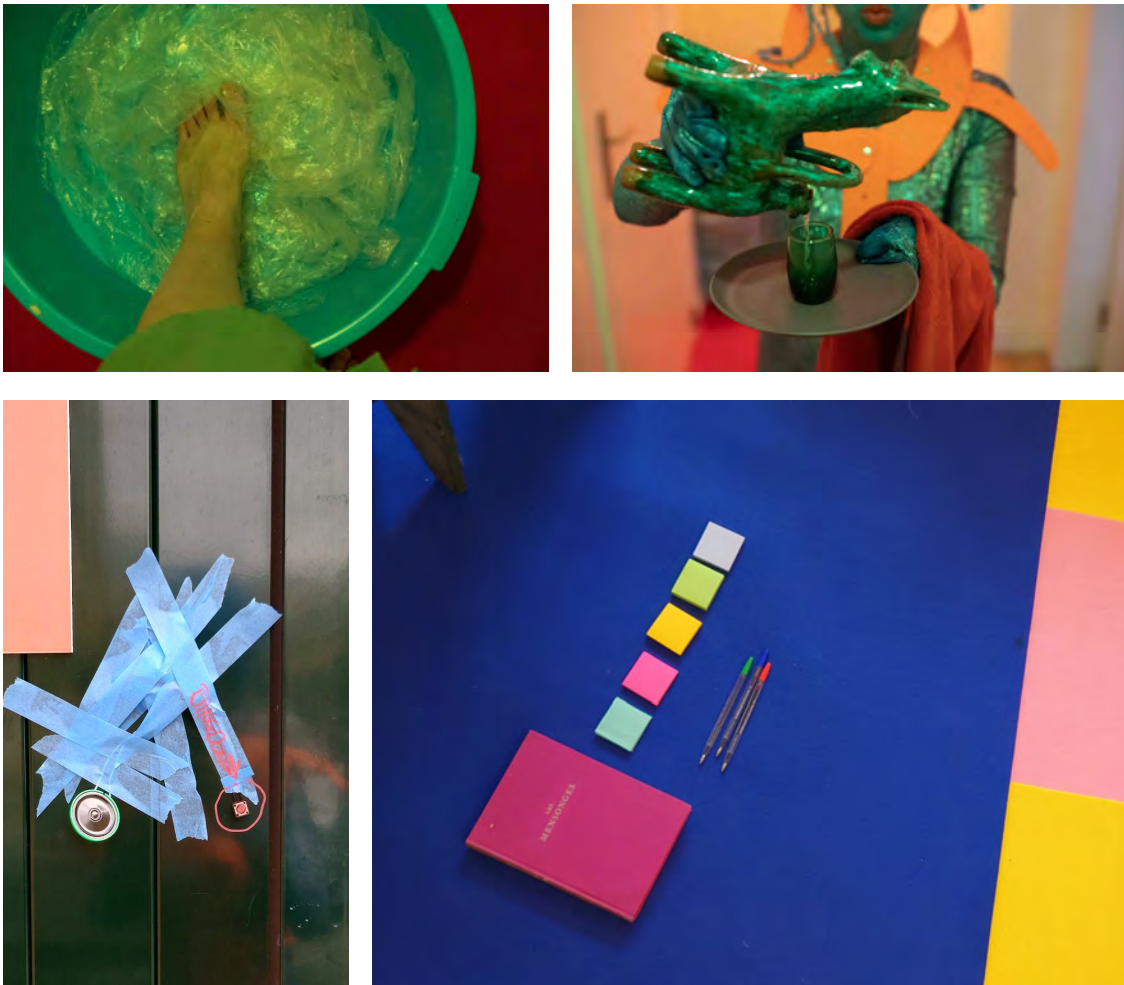
Note. from (l.) to (r.): bucket of fake water to 'clean' feet. (Photo by Anna Ablogina, 2023), missfish serving intergalactic cleansing water. (Ibid.), the talking bell on the door. (Photo by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023), the book of lies ('les mensonges') in the waiting room. (Ibid.).

One by one, you will be called to the reception for your official admission into the ministry and the handover of your official documents (see fig. 4). Missfish asks you a few questions to make sure you understand your role in this ministry. Here, she might

explain it in more human words so that there are no misunderstandings about your new job as an agent. (see fig. 4)

Figure 4

Inside the Ministry of Strange Affairs Installation #1

Note.: Image (l.) waiting room. (Photo by Anna Ablogina, 2023), (c.) Missfish inside reception handing over the agent's file. (Ibid.), (r.) welcome note inside the agent's file. (Ibid.).

d) transformation station

The next step in your journey is the transformation station, a changing room of a different kind (fig. 5), a place full of colorful, weird pieces of fabric, and other things. Missfish explains to you that wearing your normal human clothes is not favorable for the completion of the mission. You should rather take on a new, strange skin so that nobody sees you as normal. Ironically, it is kind of like being undercover.

She then gives you some time to truly transform into your new role as an agent of strange affairs.

Besides your gowns, you may even choose your agent name and your character. Furthermore, some tools and superpowers can be acquired to help you on your first mission (scissors, camera, recorder, binoculars, tape, clothes hanger, hammer, bag, etc).

Figure 5

Inside the Ministry of Strange Affairs Installation #2

Note. (l.) view from inside the transformation station, Campo de Ourique. (Photo by Anna Ablogina, 2023), (r.) detailed view of costume accessories and 'superpowers' (tools) for the creation of agent's avatars. (Ibid.).

e) mission #1 : harvesting

In your newly acquired agent file, you can find the description of the first mission (Annex O, p.167) you and your friends need to accomplish. In a nutshell, your mission is to go out into the world and find what moves the world and what brings it to a halt. You are asked to collect the clues in the way you desire and bring them back to the office for further inspection.

Now is the big moment when you are let out onto the streets on your own, to explore the streets of Graça or Campo de Ourique. (fig. 6) You might take photographs or videos with your human phone, or you might write them down in your agent's file or on any other surface, or you might even pick some things up from the street and bring them to the office.

When you feel like you have accomplished your mission, you walk back to the head office.

Figure 6

MOSA Agents in action

Note. Group 1: (1.) trying to move a wrongly parked car. (Photo by agents, Group 1, 2023), (r.) Group 5: agent pointing out strangeness. (Photo by agents, Group 5, 2023).

2) THE FEAST

a) Silly sally's fabulous cooking show

Upon arrival around 5 or 6 p.m., a cozy surprise awaits you. Missfish is not there anymore (she finishes work at 4h30) but instead Silly Sally greets you with her classic enthusiasm. The space has changed too; instead of the transformation station, you walk into a cozy dining area with a pizza oven and plenty of colorful food and drinks on the table. (See Annex P, fig. 7)

Silly Sally lets you settle back in. Take a seat and relax. With a little refreshment, you can then begin to tell Silly Sally all about your adventures.

i) version 1:

So that your work as an agent is recorded and archived properly, you will need to draw a map of your journey on the pizza dough with all the ingredients provided for that effect while you tell Silly Sally all about it.

ii) version 2:

So that your work as an agent is recorded and archived properly, you will need to represent your findings with the pizza dough and with all the ingredients provided for that effect while you tell Silly Sally all about it. You have complete freedom in how you represent your strange and stiff affairs.

Last but not least, before you are dismissed for the day, you ingest the encrypted information in the file called 'the pizza'.

Figure 7

Silly Sally's Fabulous Cooking Show

Note. Pizza report in the making: Group 5. (Photo by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

DAY 2

3) THE WRENCH

a) initiation ritual

The clock strikes 2pm, or maybe 3pm. You are greeted again with the same initiation ritual as the day before. You've slept on your experience in the human world and will now again need to wash off your human reality before continuing.

b) preparation mission 2

i) version 1:

Missfish greets you and then invites you to the office table, where you first discuss the conclusions from the day before. Second, she presents you with the evidence you collected yesterday and asks you to extract the essence from your evidence, which means to analyze which situations or objects were most efficient in animating the world. (fig. 8) You are then asked to take a decision based on these analyses: What do you want to do with this to help the world turn faster again? What is your next step at the ministry?

Figure 8

Second day version 1: The Wrench Group 1

Note. Group 1 agents at work in the office extracting essential information of clues. (Photos by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

ii) version 2:

On the second day in your life as an agent of MOSA, yet another officer will greet you, intergalactic journalist *It*. After your cleansing ritual, *It* invites you into her TV studio for an official interview. The universe has been notified of the agents' heroic work in their first mission, and she wants to broadcast their story on TV. *It* asks many questions about the previous day: What is your work like? What did you observe? What did you

do? What were your conclusions? At the end of the interview, she asks you about what needs to be done next, and she wishes you good luck on your future missions. (fig. 9)

Figure 9

Second day version 2: Wrench & Groom

Note. (top.) TV interview. (l.) office-like installation filled with normal and strange tools. (r.) strange objects which might be useful for some strange mission. (Photos by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

iii)   version 3:

Another version is in the making for future groups:

It welcomes you and does an interview. Instead of asking you what you will be doing with this information to help animating the world, she will simply ask what you feel your calling as agents of strange affairs is.

4) TO GROOM

  a) execution mission 2

Once you have decided in the group what your next mission is, you are offered some tools and materials to realize this new mission. (fig.8)

Depending on what your new self-assigned mission is in the group, you either continue to work in the office or go out into the street to fulfill your duties.

  b) Knightly Accolade

Finally, after a long day of playing, you have earned your place as a graduated agent of strange affairs at MOSA and will receive a diploma in a festive and holy ritual (including some waterfall delight cocktail). You are now ready to become an undercover agent in your own human reality where you can spread strangeness as you feel is needed. **(fig. 10)**

DAY 3

  a) special mission for Group 4

You have decided to come back for another mission. This time, you will enter a harder level. This time, you are going to explore the world without talking; you will only be able to communicate without speaking any human language.

Figure 10

Knightly accolade

Note.(l.) agent Tsipoura, (r.) agents holding undercover agent passport (diploma). (Photos by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

3.2 Explanation of strategic choices for play activation

J: *MOSA, the game* has been developed following the research presented in Chapter 2. You thus developed certain strategic methods with the aim of creating an artwork with the ability to activate play in adults. Can you explain them to us?

Aurélie:

First, in order to deflect self-consciousness, we invited groups of friends to come to MOSA. This way, they would bring their own frame of reference and feel safer than if they were alone. Usually, it is with friends that we allow ourselves to be more vulnerable and silly, which we believed would also help them greatly in their process.

Second, we needed the installation to communicate playfulness immediately in order for it to function as a play frame. Knowing that adults don't like to be forced into play and that pressure for being imaginative and creative prevents them from playing, we didn't want them to have to do the mental work of imagining to be somewhere they are not; on the contrary, we wanted them to actually enter a different world.

Furthermore, as MOSA puts adults into a completely new situation in a new frame where the rules of conduct are not clear and especially where strangeness is expected, we needed it to be visually clear about what was expected of them. Therefore, we created an extremely colorful place where everything is ever so slightly different from the real world.

Third, storytelling helps us enter a playful state of mind and is probably the most widespread means to transport us into imaginative worlds. At MOSA, we intended to make the best use of this tool to activate the imaginative power within the participants' minds as well as include a sense of purpose in the story. With this goal in mind, we chose to write a magical-realistic story, including real life elements (the real world, people) and a magical, imaginary problem (that the world stops to turn).

Fourth, part of the storytelling was all the little details that made the ministry actually strange. Nothing could be too real for the imaginary world to be credible and conserve the magic circle. Not just the facilitators or game masters were fictional characters, but also the texts in the agent file were crooked; there was a jacket that served as a notebook and more. However, one bigger moment where reality was twisted into fictionality was the pizza map.

Fifth, we integrated the creation of an avatar and the associated costumes. Costumes are being used in every culture all around the world to transcend our everyday limitations (Prange, 2019; Fréger, 2016, 2019) and we believe them to be magical. We chose costumes, because we've played many times with costumes to get out of our own everyday roles, but also because we have seen that reframing our identity could help adults in awareness management.

Sixth, we integrated missions because we know that adults like to know what they are doing, have a specific purpose and a clear goal, and straightforward rules. Fluxus artists and other artists who used missions and instructions to activate play were a big inspiration for this strategic choice. (Johnson, 2020) We found that missions are a playful way to give the visitors a nudge towards play and give them a reason to explore other ways of looking at things.

Last but not least, we thought of the game structure as something that leads the adults slowly towards more free play. We had been artistically inspired by the use of scores by Oliveros (2013), Overlie (*Overview — the Six Viewpoints*, n.d.), and Rosenbaum (2000) and combined it with research by Walsh. After a slow entrance where Missfish, the game master, takes care of the participants, she leads them through all the steps and makes sure they feel welcomed. Further along in the game, participants are invited to take on more responsibilities for their play, the hope being that they slowly become confident in playing more freely on the second day.

3.3 Methodology

J: You divided this research into two parts. We already discussed the first part which focused on literature and now we will discuss the second part where you studied the previously acquired knowledge in an exploratory case study. In the first part, we entered into a literature review of research previously conducted on the topic of adult play and highlighted the lack of literature on methods to activate a play mindset in the visual arts. Following that, we talked about the secondary data collected from books and articles in psychology, neuroscience, sociology, anthropology and game design to understand how adults play and whether or not there is something similar, in their case, to free play. What did you do then?

Aurélie:

In a second instance, we then began the artistic process of creating the immersive role-playing game *the Ministry of Strange Affairs* which served as a research ground for the exploratory case study. Here, we aimed to observe which elements of the above-described experience activated play. This artwork has other conceptual layers and aims besides activating play, which are not taken into consideration in this paper.

We then organized the playdates. In 4 months, 5 play dates were organized, each consisting of groups of 3-4 adult friends. The two first groups played for two half days of 5 to 6 hours, Saturday and Sunday, between 2 p.m. and 7 p.m.. The other three groups played only on one weekend day, leaving the other day for another occasion due to organizational issues.

One week before the session, we sent a profile survey to the participants, which helped us to get to know the individuals. The survey was online, on https://www.ministryofstrangeaffairs.com/participants-portal, on a page only accessible by password. (see Annex F. and G.) Our choice to make it accessible on a website especially designed for the game was an attempt to make the process of answering questions more intuitive and easy so that their experience stays light and playful. For the research, this choice was especially helpful because all answers could be downloaded as a neatly organized Excel sheet. (Annex B.)

The survey was divided into two parts. The first was about their personal lives, their perceptions of adulthood, play, and leisure activities, and mostly took the form of open questions and ratings. (Annex G, p.27)

The second part was about their play personalities (p.28). Here we copied the different descriptions of the play personalities off Stuart Brown's website (https://www.nifplay.org/what-is-play/play-personalities/) and asked the participants to choose their 2 most pertinent personalities. This gave us an overview of the participants preferences for activities and was aimed at comparing their behavior during the game.

Additionally, we asked them to sign a declaration of consent on the website (p.29). Group 1 signed a paper contract, which we then left out for the following groups, as it was very serious and completely broke the play's atmosphere. Signing online a week before their playdate allowed them to forget about the adult serious part and concentrate on play during the play date. (Annex H, p.41)

The next step was the game itself, and thus also the case we studied. As our research is of an exploratory nature, the data we collected is completely qualitative. We

therefore relied a lot on our observation, interpersonal talks, and evaluation surveys and allowed ourselves to adapt as we went along.

First, in order to observe, we needed to become part of the whole play experience. Lili therefore turned into the fictitious characters Missfish Silly Sally and *It*. As a result, we were participant researchers, facilitators, and game masters at the same time.

After each play date, observations and evaluations about negative and positive elements in the game that might have influenced the participant's play experience were written in an individual document for each group. The general structure of this document followed the elements of our art work, which we previously thought of as play activators: game structure, the installation, storytelling, groups, costumes, and missions. Additionally, we evaluated our own performance and our own play experience.

Further, an open evaluation talk took place at the end of each session with the participants (in English or Portuguese). The questions were open-ended and diverged a bit from group to group. (Annex S.) Nevertheless, the aim during these talks was always, on the one hand, to find out how their emotional disposition was in relation to their play mindset and, on the other, what about the experience was helping them to play. With Group 1 we evaluated after each day. In Group 2, however, we decided to keep the evaluation for the second day because it had made Group 1 too conscious of their role in the research. (Annex H, p.41)

Finally, the participants were asked to answer a final auto-evaluation survey. This last questionnaire was sent two weeks later, so that the participants had time to digest their experience and so that they would only answer with the most essential core memories of their play experiences. In the evaluation survey, we asked them to rate and evaluate their experience (see Annex G. p.30). It was filled out by 13 out of 14 participants and they were free to answer in English or Portuguese.

Last but not least, to accompany these data collections, we also used photography, drawing, and other artistic methods to collect artistic data. These data collections were intricately woven into the very experience of MOSA, all in order not to pull them out of their play mindset. For example, the participants were given an agent passport within which they could take notes and create their own profile, or they could wear a white note-book robe (Annex Q), which serves as a never-ending mind map of

play-inherent data[3]. Furthermore, photographs were taken by the game masters as well as agents. Nevertheless, as these data collections generate rather artistic data and do not necessarily bear on our objectives, we do not use them as much in our analysis.

Yet another artistic data collection method, which in this case we did use in our analysis, was the Pizza Map from the first day of the play experience. As we did not join the groups in their missions in the streets, we needed to invent a playful way to gather information about it. Therefore, we designed this method of drawing a map on a pizza. The conversations during the pizza-map-making process were audio recorded, and we later listened to them again and took notes. These notes are also in the evaluation files of the individual groups. (See Annex H, I, J, K and L)

Last but not least, as the second day was designed more experimentally and changed from group to group, we could not define a coherent method of artistic data collection, and it was adapted from situation to situation. For example, the first group was asked to create a mind map, whereas the second group was interviewed by 'It', the reporter.

In terms of the organization of the data, we have Excel sheets and descriptive documents. On the one hand, the survey answers are grouped in Excel sheets: "1) Profile Participants" (Annex B), "2) Play personality" (Annex C), "3) Consent form" (Annex D) and "4) How was it"(Annex E). On the other hand, we made documents for each individual group, uniting observations, evaluation notes, and notes about the pizza-map-making talks, the evaluation talks and artistic documentation (Annex H. Group 1, Annex I. Group 2, Annex J. Group 3, Annex K. Group 4, Annex L. Group 5).

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[3] This robe was an idea of artist Nora Wagner who played with us to test the missions in 2022.

3.4 Presentation of participants

J: In your case study, you were joined by 14 adult participants (fig. 11). Over the course of 4 months (february-june 2023) 5 groups of 3–4 adults in their twenties, thirties, and forties came to play at MOSA. How did you find them and who are they?

Figure 11

All agents of MOSA

Note. Legend for each profile: agent name, division name (group name), super power, message to the world. (Figure by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

A: We first tried to reach out to more random adult participants through social media and posters hanging in the streets in Graça (see Annex N). However, it was through personal contacts and word of mouth that we managed to reach and organize their participation. In effect, it was only in Group 5, that we didn't know anyone. This particular condition turned out to be a facilitating factor because we ended up having more contact with the personal connections and could collect insights that we would not have otherwise gotten. Moreover, as our circle consists of art interested people, most of our participants were people who are interested in the arts (out of 14, 4 were not interested nor connected to the arts (Annex B, column S)

Due to our difficulty in finding strangers as participants as well as the exploratory nature of this case study, we only had one condition for the participants: they had to identify as adults. (This point was agreed upon in messages, personal conversations or calls). As you can read in the previous chapter, adulthood is an ambiguous concept, both subjectively and culturally. Equally intangible is the question of what play really is, and every person has their own definition of it. Therefore, we chose to be open-minded about their own perceptions of the topic.

We therefore asked many questions in the participant profile (Annex B, Annex G.) in order to get a good overview of their perceptions on different topics, such as adulthood and leisure activities compared to play activities, and asked them about their motivation to play, let them rate their playfulness and define their play personality, and whether or not they were worn out by their responsibilities. (In figure 12, you can see all play personalities represented.)

When we thus look at their rating of 'do you identify as an adult', we can see that they all, except one, did feel adult. Half (7) identified themselves more or less as adults, with a 3/5 score, four identified themselves highly as adults with a 4/5, three identified fully as adults with a 5/5 (Annex A) and only agent, Orango-Tango, didn't identify as an adult much, rating herself a 1/5. After asking her again about this rating, she clarified that she did identify as an adult because of maturity and responsibility but said that she felt that she was not one according to society's expectations. (p.3)

Considering their definitions of adulthood, each participant expressed different perspectives of what they believe adulthood to be, and in general, they overlapped with the definition we gave in the previous chapter. (pp.1-3)

As the participants were all volunteers, they had personal motivations to participate. In the participant profile survey, we learned more about their personalities and their motivations to join in. Some were there to help out a friend; others were there because they liked to play (pp.10-11).

In fact, contrary to our initial ambition to see how we can activate play in people who don't usually play, many of our participants identified as playful people who engage in play activities on a regular basis. Only a few participants did not self-describe as playful people and also did not believe in engaging in play activities much. In these cases, the motivations to participate were to help out with the research, for example. (Annex B, T3)

Nevertheless, even though the participants were rather playful people, many also

said that they felt worn down by their responsibilities and that this experience was an opportunity to find out if they could free themselves from their inhibitions or find their creative selves again. (Annexe B, T11, T15)

Figure 12

Pie chart of play personalities of participants
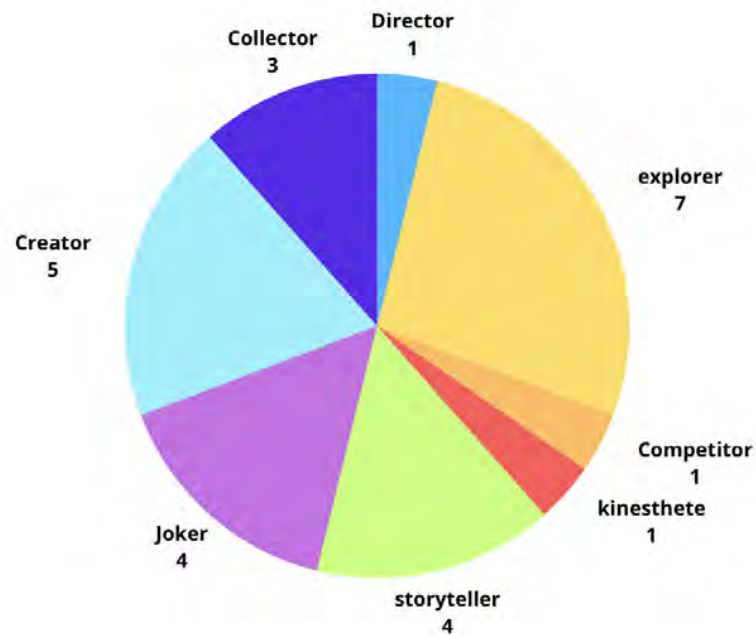
Note. Thirteen Participants chose their 2 most prominent play personalities by Steward Brown (2010). (Chart by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

J: After a short break, we will be back and we will find out what happened at MOSA.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

J: And we are back! Let a whole new chapter begin. Our goal now is to compare your findings of the case study to the psychological definitions of the play mindset: enjoyment, desire for play to continue or repeat, diminished or distorted sense of time, play is purposeful/meaningful to the player. Furthermore, we will discuss lower self-consciousness, lower embarrassment, imagination, curiosity, self-directed play, in relation to each strategy (group, storytelling, pizza-map, costumes, missions and game structure/ game masters) in order to evaluate how they worked in activating play. Each strategy is unique in its potential, yet tightly interlinked with all the others - therefore some situations are discussed in relation to strategy one when they could also be discussed in relation to another.

4.1 General play experience

Journalist:
Let's dive right in. Did participants enjoy their time at the Ministry?

Aurélie the researcher:
First, let's have a look at their overall rating of their experience (Annex E, column D). All participants rated their experience very highly: 5 rated it a 4 (D4, D8, D9, D13, D16), 8 rated it a 5 (D2, D3, D7, D10, D11, D12, D14, D15) and one did not fill out the form. In terms of how much they enjoyed their experience, it seems to be rather positive.

Second, when we have a look at their answers to the question, 'How was your experience?' during the evaluation talks, participants answered with 'it was fun, interesting. Different' (Tsipoura), 'I really enjoyed it' (Kukubadi), 'Interesting' (Seafish), (Annex H, p.42). In Group 2, things like 'Entertaining' (Meuf), 'Fun' (Muna), 'fun and energizing, I was tired but energized' (Jeeeey) (Annex I, p.86) were said. Group 4 did not react to the question directly; Bubblemaker said "it was perfect, but missing evaluation". Group 5 liked their experience very much; Xico Fininho, for

example, "was happy to leave the house in the end." (Annex L, p.147) and Orango-Tango "liked it a lot. not knowing what was going to come was part of the game. she was happy to be surprised." (ibid.) Group 3 did not answer the question as a second session was planned and the question was supposed to be asked after the second playdate. The general enjoyment of this experience was thus very high.

J: Did they want to continue playing or come back for more sessions?

A: Many of the participants expressed the desire to continue their play. Group 2 agreed that they would do it again, not immediately after but after a bit of time had passed (Annex I.G2, p.92). Group 5 and Group 3, who only played the first two acts, unanimously expressed motivation to come back for a second playdate. In fact, Bugigangas said in the evaluation survey (Annex E) that her least favorite part was "The fact that it ended. (Loved everything!)" (F11), underlining this statement with "I want to play moreeeee." (M11) in answer to the last question "Want to add something?". Similarly, her playmate Serôdio wrote "I want to come back"[4] (M13) and Côdeas proposed for this to be a regular thing: "the agents should have scheduled moments throughout the year to play together"[5] (M12)

In fact, two agents from Group 1 came back for a third round. Although Seafish and Tsipoura were not very vocal about this question in the evaluation talk of Group 1, Seafish asked me, 'When can we play again?' in a private conversation. He had brought one of his friends (future agent bubblemaker) who himself wanted to join too, and we talked about the ministry with great excitement (Annex H, p.38).

Then, when the friends organized another playdate, it became ever more clear how invested they were in this game. In fact, during the pizza evaluation of Group 4, they made plans for more future playdates (Annex K, p.129) and imagined how they could create harder levels or engage with other agents (p.130). Bubblemaker himself was still a bit reserved, which was to be expected as it was only his first time. Nevertheless, he also showed himself willing to play again (observation notes).

As for unwillingness to continue, we observed only 2 cases. Agent Kukubadi, who mainly participated to help out with research (Annex B, T3), said that 'it's not my

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[4] "Quero voltar"

[5] "Os agentes deveriam ter momentos agendados ao longo do ano para brincarem juntos."

style and I wouldn't do it again.' (Annex H, p.55). Unsurprisingly, when agent Seafish and agent Tsipoura came back for a third play day (Group 4), Agent Kukubadi did not. Agent Fishstick did not come back either; this might be because of the social pressure of her romantic partner, Kukubadi, but it could also be any other reason.

Further, the two first groups mentioned that their energy level was very low on the second day (Annex H, p.55; Annex I, p.69) and that it was harder for them to get into play then (Annex I, pp.85-88). Group 1 said that they were quite tired and that they only came back on the second day because they made a commitment (Annex H, p.55).

This is why, after the first two groups, we decided to change the planning of the playdates (Annex I, p.71). It seemed to us that straining their mental and physical capacities could actually stain their entire experience, causing it to remain in their memory as yet another responsibility that they had to fulfill instead of a good play memory (Annex I, p.80).

For the following groups, we then proposed to play on different weekends. This gave us the opportunity to, on the one hand, observe whether or not they wanted to come back and, on the other, see if they were more playful and motivated with this approach. Unfortunately, however, we did not manage to organize second playdates with groups 3 and 5 and cannot answer this question in their cases. Concerning the reason we were not able to organize a second play date with these groups, it was clearly a question of busy agendas and not their lack of willingness to play, as you could read above. On the contrary, agents said several times in personal messages (we do not have consent to share these messages) that they wanted to organize a second playdate but that they had difficulty finding time between jobs and other hobbies and their family time.

Moreover, we noticed that the more often we played with the participants, the more refined their feedback became about their engagement and their willingness to play again. Seafish commented in the evaluation talk about his second participation:

"To be honest with you, the first time I tried it, I thought maybe I will like it or maybe I won't. But then you feel like it's something new and I really like it. It is better than doing something else. Because it was really something which I enjoyed."(Annex K, p.134)

In his case, we really can see how novelty and the challenge to do things differently were driving motivations for him to come back.

All in all, we can say that, first, most participants were excited at the end of their participation, expressing their support for MOSA and their possible future participation.

Second, being tired and a lack of interest can diminish the motivation to continue or to come back. Third, the more Tsipoura and Seafish play, the more they become engaged and motivated to come back.

J: Did they lose a sense of time? Were they thinking of other things besides play?

A: Most groups mentioned something along the lines of time having passed quickly. Groups 3 and 5 thought that time had passed without them noticing at the end of the pizza-map-making (Annex J, p.105; Annex L, p.151). In Group 1, Kukubadi said something interesting, which hints that she was so immersed that she forgot to smoke: "It is amazing, amazing, I didn't smoke. Nada" (Annex H, p.46). Furthermore, Group 2 evaluated a bit further. Agent Muna said that "time was passing but we were not thinking about time, it wasn't heavy." Meuf fatale said: "When we finished around 8 or 9 in the evening, I thought, oh wow, is it this late already?", and Jeeeey added: "We were not keeping track of time. I could estimate the time, probably quite exact, but we were not thinking about the passing of time." (Annex I, p.87).

J: How was their emotional experience?

A: As Scott Eberle (2014) said, play is an emergent process driven by positive emotions, it is not a static moment in time or a constant feeling of flow. In order to understand what their journey through these emotions was, we asked the participants to arrange these emotions (Eberle's 6 stages and their synonyms plus anti-play emotions) in a timeline according to their experience, leaving space to add their own vocabulary (see Annex G, p.30).

As a result, in order to visualize their emotional evolutions, we created emotional 'roller coaster' charts, each group having their own chart (Annex M). Some participants added emotions to their timeline, which we then approximately placed on the chart. In these cases, we placed a tag next to the cross to identify this emotion. It is important to mention that this chart is an approximative visualization, as each participant answered the question a little differently and played a different number of acts, and the horizontal axis cannot be seen as a linear timeline.

Looking at the charts in Annex M, the first thing that stands out is that all participants started with anticipation, curiosity, surprise, and excitement, and most of them evolved towards feeling capable, confidence, or even poise and contentment. The first glance thus already gives us a hint that they roughly passed through the play emotions defined by Eberle, although not linearly.

The second thing that becomes apparent is that most participants fluctuated between the play emotions and the non-play emotions, some more often than others. Only Tsipoura, Muna, Bugigangas, and Bubblemaker didn't seem to have felt any of those negative emotions in their experience.

These negative emotions were mostly described as sporadic feelings that did not last for a long time. For example, Agent Seafish said, "I was stressed when we were next to the kids who were playing because I imagined the wrong judgment that people might take." (Annex E, K3) which, in the evaluation talk, he said passed as soon as they continued their journey away from the children (Annex H., p.50). Xico Fininho (see fig. 13) wrote, "When we were left alone: embarrassment, wondering, sadness." (Annex E, K17). This moment was when Missfish let them go out into the streets alone to look for evidence. Shortly after, the group decided to go for a drink (Annex L, p.148) and Xico Fininho felt "courageous, confidence" again.

Nevertheless, although sporadic, the negative emotions were experienced as bad moments. We can see that, in the case of Xico Fininho (Annex E, F17) and 1000K (F18) and Fishstick (F4), their least favorite part of the entire experience was also when they were left alone in the first mission. 1000K and Xico Fininho reported that they were a little scared at the beginning when they were left alone (Annex L, p.149), they therefore 'needed to stop and let the situation sink in' (p.148), 1000K also added that her play is a private matter, and going into a public space gave her anxiety (p.149) (which is usual for adults as we have mentioned in Chapter 2).

Although we could think that the fluctuation between play and anti-play emotions was a sign of the absence of play, we have to take into account that the general evolution went from anticipation to strength and even poise. If we did not see an elevation in play emotions after their moment of anxiety, it would have been a sign that the experience was generating anxiety more than play. However, because they all quickly found their way back to play emotions and, in most cases, ended in either confidence or poise, we can only assume that these negative emotions were overcome

by the bigger will to play and that the play emotions overwhelmed the anti-play emotions.

Figure 13

Emotional rollercoaster Group 5
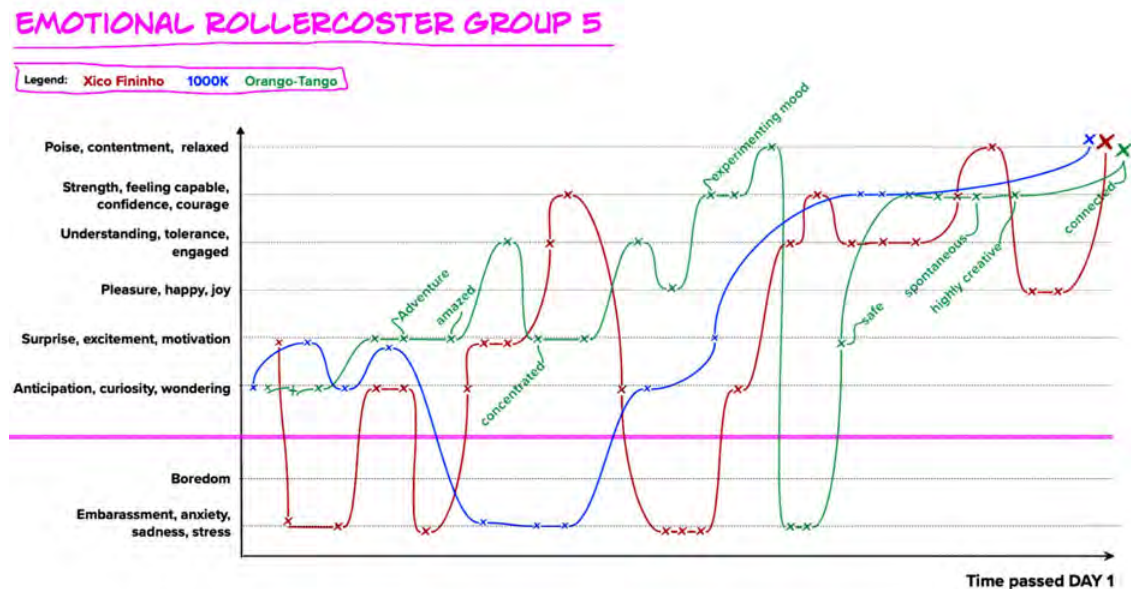
Note. This rollercoaster only represents their first day of play. Crosses are approximately placed. (Chart by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

> **Journalist: We can see one very intriguing emotional rollercoaster in figure 14: the one of Meuf fatale. Can you tell us about that?**

A: Indeed, Meuf fatale's experience fluctuated emotionally quite a lot, and she had many moments of boredom, stress, and anxiety and ended in "anxiety about my own things, but contentment about having experienced this" (Annex E, K8).

There can be different reasons beyond our capacity for Meuf fatale's emotional rollercoaster, but we will try to give a possible explanation.

Looking back at her participant profile, she claimed to feel fully adult (5/5) (Annex B, p.13, I11), had a lot of responsibilities, and felt worn down by them (J11). On the other hand, however, she considered herself a very playful (4/5) person (L11) and also very creative but didn't like to be creative (Annex I, p.91). Moreover, she

claimed to be a director and a kinesthete as a play personality (Annex C, D8, E8) which were two of the most rare of play personalities.

Furthermore, when we look at her evaluations, Meuf fatale's favorite part was "the introduction and immersion into this parallel universe. Being stimulated to dive in it without having to force myself to be overly creative." (Annex E, L11) and her least favorite moment was when

> "Sometimes we get into very complicated conversations about rigidity and stiffness that touch upon inner workings within ourselves that are not really "fun" to think about. So talking about things that are not going so well for us personally is also difficult" (F8)

It seems that Meuf fatale's play-experience was heavily undermined by four factors. First of all, her mental predisposition and her personal responsibilities pulled her back into feeling stressed. Second, the play activity for two days could have worn her down more than it energized her. Third, the activities might not have fulfilled her play needs as a kinesthete enough. Fourth, the mental activities that required some mental responsibility from her, such as to find a solution to a problem or to self-reflect, put pressure on her. We suppose that the game was lacking the full intensity of bodily activity that would let her mind experience ease. All in all, the activity apparently pulled her into play mainly at the beginning but became more complicated during the moments where the group was more responsible for their own choices. Later we will show that our own performance could also have influenced these feelings.

J: What meaning did this experience have in the participants' lives at this moment?

A: Some participants found less meaning beyond fun than others. To agent Jeeeey, for example, the experience did not go beyond "having some fun with friends and trying out something interesting." (Annex E, I9). To others, however, the experience was also a new way to socially bond (I2, I9, I11). Tsipoura for example realized "how much closer to ur friends u can come by having simple conversations and sharing ideas. It was [...] another way to come closer by doing something out of the norm" (Annex E, I2).

Figure 14

Emotional rollercoaster Group 2
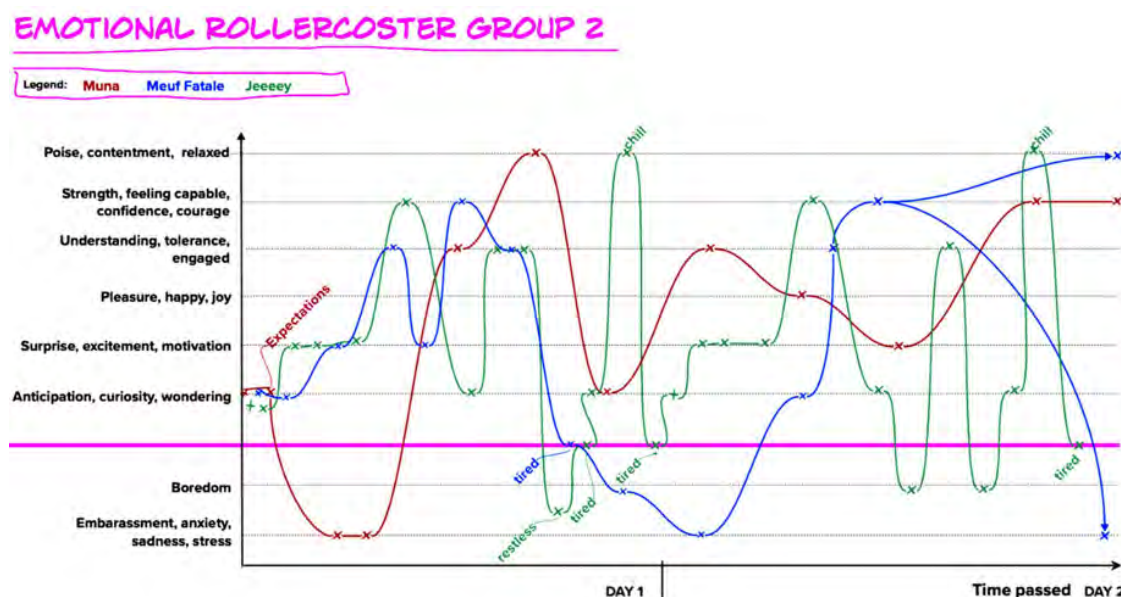
Note. (Chart by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

More symbolic reasons related to the story of MOSA were also mentioned. Seafish said "That there are small things we can do to make the planet spinning" (I3) and to Serôdio it was a reminder of how awkward people in the world are around *strangeness* and difference and that he enjoyed triggering reactions with his *strangeness*[6] (I13).

Furthermore, a few agents found their experience to have taught them something about themselves. To Fishstick, MOSA seemed to make her more extroverted from time to time (I4) similar to Bubblemaker, who sees MOSA "as a way of increasing self-confidence" (I15). Meuf fatale too saw a meaning in "Trying to live a life in the present, connecting to a more intuitive and self-loving version of myself." (I8) and lastly, Xico Fininho questions "why we are so stiff most of the time and a bit about how I should not forget to slow down sometimes and just enjoy seeing what is around me" (I17).

The most represented meaning however, was that this experience was a reminder of the importance of play and playfulness and childlike happiness. This experience for example, showed Côdeas that it was really good to get out of the traditional way of

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[6] "O facto de seres diferente torna as pessoas apreensivas. É muito engraçado abordar as pessoas e esperar a sua reação."

being an adult[7] (I12), similarly to Orango-Tango who felt the "Happiness about breaking out of routines and doing something different by diving into another personality and "world". " (I19). Furthermore, it "Reminded [Bugigangas] of the wonderful things that happen when you play (childmode) with others and your imagination has no limits." (I11), and 1000K remembered "what was playing as a kid, seriously yet about nothing serious" (I18). And finally, MOSA helped Muna to see that "tasks can be done with a playful attitude" (I7),

We can see from their answers how this experience impacted almost every participant in one way or another. While we cannot conclusively say whether or not this entire experience is optimal for the activation of play or even a state of play, we can see by the meaning this experience had for agents: that the wish to play or to explore different ways of being adults was sparked. Even the participants whose meaning was not linked directly to play found meaning that pushed themselves to be and see things differently.

4.2 Play activating elements

4.2.1 Groups

J: Let's move on to the first strategic choice of yours, to invite groups of friends instead of strangers. How did this choice affect their play?

A: When we look at groups and their play, the first thing that became evident was the fact that safety that comes with the group helped to overcome embarrassment, especially when they went into public space all dressed up. Group 1, for example, unanimously felt less alone in their strangeness because they were in a group. It "served as a hiding place" (Annex H, p.46). Seafish also said that he felt "confident and relaxed because I was in a group." (Annex E, K3). Group 5 said that they were scared at first "but we were together. It was strange not to be strange." (Annex L, p.145) and they also used the group as a hiding place. For example, Xico fininho and Orango-Tango were happy that 1000K talked to strangers because it felt too far out of their comfort zone.

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[7] "que é mesmo bom sair da forma tradicional de ser adulto."

Furthermore, feeling part of a group (or frame of reference) helps, especially when applied to a larger context. For example, when Group 1 went into the streets, they felt strange, but when they met a strange-looking Spanish lady and they took a picture together (see Annex H, p.59), Seafish reported feeling comfortable again, and his self-consciousness went away (Annex H, p.52). In this example, we can see how becoming part of a larger societal group and frame of reference where strange looks were accepted changed their perception of themselves, and their self-consciousness was diminished.

The second impact that group dynamics had was that they drove play and made play easier. Tsipoura explained that

"you do it with people is not only the confidence that people give you, your comfort zone. It is also the sharing. I imagine myself if I were alone, I would be seeing stuff but then I wouldn't think so much or discuss it, as we were doing. (…) so I think it brings more insights on your mission when you are with others.". (Annex H, p.47)

Moreover, another example of how sharing a frame with other people could drive play forward could be observed in Group 3. They did not feel embarrassed or self-conscious about their strangeness and were more actively in search of other groups of people with whom they could share some *strangeness*. They noted that adults were always serious and interacted less. Children, however, especially a group of three, were more fun to interact with. (Annex J, p.110). In other words, they found their play partners, with whom they shared a frame.

Third, we could observe that knowing that they were not the only groups in this project was a motivator for play. For example, Kukubadi, whose play personality is 'competitor' said that knowing that they were the first group to participate motivated her to be the best (Annex H, p.45). Further, on a softer note, when Tsipoura and Seafish came to play with Bubblemaker (Group 4), they suggested organizing a convention of all the groups, where they would exchange about their missions and see how the game can further develop (Annex K, p.135). Agent Serôdio also suggested to gather all agents and play in a populated busy space like the city center or a mall or a park[8] (Annex E, L13) Here we can see how the playgroups were not isolated from one another, but that, the more we played, the more MOSA became its own frame of reference, so much so that they even felt open to share with strangers.

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[8] "Juntar todos os agentes e brincar numa zona onde haja muita gente (baixa, centro comercial, jardim..."

On a negative note, however, being in a group also means that one is in constant negotiation about what to play. Group 2, for example, decided to work on a crafting project that did not serve everyone's needs. Agent Jeeeey didn't enjoy the building of the flowboat as much (Annex E, F9) as Muna, who's favorite part it was (Annex E, E8). We have seen in Chapter 2 that children are freer and more flexible in their play. Adults, however, are more and more conscious of their preferences and become more selective about their play activities. Therefore, it can sometimes become difficult to find a play situation where everybody finds something to play about.

4.2.2 Installation

Journalist: Can you tell us about the effect of this "participatory-art- playground-frame"?

Lili the artist:

Yes, the installation and in general the artistic parts of the experience were quite important to us, because it is where I feel most playful, it is the world that I created through play. So it is important, not just for Aurélie, the researcher, but as an artist, to explore its effect on the play experience.[9]

Let me tell you about the two installations I created. Although play was supposed to happen only in Graça, a force majeure made us move the ministry to a different location, Campo de Ourique (Annex J, p.99). The installations at the two locations were indeed very different from one another as you can see in figure 15.

Although the installation in Graça was already very colorful and immersive, we found that the installation in Campo de Ourique was even more immersive because it felt more light and more like a mysterious rabbit hole where barely anything from the original spaces was identifiable (Annex P, pp.168-170). Furthermore, the location in Graça was on the ground floor and was in one big room, without divisions, whereas in Campo de Ourique, the participants first had to go down mysterious stairs to get to the

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[9] As we had forgotten to ask the participants about the artistic choices in the evaluation talks and also in the survey, we sent them personal messages asking them to rate the artistic choices and also to evaluate it in an open question. Both questions and answers were added to the excel sheet of Annex E, column N and O.

basement with meandering corridors, giving it a feel of Alice in Wonderland's rabbit hole.

Figure 15

Installations MOSA comparison: Graça - Campo de Ourique

Note. (l.) installation view Graça. (Photo by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023). (r.) installation view Campo de Ourique. (Photo by Anna Ablogina, 2023).

When it comes to what the participants thought of the installation, both installations had an effect of immersion. Group 3, who played in the second version, showed surprise when they, at the end of the game, peeked through to the other side of the curtain (Annex J, p.105). This, in our eyes, means that we managed to transform the space truly into something immersive. Some participants, who helped me tidy up after the playdate, also showed their admiration of its transformation because they saw what the space otherwise looked like. (Annex E, O18, Annex I, p.76).

Furthermore, the entire situation was kind of like wrapping paper, which framed and set the tone for the entire play experience. Group 2, for example, said that it was specifically nice to participate in something that someone else put a lot of effort into and in which they just had to concentrate on play. It made them think of their childhood, where their parents took care of all the responsibilities and they could concentrate on the play. (Annex I, p.88) Furthermore, Meuf fatale specifically liked "the introduction and immersion into this parallel universe. [...] The surroundings already helped visualize the game" (Annex E, E8).

As we had forgotten to ask specific questions about the artistic choices we made,

we asked them later through personal messaging, "Please rate from 1-5. Do you think the environment I created (the Ministry's interior) helped you enter a play mindset?". and "What about the installation was helpful to switch from 'normal life' to a 'play mindset', and what wasn't?" It allowed us to evaluate more precisely how it affected their play immersion.

From all the agents who answered our request (8 out of 14), seven rated the art work 5/5 while one rated it a 4/5 (Annex E, column N). Supporting these ratings, what they said about the installation was also generally very positive. They said that it was 'a great idea, and very engaging', (Annex E, O5), 'fundamental' (O7), that it was "a completely new experience and to immerse people in a playful and relaxed environment" (O18) which made it easy to enter play (O12) because "it was clear: Now you stepped into this world, go and be part of it (Play)!" (O19). Especially "Your makeup and devotion to the character, and also the way the room, with all the carpets, was clearly different than a normal living room." (O9).

However, which part of the installation they preferred varied in some cases. For Orango-Tango, for example, the entire first ritual part was the most helpful to disconnect from the world and to enter the Play world (Annex E, O19) and 1000K thought that "Bathing the feet was an amazing detail" (O18) but for Jeeeey, "The beginning of feet washing and drinking water had less strong effect for me, but was also still nice :)" (O9).

4.2.3 Storytelling

J: The story was also a great part of the experience because it created an alternative reality and stimulated imagination. So, was it effective in taking participants on the play journey?

A: First, 10 participants rated their immersion a 5/5 while 3 participants rated it a 4/5 and 1 did not answer (Annex E, column G). Based on their rating, it seems that they were immersed in the story.

Second, their answers on 'What about the story was engaging? And what wasn't?' gave us a more detailed insight into their rating. Some agents answered shortly and generally positively; others went into a relativized evaluation of the question. (Annex E, column H).

Agent Muna, for example, "loved everything about the story and the setup!" (Annex E, I7), and agent Meuf Fatale said: "the entire story was engaging and super nice. I don't have anything I would have liked to be differently" (I8), Agent Fishstick found the story interesting because it allowed her to adopt a different perspective and to interact with the environment[10] (I4).

What exactly it was about the story that was engaging was specified by Bugigangas, for instance: "The introduction by Miss Fish, the video on TV, passport of agent." (I11). Orango-Tango too found that the story "helped to switch immediately to another "mode"! [...] all live-role part was envolving [engaging] and enchanting, all props and details were lovely and helped to get in (feet, drink, leave bad stuff on paper, reception, dressing)" (I19)

In fact, the entire first part (arrival, initiation ritual, waiting room with the TV station and the reception) as intended as one big introductive story, was generally well received by the participants. As they walked into the ministry, cleaned off their human reality in the cleansing ritual, and sat down in the waiting room, we could observe the curious looks on their faces of someone who is on the exploration journey towards the exciting unknown. (Annex I, p.73; Annex J, p.102) Nothing was yet carved into stone, and everything was new and exciting. For instance, Group 2 said that the beginning had been the most exciting part. Jeeeey, for example, claimed: "The introduction was amazing. The video was very funny. [...] The documentary part, where missifish is filmed from far away was also very funny. The beginning of the hero's journey was the strongest. It was very exciting." (Annex I, p.88)

Some agents, however, did not enjoy the video that much. Orango-tango, for example, preferred the role-playing parts because she "sometimes had problems to follow the video (could have been also my lack of focus or excitement)" (Annex E, H19). Which led her to like this part of the experience the least (Annex E, F19).

In fact, we had considered in advance the possibility of not everyone liking the video so much as a means to tell the story. Missfish therefore explained the story in a few words again when she called each agent to the reception and gave them an agent's file, which included the story in written form too (fig. 4). And indeed, it seemed like the right choice to do this as Orango-Tango approved of all the role-playing parts and Tsipoura, too, "preferred someone to tell [her] the story, like Missfish did in the

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[10] "permitiu visualizar e interagir de forma diferente com o meio envolvente."

reception." instead of watching a video. Despite her preference, she confirmed that "it was good to have multiple channels of conveying the story" (Annex H, p.36).

Additionally, other agents' answers seemed to be more about their general experience, the pizza map, or the costumes. All these elements are part of the story as the story weaves through the entire experience. However, for clarity purposes, we will get back to these answers in the sections where they fit best.

Third, the moments where it is harder to evaluate how well it went were the little moments where the storytelling aspect was less about telling the story but rather inherent to parts of the actions. We actually found out that the little fictitious additions to reality, like turning a pizza into a map, were what made the experience very important and playful. In other words, turning reality upside down and making it unreal was the trick.

Although these little storytelling aspects are hard to identify and thus to analyze, it turned out to be quite easy to understand their impact when our choices were not playful at all or when we changed or eliminated something that originally worked out fine. In the following lines, we will explain the former and leave the latter for the next section, where we will talk about pizza-map making.

Let's have a look at the less playful and imaginary choices we made. On the second day of the first group, Missfish asked them to write down the defining essence of the clues they had collected the day before. They were printed on paper, and the tools available to them were office materials. As a result, they said it felt like school (Annex H, p.56). The twist to reality was missing, and Agent Tsipoura later commented that it would be more fun to draw their findings, creating some sort of obstacle that adds humor to the task. She explained: "for example you print one and then say, 'I'm sorry but the ministry allows us only one print per mission… blabla'" (ibid.). Instead, they would have to play 'printer' themselves by drawing their own pictures. They all agreed that it was too real and needed more fiction and a humorous twist for it to be fun. (p.57)

For the second group, we then decided to make a talk show. The intergalactic reporter 'It' came to earth to report on the great missions the agents were on. This was the way we intended to give them more agency in telling and creating the story. This version, however, was equally difficult. Indeed, this moment was even Meuf fatale's least favorite moment because of overthinking and the pressure to find a solution to save the world. (Annex I, p.89).

In conclusion, we can see that storytelling is not only about telling stories but also about the little ways of turning reality into something more magical and fictitious. As we have highlighted above, the second day of the game was still too close to real life, where they had to find solutions and think about topics intellectually. As we did not have the chance to play out the second day with more groups, we can only speculate on how to playfully and imaginatively continue the storyline. It is thus especially important to continue working on the second day in order to wrap every single moment of the experience in story-telling wrapping paper.

4.2.4 Pizza-map

J: Initially, you wanted to evaluate the pizza map-making (fig. 16) as part of storytelling, but then you noticed how well participants reacted to it and decided that it deserved its own section. What did this little detail do to their experience?

A: Making a map on pizza dough at the end of the first day was one of those more efficient ways to turn reality into something fictitious. There were two different versions of the pizza-map making, one that turned out fine and another that did not do so well. As we didn't intend to analyze this part specifically, we did not specifically ask participants about it and had to refer to other comments and observations.

Almost all participants who made the first version of the pizza map seemed to enjoy the process (Annex H, p.37; Annex I, p.73; Annex J, p.110). The entire Group 5 as well as Bugigangas even said that it was their favorite part (Annex E, E11, E17, E18, E19). Agent Bugigangas reflected that it was surprising how "The pizza moment and how the rewind of what we experienced as agents outside enabled us to reflect on it" (Annex E, J11). It was like writing a diary in a playful way (Orango-Tango, Annex L, p.148) For agent Seafish, however, it was less engaging because all indoor activities made him feel sleepy (Annex H, p.55). In other words, with the exception of for Seafish, this version of pizza-making was twisting reality just enough to take away any seriousness and make way to play.

Furthermore, the pizza-map making sparked some creativity and imagination. Olives became cars, broccoli became trees, pesto or tomato sauce became streets, a

salami piece was cut into a peace sign, or cheese became pollen in the air. (Annex E, p.108; Annex L, p.152). Then, when the pizza came out of the oven, many participants imagined that they ate certain parts of their experience. For example, Serôdio was jokingly saying that he was going to eat a megaphone (sausage) and unimportant people (sweet corn) (Annex J, p.110), or when Silly Sally asked Group 5 whether nobody wanted to eat the last piece of pizza, 1000K said it was okay for Silly Sally to eat the stack of suitcases (layers of chocolate and feta) (Annex L, p.144). Moreover, Group 3 liked the idea of ingesting information and joked about how they were creating a 'zipped file' (Annex J, p.106). We can thus see that this little tweak to reality really helped them to stay in play because they were nurturing this alternative reality, leaning into the absurdity of imaginary thinking.

Figure 16

Pizza making - cozy hut

Note. Group 2 pizza making installation. (Photo by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

Nevertheless, we did not expect this pizza moment to be so substantial. In fact, after the first group, we thought we could turn the pizza-making into something even

more engaging. By changing this, however, we quickly learned that the pizza map had to stay.

In preparation for the second group, we thought that we had been too controlling of the outcome with the first group and didn't leave enough freedom for their own creativity. (Annex H, p.36) We then replaced the pizza map with a more abstract version of it for Group 2 (see p.38, the Feast, version 2). As a replacement, we had planned to ask them to recreate their findings with pizza dough (a dough lump, not a roll) and the usual ingredients (Annex I, p.93). They had complete creative freedom. However, instead of recounting their day while making a pizza, they talked and even interpreted their findings first and only afterwards created their own pizza. (p.82) As a result, they became tired and hungry (p.29).

Further, when we started the cooking show, everybody's livelihood and laughter came back. Jeeeey became the cooking show host; many jokes were made, and it was very funny to play with food. (Annex I, p.84). Meuf fatale expressed the mood quite well: "I felt exhausted by all the talking or thinking or trying to make sense of it. And then you came with the task with the food, and then I was all in again." (p.90). We can thus see, in this example, that making something with their hands was the more engaging and fun part, and recounting and interpreting their explorations was the intellectual and therefore tiring part.

In reaction to this, we could even think that we could leave out the recounting completely and simply focus on pizza-making. On the contrary, however, the recounting was a great part of finishing the day and seemed really important to all groups. In fact, many groups came back full of joy and couldn't wait until they sat down to tell Silly Sally everything that had happened (See Fig. 17) (Annex H, p.37; Annex I, p.73; Annex J, p.104).

Finally, in Group 4, where there was neither pizza-making nor any recap or evaluation straight after the game, but only a week later, it became clear that that moment was very important. Agent Bubblemaker has several times mentioned that not having a recap at the end of the game was his least favorite part. (Annex E, F15, H15; Annex K, p.125).

We thus plan to keep the pizza-map-making part on the first day, and we are even considering integrating it into all playdates we will have with adults, no matter whether it is the first, second, or third day of play. This way, it becomes a ritual to look forward to, and we can round up the experience in a relaxed, playful manner.

Figure 17

Group 3 reporting on their first mission

Note. Group 3 tells Silly Sally about humans using weird rectangular flat things to talk to themselves and how their devices are much more versatile. (Photos by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

4.2.5 Costumes

J: Costumes are a very visually impactful part of MOSA. They function as part of the frame of reference and also part of the storytelling. Now, how did the costumes influence the agents' play?

A: The costumes were essential to the participants' experience. It did not matter whether or not the participants had an affinity with costumes beforehand; they seemed to be one of the most explicitly helpful strategies. Five out of thirteen agents reported that one of their favorite parts was to dress up or to be dressed up (E2, E3, E7, E13, E19), of whom three said it was because they wouldn't normally do this (E2, E3, E13).

In fact, when we look closer at their experience, we can see that costumes were, to a great extent, responsible for, first, their immersion into play, second, their immersion in the alternative reality, and third, their overcoming embarrassment and

feeling generally encouraged to explore outside of their comfort zone.

First, let's have a look at how costumes helped many agents enter the play. Muna, for example, reported that being dressed up helped her to get into the 'play modality' (Annex I, p.88). When we compare this to our observation, we can see that after a rather passive immersion into the story during the introduction part, participants started to be more lively (Annex I, p.75; Annex L, p.140), talk, and laugh while trying out different costumes and inventing their characters. Especially observable were Groups 2 and 3 in this respect. Group 3 tried on all kinds of costume elements, chose many tools, imagined their possible functions, and were inventing names for their agent characters (Annex J, p.103). Group 2 even invented tools and used tape and other elements to create weapons (Annex I, p.75). These weapons were at the disposal of all the following groups.

Moreover, even the less observable participants, such as those from Group 5, who were more quiet, experienced initial play feelings (Annex L, p.140). Xico Fininho claimed that the making of the costume was the moment he started to play and even said that this part could be the whole play. (Annex L, p.150), Orango-Tango added that the costumes were very playful and that the variety of costume elements and the modular elements sparked their creativity (ibid).

Second, the costumes were a gateway into the alternative reality. Participants could, by dressing up, start to identify themselves with the world and the story and become themselves part of it. Meuf fatale explained it in other words: "the costumes were also the bit of the world, the story you [Lili] created, which we took with us into the streets. It was the mobile form of the story." (Annex I, p.89) Furthermore, Xico Fininho, who was feeling "embarrassment, wondering, sadness" when left alone to go into the streets (Annex E, K7), found out "How easy it ended up to be to embrace the story and go out in costumes around the neighborhood" (Annex E, J17). To agent Serôdio, on his side, dressing up was a way of getting out of his own routine and to dive into a parallel life, an imaginary world. (Annex E, E13)[11].

Third, although costumes pushed them out of their comfort zone, they also helped them overcome inhibitions and explore different behaviors. While, to some agents, going out of their comfort zone was freely chosen, others were rather avoiding it, yet were surprised by their capacities to do so.

On the one hand, we have the agents who adventurously went out of their

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[11] "sair da minha rotina e criar uma vida paralela, um mundo imaginário."

comfort zone. Agent Tsipoura, for example, enjoyed the challenge of dressing up and having to be out of the norm. (Annex E, E2). She chose the longest veil of 3 meters that she could find, and she loved leading the group with a theatrical high chin and dramatic music in the background when they left the ministry to go outside into the streets (see fig. 18). To agent Bubblemaker too, the costumes were an invitation to explore what was outside of his comfort zone, and he tried to choose the most crazy costume elements (Annex K, p.129). During the game, he even tried out several movements in his costume in combination with his bell, which were quite loud and made people watch in the street (p.127). Nevertheless, although both explored the limits of their comfort zone, both claimed to not have felt embarrassed or uncomfortable at any time. (p.129).

On the other hand, we have those who did not actively look to step outside their comfort zone but who were surprised by how much they liked it and felt comfortable. Kukubadi, for example, would never do this in her free time, yet she enjoyed it a lot (Annex H, p.42). Agent 1000K said, "I would like to do it [dressing up in general] but it seems too much effort." (Annex L, p.146) And Muna said, "If you had told me beforehand that I had to do all those things (dressing up, going out on the street, talking to strangers) I would have said straight away that I will not do it. (Annex I, p.88), " yet she "really loved [...] the dress up on the first day" (Annex E, E7).

In both cases, it looked as if the costumes gave them more courage and took away embarrassment, as Orango-Tango said herself (Annex L, p.151). In agent Bubblemaker's case, this was literally true. He felt like the protector and was protected with his weapon (a tiny garden shovel on a stick). (see Annex K, p.127) In the case of Fishstick and Xico Fininho, the tinted glasses offered a hiding place in bright daylight, which made them feel more protected. (Annex H, p.46; Annex L, p.145). As a result, Agent Fishstick said that she seemed to become more extroverted (Annex E, I4). In our observations, we noticed as well that Agent Fishstick was very shy at the beginning of the game, not even showing her face for pictures (Annex H, p.40), but further on, on the second day, during her favorite part of the game, playing ball in the streets (Annex E, E4) she was not using the glasses anymore (Annex H, p.37). This shows us that Fishstick became more courageous along the way and less and less needed the protection of the glasses.

Figure 18

Agent Tsipoura and her costume

Note. Tsipoura being fearless. (Photos by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

Moreover, they behaved differently than if they were dressed 'normal'. Meuf fatale said: "It kind of gave me permission to talk to strangers randomly. Because as soon as you are dressed up and you approach people, they are intrigued at least to hear you out and not weirded out." In the case of Côdeas, to feel like a different person made her go out of her comfort zone. So much even, she never thought it would be this freeing. (Annex E, J12)[12] Similarly, it was surprising to Muna "To understand that I can be so immersed that I don't care about being dressed funny outside" (Annex E, G7).

J: Agent Seafish went through an interesting process concerning costumes. Can you tell us about it?

With Seafish, we noticed that costumes are not an automatic eraser of inhibitions, but rather a transitional material that triggers inhibitions and then becomes

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[12] A interação com os desconhecidos. O facto de me sentir outra pessoa fez-me sair da minha zona de conforto e ser completamente livre. Nunca pensei que seria tão libertador.

the driver to overcome them. With Seafish, we could witness an especially deep transition over the course of three playdates concerning the costumes. Let me illustrate.

Agent Seafish comes from a culture where the way you dress has big symbolic power. Seafish told us in a private conversation that one shouldn't appear in front of an authority figure, such as an uncle, in short pants because it is a sign of disrespect. One should rather wear long pants (Annex H, p.38). Furthermore, his professional occupation has to do with censoring inappropriate and immoral behavior on the internet. (Annex H, p.50) This means he spends a lot of time with the question of what appropriate behavior is and how we can discern from self-presentation (including clothes) whether or not a person might be dangerous. We can thus imagine that, while any other adult is already quite conscious of frames and their image projected to the world, Seafish must have had an even stronger relation to this question.

In order to explain his transition, we will, in the following pages, describe his process chronologically.

To start with, when Group 1 came to the ministry, agent Seafish didn't want to dress up much. In the end, he chose a purple backpack on his front, an orange baking glove and chopsticks (fig. 19)

Figure 19

Agent Seafish and his costume

Note. (Photo and collage by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

Then the group went out on their first mission to find out what *strangeness* moves the world. When they were walking past a playground full of cheerful children, they thought, 'This truly is a sign of *strangeness*: the giggles of children move the world.' (Annex H, p.43). However, when they wanted to record this evidence in order to bring it back to the office, Seafish and some of his colleagues started to feel like it was inappropriate to take pictures or even to record the sounds of the children. He was self-conscious and thought about what the parents would think of this weird person lurking behind the wall of a playground. In the evaluation talk, they discussed the topic, and it became clear that the colorful costumes made Seafish feel exposed and feel that people would judge him. The colorful costumes were, in effect, pointing a finger at them. He in fact said that if he had been with strangers in this play situation, he would not have worn any costume. (Annex H, pp.49-52)

After the playdate, thinking that the costumes and negative feelings that came with them for him were too strong, we didn't expect him to have liked any part of the experience, let alone to want to come back. But then, to our surprise, in the evaluation survey, he said that the most surprising element of his experience was "Wearing strange clothes" (Annex E, G3) and, above all, his favorite thing was "The clothes because something I wouldn't do it before" (Annex E, E3).

Motivated and intrigued by this novelty, he organized a second playdate with Group 4. This time around, he seemed more comfortable in his skin. To our surprise, in the evaluation talk, he then said that he felt the urge to interact with people and even children in the streets. "Maybe next time he would be closer to children [...] Because it seemed more funny and not like creeps anymore. There were many people who were curious. Next time we could involve them." (Annex K, pp.127-128) We can see here how his perception of the outsider's gaze radically changed from one playdate to another. While the first time he thought he was judged, this time he thought people were curious about the play.

Furthermore, as Missfish joined them in their exploration of the streets this time around, he thought that Missfish's extravagant *strangeness* helped. "Missfish looks more like a character that wants to make people smile (clown)," which inspired him to think that next time he could choose an "even more attractive, more crazy dress up, paint face pink or smth.". (Annex K, p.131). In other words, Missfish functioned as a role model as well as a hiding place, which gave him confidence.

We can thus see, for Seafish, that although the costumes were his biggest challenge, they seemed to also be his biggest motivator. His discomfort was not a reason to stop playing, but playing was the reason to overcome his discomfort.

We had to learn from Seafish that, while our ego was excited about agents who could immediately let go of their embarrassment and dive into an alternative role with ease, difficult moments, inhibitions, and adult emotions are not always simply anathema to play but also sometimes material for play. He also showed us that play activation can be a slow and almost invisible process and that it is essentially through the player's will that the play activation happens. MOSA can be a place for confronting our adult demons slowly, for daring to go out of the comfort zone an inch at a time.

We are curious to see what can happen in future playdates with Agent Seafish. Maybe he will end up playing with many kids, dressed up most extravagantly, all without any embarrassment.

4.2.6 Missions

J: Missions were part of the story line and were intended to drive the entire play process. How did the missions impact their play? What was good about them, and what wasn't?

A: First, let's have a look at how the groups played out the first mission. The basis of the mission was always the same: walking around in the streets and looking for *strangeness* and stiffness (Annex O, p.167). Within that structure, however, we can see completely different ways in which the groups enacted the mission. Some groups enacted the mission more intellectually, others' missions were more silly; some collected an enormous amount of evidence, others less (see Annex H, p.59; Annex I, p.93; Annex J, p.112; Annex K, p.137; Annex L, p.154).

Group 1, for example, took the mission very seriously. It was very evident that this group of friends (Annex K, p.130) liked to discuss things in detail and that they did not enter an unrealistic fictitious role-play but took the mission as a real philosophical discussion. (Annex H, p.39) They also collected many clues by taking photographs and taking notes on the Tsipouras veil, and they discussed each finding thoroughly. (Annex H, p.46)

Furthermore, Group 2's mission enactment was a mixture of, on the one hand, jokingly imaginative and, on the other, very deep and thorough philosophical evaluations of the findings they made (Annex I, p.83). They took fewer pictures but used the note-book robe more for writing notes (p.82). In contrast, Group 3 was completely into fictitious and very humorous role-playing and interacted with people. (Annex J, p.111) They gathered only a few photographs and used their agent's files to take a few notes (Annex J, p.104; see fig. 20). Yet another way of playing comes from Group 5, who were very much involved in the observation, took their time to look at things, took a few pictures, and wrote a few notes in the agent's file (Annex L, pp.154). Although they took the notebook robe on their mission, they did not use it, because "then we were too much into what was happening we did not take notes." (Annex L, p.145).

Figure 20

Agent Côdeas' agent's file

Note. they met the two 'poets' Antônio Aleixo & Paulo Rodrigues, who recited for them a poem: "Eu não trabalho para comer, Eu como para sobreviver" (I don't work to eat, I eat to survive). (Photo by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

Furthermore, the freedom to play out the game in their own way was an intentional choice on our part - we wanted free play to be able to happen. For some groups, this freedom was easier than for others, but all somehow had to find their way. Groups 1 and 5, for example, sat down at a café to have a drink, recollect, and negotiate

how to play out this mission. (Annex H, p.47, Annex L, p.145) Tsipoura (Group 1) explained that

"it was vague in a good way, because then we had to discuss the rules. Like okay what is good for the movement of the world, what is good and bad stiffness as Seafish was saying. We have to have the balance (between stiff and *strangeness*) we were saying. What is the structure, how do we put the people in the box." (Annex H, p.47)

For Group 5, going out into the street alone was a rather difficult task; they were a little self-conscious (Annex E, F18) and lost (Annex E, H17). Thus, sitting down was more of a "natural necessary step. We needed to stop and let the situation sink in" (Annex L, p.148), "to plan the way to go and accept we don't really know what to do." (Annex E, H17), and "then to see things pop up, unexpectedly like the boy dressed strangely. letting *strangeness* come to you" (Annex L, p.148), In other words, they first had to accept their new situation and then let play come to them.

When it comes to free, self-directed play, Group 3 provide the best example. Instead of deciding beforehand what is *strangeness* and what is stiffness, like in Group 1, or where to go, like in Group 5, they walked without purpose and collected any kind of thing they found curious. Above all, however, they simply indulged in their alien nature, approached humans completely ignorantly, and tried to understand how they worked. (Annex J, pp.106-109). In other words, instead of thinking about *strangeness,* they became *strangeness*, approaching reality like they knew nothing about it and letting themselves think strangely about normal things.

As we can see, the first mission was adapted by each group according to their needs and played out quite differently. There were different levels of imaginative play and different levels of interaction with people outside. It thus seems that the first mission was just defined enough to give them a direction yet open enough to let them define their own play. Free play, however, seemed to only be reached in Group 3.

Second, let's have a look at the second mission on the second day, which was only played by Groups 1 and 2. As we have explained, we intended for the second day to be ever more free in play, and therefore the groups got to decide themselves which mission they needed to fulfill. Group 1 and Group 2 are therefore uncomparable.

Concerning their choices of activity, Group 1, for example, chose to play at throwing and catching a ball on the second day (Annex H, p.60). Their mission was to

play ball becauseit makes people happy and therefore moves the world (Annex H, p.37). Group 2, on the other hand, decided to build a prototype of a 'Flowboat' that can be used by humans who feel stuck and who need to find their flow again. Additionally, they wrote a manual for anyone who wishes to use this boat (Annex I, p.74). While the first group was playing outside, trying to get other people to join them in their ball game (Annex H, p.55), the second group chose to stay inside to play on (Annex I, p.70).

J: But what did it generate in the player? What were the mental and emotional effects?

A: The first positive effect of having a mission in this experience was that it was an incentive to go outside into the streets. It gave them a reason to be strange in the street, an 'alibi', as Deterding (2017) would put it, to behave differently. Jeeeey's favorite part was, for example, "walking around in Lisbon in search for clues. Both I think because of the storytelling aspect, and having a mission". (Annex E, E9) In Group 5, being on a mission was actually an important part of their mission itself. Every time they saw a strange-looking human, they imagined what kind of mission they were on (Annex L, p.143) Or whenever they were approached and asked what they were doing, they said that they were on a secret mission (p.146).

Furthermore, another effect of the mission was that it encouraged them to look at the things in the streets differently and to explore places they would otherwise never have. Tsipoura said "We had our eyes and ears open because that was the mission and that makes it interesting because we were looking for something." (Annex H, p.42) Seafish underlined that the challenge that motivated the mission was "to find really stuff I wouldn't see if I went out alone", "I was trying to be more attentive and see better." (Annex H, p.46). In other words, the mission pushed them to be more curious and open-minded.

Moreover, the fact of being on a mission also seemed to make them more sociable and curious about other people. In fact, it was the most surprising part to many. Fishstick, who is an introvert, was surprised by her ability to interrogate/talk to other people (Annex E, J4)[13]. To Agent Côdeas, one of her favorite and most surprising parts of her experience was the play in the streets because she approached people and

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[13] "Interpelar outras pessoas."

interacted with them. (Annex E, E12, J12)[14]. Serôdio too was surprised to create moments of mutual sharing with people who initially weren't receptive and didn't want to be bothered. (K13)[15] It thus seems that they were more curious not just of the things around them but also of the people, which in turn made them behave more sociably.

Further, we noticed that when agents came back from their missions, they reported that they saw more *strangeness* than stiffness. And when we look at Fishstick's explanation, we will understand: "When you actually look around, when you really want to look, you find the strange things, the ones that are more funny or awkward. Because our lives are always filled with responsibility and gray, when you walk around with your friends and you are having fun, you start to see funny and positive things." (Annex H, p.43) As you can see, even though the mission invited them to look for both stiffness and *strangeness,* their good mood drew them more towards *strangeness*. It seems thus that the positive impact could also be the other way around, with the agents' play mindset influencing how they played the missions.

Concerning the second mission, as it allowed the agents to decide on their next activity, it opened up the chance for them to engage in more free, self-directed play. The first group chose an activity that was closer to their understanding of play: playing with a ball. Fishstick explained that throwing a ball is more basic play, and they felt carefree (Annex H, p.54). Seafish reflected further on ball games in the evaluation talk in Group 4: "Games or sports are one of the best ways to communicate and connect with someone. Because there are no other reasons to play this game than having fun, there can't be misunderstanding" (Annex K, p.131). We can thus see that freedom of thought and freedom of expectation helped them to dive into play.

In the second group, we could identify memories of happy play moments as the positive effects of their second-day mission, where they crafted a flowboat. (see Annex I, p.94) We observed a lot of conversations about the games they played as children during their building process (Annex I, p.77). Especially agent Muna was really into the building part because "I felt like home, that's how I play." (Annex I, p.90).

Although the missions had many positive effects, which come very close to our approach to play, there were also some negative things we had to point out.

The first negative effect the first mission had was when they had to go outside into the streets without the company of Missfish and fulfill the mission. Many agents

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[14] "A interação com os desconhecidos."
[15] "Criar momentos de muita partilha com pessoas que inicialmente não estavam receptivas nem queriam ser incomodadas."

reported embarrassment, anxiety, and stress during this moment, which we previously illustrated in the emotional rollercoaster chart (Annex M, p.155). It might seem contradictory to the positive effect of giving them a reason to go out into the streets, but it is not. On the contrary, as Xico Fininho said, the mission was the gateway into play (Annex L, p.149). It can be seen as a necessary obstacle to getting to the new play experience, and in combination with the costumes, it can even show them that they are more capable than what their inhibitions allow them to think. We expect that if they did not have a mission, they probably would not have overcome the embarrassment and would have avoided that situation.

Furthermore, the first mission did not feel that much like play to Group 1, according to their definition of play: The "meaning of playing is game, like fooling around, no mission, no thoughts." (Annex H, p.55). Therefore, they saw it more like an 'activity' that challenged them to look at the world differently. Kukubadi and Fishstick explained that the first day was more of a duty, a necessary preparation for the second day (Annex H, p.54). On the second day, however, their self-chosen mission was play to them because they "were using [their] brain less today, yesterday it was more close to reality". (ibid.). As they explained here, their sense of play was deeply affected by the level of intellectual thinking involved. The fact that they 'are adults and overthink things' (ibid.) held them back from playing on the first day. Both Fishstick and Seafish agreed that they could have thought less and interacted more in the first mission. (ibid.) Nevertheless, according to them, the first mission was the foundation for the second self-directed play experience and therefore a necessary step.

In Group 2, the intellectuality of the topic was equally remarkable in the first mission. Especially for Agent Meuf fatale, the topic felt too heavy: "Sometimes I got a little bit tired of the complexity of the topic. Not that it is not interesting or essential, I think it is part of the whole thing. But there were times that I thought, let's not talk about it anymore, let's do something." (Annex I, p.88) In fact, she identified these moments of overthinking and making sense of things as her least favorite moments of the experience (Annex E, F8).

Concerning the second mission of Group 2, their choice did not spark free play equally for all players, like it did in Group 1. It seemed that their choice of activity was nurturing mainly Muna's play (Annex E, E7). For Jeeeey, however, crafting was one of his least favorite parts of the entire experience (Annex E, F9), because "craft is less my plaything" (Annex I, p.90) and it was tiring and boring from time to time (Annex E,

K9), (which we can also see in the emotional rollercoaster of Jeeeey, fig.14). Curiously enough, Jeeeey claimed to be a creator-play personality (Annex C, D7), which we thought would make him enjoy this part of the game more.

We can only speculate that either the kind of creation that was possible within MOSA, given the materials available, was not as inviting to him, or that the decisions about what to play were negotiated between them and/or a result of the interference of reporter *It*. In fact, in the evaluation talk, the group mentioned that they might have been biased by reporter *It*'s suggestions (Annex I, p.89). We later reflected upon it in our auto-evaluation and had to admit that our participation in their decision-making process was again and again interfering with their progress towards free play (Annex I, p.67).

All in all, when we look at the missions and their effects, they really triggered certain positive play emotions: feeling carefree, having positive thoughts, and experiencing an uplift in humor. Furthermore, the first mission was free enough for groups to take different turns and explore with their own imagination. Furthermore, the first mission triggered curiosity, a different view of reality, going out of their comfort zone, and being more sociable. On a negative note, the mission caused a few moments of embarrassment and can be interpreted in a very intellectual way, and if this does not serve the needs of the players at that moment in their lives, it can be counterproductive.

J: As we have seen that the first group often had the urge to understand things rationally and explain everything through language, you thought it would be interesting to change the mission for Group 4 to see how they behaved in a non-verbal play activity and to see if the group could find a different form of understanding. (Annex K, p.121). Now, Missfish is dialing in to tell us, first-handedly, about it.

Hello Missfish, how was your experience?

Missfish, the game-master:

It was indeed a very interesting experience to go out with Group 4 and experience it firsthand (Annex K, p.136).

The invitation came unexpectedly. I was not really ready for it. You have to understand that during the entire week, I was completely anxious about the fact that there would be one new member and two old agents coming to play (Annex K, p.117).

We thus had to invent a whole new mission that would be challenging enough for the old agents yet initiating for the new agent, Bubblemaker. (ibid.) This situation did not leave me in a play mindset at all; rather, I was in an organizational, researcher, and facilitator mindset. Even when we went out into the streets without being able to talk, I was very much involved in the observation and in the performance and had a hard time getting playful (p.100).

What happened was that, over an hour or so, there was a lot of silence, a lot of walking side by side, and not so much laughter at first. Everybody looked around and pointed at different things. I, personally, never really knew what they meant by it. At some point, a ball game was initiated, and more interaction and laughter happened. The ball game ended because I stepped on the ball and it flattened (Annex K, p.131). I did not know why I broke the toy, and I felt bad about it in the end. (p.125) We invented a ritual for the ball (which was also an agent, I found out later) and continued our journey. Slowly but surely, more communication happened, and I felt more playful and engaged (p.126).

Further on, we entered an ice cream shop. I was the first in line and had to make the decision whether or not to break the silence to order an ice cream. I did break the silence, as I was embarrassed to be pointing fingers at things and making the people wait behind me (Annex K, p.128). Nevertheless, the game continued in silence straight after. Then, on our way back to the Ministry, Agent Seafish started to copy the sounds of birds in the street, and soon every one of them was whistling along, chatting about who knows what in bird language. (see fig. 21) This was the moment that I thought I finally stopped thinking of everything around me, and I felt like I understood and like I could be understood. It felt very much like a harmonic moment of being together (p.126).

Why do I tell you all of this? Because it is essential to understand the difference between my observations and the way the other agents experienced the play. When we discussed the moment we started to actually understand each other, I was the only one who thought it was only at the end of the game that it happened. All three of the agents agreed that it was really easy to understand each other. (Annex K, p.125)

There are several reasons why I did not feel the same harmony during the entire game as the rest of the group. The first reason was that I was not part of the friend group. They know each other so well that they sometimes don't even finish their

sentences (p.130). The second reason was that I was trapped in anxiety and expectations, which held me back from diving completely into play (p.131). My continuous observation and thinking held me back in my intellectual thoughts.

Figure 21

Group 4 - Mission 3 - play moments
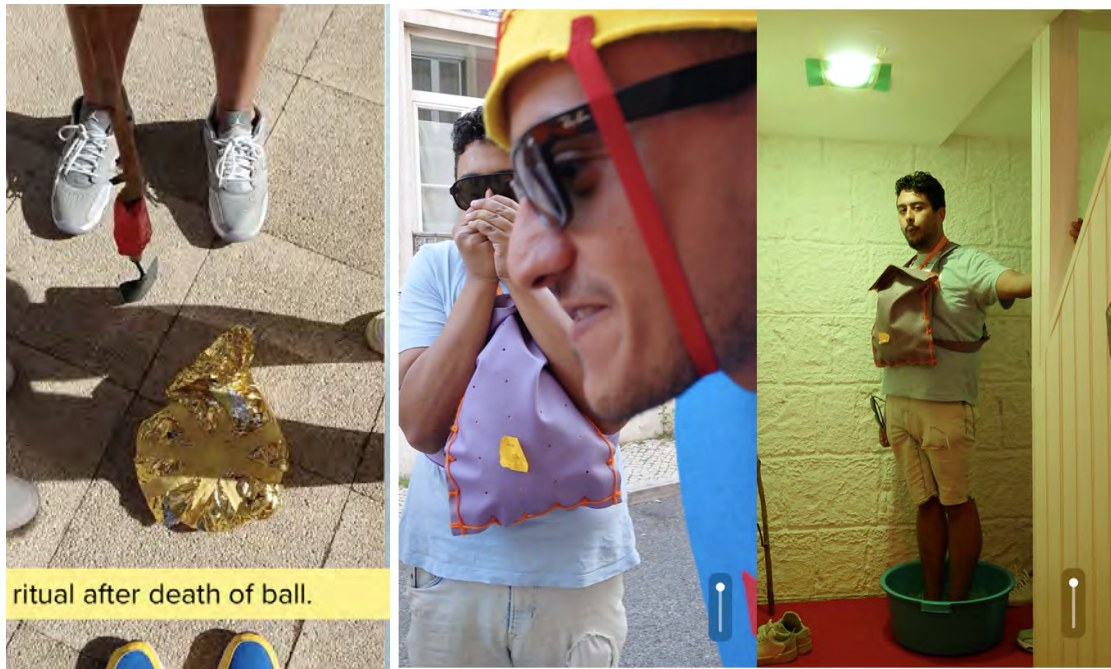
Note. l. to r. ball's funeral, whistling in the streets, seafish getting back to the office, whistling along. (Photos by Aurélie d'Incau, 2023).

Nevertheless, communication and play happened, even for me, and when we had to end the play date due to other appointments, it was hard for everyone to break the silence. Agent Seafish, for example, who suddenly noticed that he had lost his glasses, was still incapable of stopping whistling and gestured to us that he had lost his glasses (Annex K, p.123; fig. 21) It was, in my understanding, the best moment to continue to play, but unfortunately had to be broken off.

Furthermore, when we met a week later for the pizza mapping and evaluation, I found out that the mission was somewhat confusing to them too. Tsipoura said that it wasn't clear what they were supposed to do. Bubblemaker, who participated for the first time, said that he liked to know what was going to happen. (Annex E, L15) Not talking and not having any explanation at the beginning was making him feel a bit confused and unsure about what the play was about. In fact, 'too much silence' was one of his

least favorite elements of the game (Annex E, F15). As a result, Agent Bubbblemaker was more on a mission to find the mishaps in the world, while we, the old timers, were looking for strangeness again. (Annex K, p.128)

As a solution, the group proposed two things to make it better. The first would be to simplify the mission: for example, to only look for the different communication tools in the world and to say that you are not human and therefore cannot speak human language (p.133). The second proposal to make it better was to explain the mission with words inside the office of the ministry, let the group discuss how they wanted to approach the mission, and give them the rule that in the streets, speech was eliminated "and when we are back we are in the safe zone and there we can talk again." All in all, however, Tsipoura supported the idea of repeating the same mission but making it a level harder. (p.132)

Aurélie the researcher:

This example of Missfish at the *Ministry of Strange Affairs* showed us many of the workings of the play experience because she was part of it. We thus, for example, found out how impactful our own anxiety was. Missfish did not manage to enter play very much and, in some instances, even broke their game. Furthermore, the anxiety was also responsible for not creating an easy mission that could be simple and fun for everyone. The group, instead of playing a mission, had to rely on finding their own kind of play without talking, which meant that we were not necessarily playing the same game.

4.2.7 Game structure & Game Masters

J: This brings us to the last-but-not-least strategy. The game structure is the overarching strategic choice which includes all the other choices. We already touched upon many structural elements in the previous sections because they are so intertwined with the very game structure. This was why you had a hard time evaluating this, right?

A: The reason why the game structure was not easy to evaluate is that the structure is not a visible or feelable element like costumes or missions, but happened rather inadvertently and we were the only ones aware of the procedure.

So, let me just summarize the structural points which were talked about in the previous sections. First, the structure generally functioned well in terms of increasing playfulness in the participants, as we described in section 4.1 with the help of the emotional rollercoaster. Second, in section 4.2.6, on missions, we showed that the first mission left enough freedom for participants to turn this game into their own play activity. Third, we showed that, on day two, during the Wrench, participants didn't feel freedom to choose but pressure from our side to find a solution, and in Group 2 the choice of mission 2 was not perfectly serving the need of 2 out of 3 agents.

The fact that participants felt pressure to find a solution or felt like they were in school on the second day suggests that the second day was the opposite of free play. We speculate that the buildup was not the issue, but rather the attitude the game masters had while leading participants through the game, because the pressure to find a solution came from us.

J: Okay, so let's evaluate the performance of the game masters, and their effect on the agent's play, rather than evaluate the structure in itself.

A: In the first playdate, when it was our very first time to do this, we were very nervous and all the details we had played out in our head beforehand made us really restless. We were interfering a lot in their play. For example, a few times Missfish proposed costume elements, instead of letting them try on and explore. (Annex H, p.33) When the group came back from their mission, during the pizza evaluation talk, Silly Sally then proposed for olives to be cars and broccoli to be trees, which took away their imagination. She also often repeated what they said to make sure she understood. This was partially also because we felt we needed to understand everything for the research. (ibid.). Following the pizza talk, we directly dove into a theoretical reflection of their experience, again because we were very much in a researcher's mind. (p.42)

As a result, on the second day, the group was very aware of the seriousness of the research project. On top of that, during the Wrench, the group felt like something was expected of them, which we had to admit. (Annex H,p.56) In our auto-evaluation notes, we

reflected that it would be favorable for play if we were more relaxed and didn't intervene all the time and above all if we did not think of the outcome (Annex H, p.33).

With this new insight, we made some adjustments for the second group. We decided to interfere less, to leave more space for decision making and free play and, above all, to leave the evaluation talk to the end of the second day. As a result, we tried to turn the pizza making into something more free, which did not work out as well as we hoped. (For more information, read 4.2.4 Pizza-map). Moreover, on the second day, we turned the Wrench into a TV Talk show where we talked about options they had for their second mission. (Section 4.2.3, p.61)

In general, Group 2 didn't think about the expectations we had of them (Annex I, p.89), which suggests that we evolved in the right direction. Nevertheless, although we tried to ask open questions, they felt very much like we steered them in a certain direction during the Wrench - or talk show - and that the idea of the flowboat didn't entirely come from them. (p.90, p.94)

All in all, in an honest evaluation, we need to admit that, even though we tried to relax, our own expectations jeopardized our performance as game masters. We were again in a game mindset where we were focused on the goal, rather than on being open for free play. Partially responsible was our personal feeling of constant anxiety to perform ourselves, which we have shown not to be a play feeling.

However, the other reason was also that Sylvia insisted "that there is a learning curve, finalizing it with creating something from within themselves, making this experience about more than just fun and distraction from real life." (Annex I, p.70).

We had to go through a very humbling realization, that what we preached was not what we did. In theory, we were convinced that if we found a way into free play, learning and creativity would happen too; however, we were slowing down this process by being fixated on our objectives. We reflected on this after the second group: "it is still one of our greatest challenges to figure out what the role of the game master is and to what extent the participants need their help and above all when?" (Annex I, p.68)

Therefore, we made the radical decision to forget about the research and the educational and creative objectives during playdates, and let play unfold organically. We also decided to leave the second playdate for a different weekend, because both groups felt tired and came back because they had committed to the project, which we consider antithetical to play.

As a result, we could unfortunately not research the effectiveness of this decision because, with all following groups, second playdates have not happened to date. We can, however, note that the game master's attitudes for Groups 3 and 5 were improving. With Group 3, although extremely anxious beforehand, we were already much more at ease with the entire process: we didn't impose as much nor did we ask as many pertinent questions. In fact, we noticed that Group 3 were so playful that they were the ones who took us on the journey of play. At that point, we noticed that we were the adult participants who needed to reactivate play within us, and we were able to actually let go of our researcher personality and enter into a more honest mutual encounter (Annex J, pp.100-101). We are excited for the moment we have a second play date.

From Group 4, we learned that the game masters are also play partners. When Missfish was invited to play by the group, she understood that the group came to play with her. They were excited about the character of Missfish and they just wanted to play with her. (see Annex K, p.136, p.120).

All in all, we think that the role of the game master still needs to be developed better. Judging by the previous examples, we expect the role of the game master to develop away from the facilitator's role, and more and more towards that of a collaborator.

Conclusion

Journalist:

The main purpose of this study was to gain insight into the psychological process of play in adults and to explore ways to activate play in adults in your artwork *the Ministry of Strange Affairs*. What were your takeaways?

Aurélie the researcher:

The research started off in Chapter 2 with the necessary definition of the ambiguous term 'play'. We used Huizinga (1949) to set the basis of this discussion, defining play as distinct from everyday life, creating a 'magic circle' (an alternative reality like a game situation) where real-life rules or real-life material interests don't apply but where players agree to alternative rules and order in, as it were, an alternative space-time continuum. We made the distinction between game and play, in line with Caillois' 'paidia' (play) and 'ludus' (game) (D'Afflon, 2012), and proposed to see them on a spectrum where 'game', as rule based, competitive, systemized and repeatable, is on one side, and 'play', as free of external rules, intrinsically motivated, imaginative, explorational, improvisational and above all process-oriented, is on the other side. At the very extreme of play, there is the free, self-directed play, which we know so well from children's play and which adults rarely engage in. For our educational and artistic ambitions, we clarified that we are striving towards a more free, improvisational play rather than a competitive, rules-based game.

Nevertheless, the word game was still used in a Bogostian way, to explain the structure while the word 'play' is used to denote the action or experience within the game structure.

Furthermore, on a psychological level, through the knowledge of Gray (2013) and Brown and Vaughan (2010), we described play as a state of mind manifesting itself when the players are absorbed by and find enjoyment in an activity which they don't feel pressured in, which they have desire for continuation or repetition of, and which they stop being conscious about the time that is passing and experience lower self-consciousness during. In the highest form of play, players are in a 'state of play' or 'flow', which happens rarely in adults, but very often in children.

Therefore, we didn't approach the case study with the expectation of finding flow. We were looking for play as a state of mind in terms of an emergent process as Eberle (2014) suggests, in which the player goes through different positive emotional states. These 6 rough stages are anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength and poise and don't appear necessarily in a linear fashion. Negative emotions which are 'anti-play' emotions are indifference, sadness, boredom, anxiety and embarrassment, among others (Eberle, 2014, Panksepp, 2014, S. M. Brown & Vaughan, 2010).

This knowledge was imperative for the case study as we needed to find out if the experience of the participants matched this information about play as a state of mind.

For our case study, we looked for people who identify as adults, as we argued that the concept of adulthood is a social construct and can differ for each person. Nevertheless, we found it important to know that Arnett (2000, 2003) confirmed our supposition that adulthood is strongly linked to responsibility, feelings of duty towards oneself and others and a strong, fixed value system which in turn makes adults take fewer risks and explore the unknown less.

Furthermore, we explained, with help from Goffman (1982, 2022) and Deterding (2017), how the social interaction order, which is ruled by social emotions, is the driver of all kinds of social interactions in adulthood and thus also regulates play behavior. Compared to children, adults inhibit themselves out of fear of embarrassment and of losing 'face' by appearing an improper adult. On this basis, we then illustrated that the forms of adult play are strongly influenced by the feelings of responsibility, duty and values. This means that adults prefer to play in situations where they feel the purpose and identify with the goal of the game, instead of exploring new uncharted and ambiguous territory. Consequently, adults prefer rule-based games, sports, or other structured and foreseeable situations.

Nevertheless, we argued that we can learn much from playful people, to whom these rules don't apply as much. Playful people are unique in the sense that they do almost anything to make situations playful and enjoyable for themselves and others and therefore are also more humorous, creative, adventurous and less inhibited to explore new situations. (Proyer and Ruch, 2022; Proyer, 2013; DeBenedet, 2018; Barnett, 2007) We suggested that naturally less playful people can practice this playfulness too.

Moreover, confronted with the twofold challenge of aiming for adults to enter a completely new situation and open up to improvisational, exploratory, creative play

outside of their comfort zone, yet knowing that they feel safe in rules-based and clearly structured game situations, we needed a way that would serve both needs.

Guided by Deterding (2017) and Walsh (2019), we then established certain strategies which we used in our role-playing game MOSA. These strategies were: (1) inviting groups of friends for a feeling of safety-in-numbers; (2) creating a play-conducting installation where all signals of the frame indicate that play and divergent behavior are welcomed; (3) creating a magical realistic storyline where every part is fictionalized, like the example of (4) drawing a map with ingredients to make pizzas; (5) the use of costumes and avatars as a way to transcend everyday identities and deflect inhibitions; (6) and missions to give participants a sense of purpose or goal. All of these strategies were wrapped in (7) a game score structured in such a way as to slowly make them more confident and ready to play more freely.

As one of our main aims was to explore the composition of our art work in its impact on adult play, yet we were aware of the ambiguity of the terms as well as the complexity of the adult psyche, we adopted a holistic methodology. It was an exploratory case study with 5 groups of 3-4 adult friends. Our involvement as a researcher-participant gave us the optimal position to observe from within the action and stay open to changes.

Data collection methods included evaluation talks, surveys with open and closed questions, combined with artistic tools such as photography and the pizza-making.

J: What did you discover concerning the play mindset in the participant's general experience?

Aurélie:

Our comparison of participants' experience to the definition of play as a state of mind showed that all 14 participants had quite high enjoyment, even to some participants' surprise; time was generally perceived as passing quickly, and most of them wanted to come back to play again. On a negative note, the two days of consecutive play was less engaging as some felt the obligation to come back.

Moreover, we concluded that participants went through most of the play emotions Eberle suggested, although none of them continuously and only a few of them stayed in play emotions throughout the game. Most of the participants fluctuated between positive play emotions and negative anti-play emotions such as

embarrassment, boredom and anxiety. The reasons for these negative emotions varied between participants but, in all cases, they were overcome and all of them evolved positively towards contentment or at least feeling capable.

Sylvia:

As we were eager to create a play experience with purpose, it was imperative to find out that most, although not all, participants reported their experience having had a meaning beyond fun. The meaning of this experience can be summarized as the following: MOSA was a reminder of childlike play, with all its imagination and joy, a reminder that things can be done playfully and there is a way to loosen up from adult seriousness. Furthermore, this experience provided an opportunity to become more extroverted, experience new connections, practice self-love and slow down and stop taking things too seriously.

J: What are your conclusions about the strategic choices you made for the activation of play?

Aurélie:

Groups showed themselves to be effective for players to share the experience, have fun together, and hide in the groups which made the individuals less inhibited. Group play however also meant negotiation which in turn meant that some players did not get as much out of the activities as others.

The installation proved itself as a play-conducting space - it helped adults to understand and adopt the new frame of reference and switch off from everyday reality. Especially well-received was the fact that everything was so detailed and the participants didn't have to organize anything. This gave them the feeling of being a child again who can concentrate purely on playing.

When it comes to the use of storytelling, we found that, although the story was received well by the participants, the medium through which we transmitted the story was not equally engaging for all: to some the video was more engaging while for others the role-playing and telling of the story were better. In some cases, the storyline was not seen as something absurd and unrealistic anymore but became a real-life discussion which could be debilitating, pulling them back into their adult seriousness.

Although the topic of the story was too serious for some, we chose not to change this because it is close to our own play as artists and is meaningful to us. Furthermore, our findings actually suggest that the story was not as challenging for adults who have already had some experience of this kind of play. However, participants who were not interested in this kind of activity, or who were more introverted, had a harder time. We thus need to consider creating a less serious topic for beginners.

Moreover, it turned out that the little transformations of reality into imaginary alternative reality were the most effective in terms of storytelling. The Pizza map-making at the end of the first day managed to turn two rather functional activities (retelling the day and making food) into integral parts of the story about strangeness. Consequently they left the real-life frame and became part of the magic circle instead. Creating the pizza had an especially good impact on the imagination of participants. Furthermore, the mere fact of doing something while talking made it less tiring or boring to talk.

We also concluded that the second day of the game still needed improvement as it did not offer enough of a transformation of reality. Techniques such as writing and mind-mapping or talking without action were too close to what participants knew from real life and therefore not as engaging.

Concerning the use of costumes, we observed that they were not only one of participants' favorite things to play with, they were also effective tools to deflect the embarrassment or other inhibitions from the players. Although costumes were for many at times the reason for embarrassment - for personal and cultural reasons - they were also excuses or motivations to behave differently and abnormally, or even gave them courage to step out of their comfort zone.

Missions were vague enough for the groups to find their own way of playing within them, although they sometimes generated anxiety because of the seriousness of the topic. The fact that the first mission was in the streets generated embarrassment and stress, however also prompted feelings of courage and capability. They allowed participants to be more curious about other people and gave them other perspectives on reality, which was received as very engaging. Lastly, being physically active made the mission engaging and playful.

Over all, our findings about the game structure are inconclusive. Our approach of easing participants into play by slowly making them acquainted with the new alternative world and the rules within was generally effective. However, we noted that

participants reported more engagement in the parts where they did not have as much responsibility. The second day of the game was especially tricky. Our approaches for leading the groups towards independent play on the second day were not as effective. As we have only explored the second day with Groups 1 and 2, we will have to try out different approaches.

Most noteworthy, however, is that game masters play an essential role in the efficiency of the game structure. It became clear that we - as game masters - were not in a 'play'- but in a 'game'-mindset, focusing on our expectations for the research and for artistic outcomes instead of the wellbeing and play of participants. Participants felt the pressure to perform and to find answers, which is contradictory to play being free of externally imposed rules. As soon as we let go of expectations in the later groups, the atmosphere seemed to be more playful. We thus propose that the role of the game master as a play facilitator could be an interesting research topic for future studies.

We believe that, once we finetune the game structure and our roles as the game masters, and become more skillful in playing ourselves, we will be able to adapt to the situations better and improve the play experience in general.

J: What were the difficulties you encountered in this research?

Lili the artist:

Minor technical challenges were the reduced number of participants, possible information lost in Portuguese-English translations, and difficulties to arrange playdates across all the busy calendars of adults. Unfortunately these difficulties also created some inconsistencies in the notetaking. For instance, we did not have such extensive evaluations with Groups 3 and 5, as we hoped to be able to play shortly after.

Nevertheless, we found the more substantial limitation of this research arose from our three-part personality of artist, researcher and educator. We found that our inability to concentrate on one role only jeopardized all our roles. Especially Aurélie and I were in a constant fight with each other because I believed that we needed to be free to play, but she had expectations about the outcomes and needed to always rationalize everything.

I believe what E.B.White once said equally applies to play: "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind." (DeBenedet, 2018, p.106)

To our dismay, attempts to overcome this restriction by exploring alternative ways to conduct and document the research, such as artistic research, were not fruitful as the rationale of the final written form felt like killing play and its inherent information. We are left with the question of whether or not we will ever be able to fully grasp play rationally.

Nevertheless, we encourage any future artists, educators and researchers who attempt to pursue this challenge to collaborate with each other and to divide the work between different bodies and different minds.

In the meantime, we are happy to see academia slowly open up to formats of knowledge production which are possibly more appropriate for discussing knowledge on a para-rational, aesthetic and embodied level.

J: What is your overall conclusion on MOSA and the research project as a whole?

Lili, the artist:

All in all, we can conclude that MOSA is not a space which entirely and completely erases any adult inhibitions and embarrassment, anxiety or boredom, nor does it offer a continuous high of play. On the contrary, this study suggests that MOSA became a place where these feelings and inhibitions found a space to be dealt with, or should I say rather played with. MOSA, although far from perfect, offers a space for the exploration of the playful self, divergent behavior, different perspectives on reality, and quite simply for growth.

Sylvia, the educator:

If we go back to what Paulo Freire (2000) said about education, "nobody educates anybody, one does not educate oneself, humans mutually educate each other through the world" (p.8) and consider these remarks in relation to the Ministry of Strange Affairs, we can see the direct relation between the two. The Ministry is not a space where I educate the participants; it is not even a space for education, and yet, through the alternative world that Lili created, as well as the streets of Lisbon, we all found a space to unlearn what we thought to knew, we found a space where we could reconnect with the child within and remember everything that we are capable of with the simplicity of play.

Aurélie, the researcher:

This research project offers itself as a bridge between academic knowledge and art by using this new approach of a written dialogue between artist, educator and researcher. We did not want to make art into science or education, nor do we want science or education to become art. Above all, we wanted play and art to be valued as worthy spaces for knowledge creation. We believe that, by approaching the topic from three perspectives, as researcher, educator and artist, we managed to find a playful manner for an honest and authentic account of real dynamics of play.

We thus believe that we encountered the tip of the iceberg of that space where all 3 collaborate horizontally without instrumentalising the other. We hope that many more researchers, educators and artists will collaborate and research other strategies of play-activators within the arts. In fact, our ambition is to continue this research at the Ministry of Strange affairs, hopefully with other artists, and eventually build a catalog of practical tools for the activation of adult play within the arts.

Journalist: Thank you, Lili, Aurélie and Sylvia for your presence here today on the couch to tell our fans out there about your research on play in adults. Do you have anything you would like to tell them before we go to the 8pm news?

Lili of HR:
Come and play with me at the Ministry of Strange affairs.

Aurélie from communications:
Follow the future of MOSA on its website www.ministryofstrangeaffairs.com and our instagram page @ministry.of.strange.affairs

Sylvia the professor:
Stop thinking so much.

J: This was 'The Where is Ana Paula Talk Show'. I wish you a pleasant evening, good night.

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