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COMPROMIZED VISIONS:

“Lately, she’s been seeing
things differently”

Working Titles is an online journal for practice-based and led research initiated by students enrolled in the Ph.D. program for art and design at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. By “working titles” we hint at the journal’s main objectives: To serve as a platform for the presentation of research carried out through any practice – from oil painting to anarchist urban plumbing – and to facilitate the self-publishing of practice-based working papers. Contributors submit their contributions to a non-blind peer review by those they deem suitable, regardless of their academic affiliation, and based on friendship and trust.

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To Watch Others Play: A Subjective and Trans-Disciplinary Exchange

Simona Zemaityte and Paolo Fazzari

Abstract

We would like to talk about the process of observing other humans playing and to talk about it in a playful way. The first author (an artist) proposed to realize this paper after connecting two phenomena: a child that plays and creates a story in a therapeutic room during a psychotherapy session and an exhibition, in a public context, of ethnographic research about play. The second author (a psychologist and play therapist) was invited to discuss play and the effects of observing other people playing. We, the authors of this text, work with kids and vulnerable groups of adults, and we often watch others playing. This text represents our non-monitored discussion. We recorded it and then we edited it as a *play*. Inspired primarily by our own experience and professional conditioning we discussed our understanding of freeplay, the role of the player, the observer, the presence of screen in the play, the private gaze and the public gaze. In this journey around play we re-discovered how 'play' plays a fundamental role in human development organizing the narration of the shared social experience and connecting human beings.

Prologue

Venice, September 2022, The Biennale. The exhibition was about to close when they jumped into the Belgium pavilion. Francis Alÿs' installation called *The Nature of the Game* was on display. "What do we see when we watch others play?" they asked themselves, and then each other. Paolo is a psychologist and Simona is an artist. They both usually watch other humans play: Simona through the lens of a camera and Paolo in a therapeutic setting. The two arrange a zoom meeting to discuss ideas around playing and watching. Paolo brings in some material prepared in advance; Simona shares her concerns and a list of questions. The rest of it – methodology and style – is a negotiation. Paolo insists on an academic structure. Simona proposes an experimental approach. "A modified form of dialogic exchange" is the chosen methodology: an open-ended conversation in which perspectives, experiences, and beliefs are explored from a subjective point of view. Simona and Paolo are both participants and researchers in their own play. Here are some excerpts from the conversation as it was verbalized, and finally written down as a play. The results are subjective, preliminary, and contextual, generated freely in a collaborative fashion.

Opening Act

S: How do we start? Can you re-read the proposal?

P: Yes, of course. So to watch others play – a subjective and interdisciplinary exchange ...

(goes on). Wait, maybe I should share my screen?

S: No, thanks. I just wanted a reminder.

P: ... we, the authors, of this text engage in a non-monitored discussion (continues).

S: Just a sec, my mom needs something.

P: Go, go (background noises).

S: Sorry ...

Simona's mom: Hi, hello.

P: Hi, how are you ...

Simona's mom: We are all here, in the office.

P: It was very dark, I could not see her.

S: I thought so.

Act 1

S: What is your last memory of watching someone play?

P: Do you want to start with subjective experience? When you first invited me to this, I thought I could review some texts about play.

S: Let's open with the first things that come to our minds. I recently watched the dog play with a toy full of treats. It soon turned into frustration.

P: Ok, so today I watched a video of my nephew playing with his mom. This little kid is three months old. The mom was emphasizing her words, and he was responding. I saw a bit of fun, a bit of connection, a bit of rhythm. Also, now I think about a phone conversation with a friend, earlier today, in which we were imagining futures.

S: Interesting you are connecting talking with playing. Playing, in the English language at least, may mean many things: you can play a game, you can play an instrument, you can read a play, you can play a role.

P: I was enjoying the conversation with a friend. And why would I call it play? Because it was an open-ended interaction with no precise end goal. I want to consider play as something opposed to an activity in which you have to complete a defined task. What if someone gives you something to do? An order, for example. Is that play?

S: Good point, maybe we are also discussing the role of playfulness in adult lives.

P: I have a definition of play with five criteria that I like: "1. play is incompletely functional in the context in which it appears; 2. it is spontaneous, pleasurable or voluntary; 3. it differs from other serious behaviors in form (e.g. exaggerated) or timing [...]; 4. it is repeated [...]; 5. It is initiated in acute or chronic stress" (Burghardt 17).

S: I know there are relatively new disciplines that connect artistic and therapeutic practices, such as drama therapy, play therapy. What is therapeutic about play?

P: In psychoanalysis and psychotherapy there has been a big movement asking what is therapeutic about play. Blake (14), for example, formulates therapy itself as "meeting with," "being with," "being present in the moment," and even as a call for "abolition of interpretation" to start a "non linear way" of thinking about what we observe in order to understand the complexity, the chaos and the emerging functions in living systems.

Act II

S: Almost everything can be play then ...

P: Yes, it feels to me like we are trying to radicalize the idea of play as a potential imminent opportunity to get access to something other than reality. Let me make an example about television and news: what happens when you turn on a TV and the newscast is on? The news may affect your emotions, but actually, you are not there where the newscast is produced or where the reported events are taking place. I may say it resembles more a simulation. Is news a form of play?

S: I think it is not that the news itself is a play, but the experience of witnessing and symbolically being present in those scenarios might work a bit like a play. As a viewer, you can choose – to play or not, to simply disengage, or to respond in a different way from what might be expected. Susan Sontag wrote about those mind and image relationships in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. An example that stayed with me was that of Georges Bataille: On his desk he kept a photograph of a torture victim from China (who died from *lingchi*), and it evoked in him both – pain and ecstasy (Sontag 77).

P: Think about a movie: You see a scene in which there is a car crash, for example. You know that the car is not actually crashing, but for a moment, a part of you believes it. It feels like a constant transition between reality and fantasy. The play acts as a bridge, and this is an idea taken from the works of the child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott.

S: Someone once noted that we always experience life in the first person. And maybe, merging with fiction is the only way to imagine what it is like to be someone else. As a child, I had a hologram postcard, the 3D animals inside looked real, a bit like on TV. I remember getting so obsessed, I wanted to take the 3D animals out and ended up dissecting the card. That way, of course, losing both – the hope to get the animals out and the image itself. I wanted to be in touch with something that seemed on the other side, in another realm. And I think this fantasy today can actually materialize. We can now have avatars and live in the game, involving many other anonymous players. There are influencers, a version of celebrity, who at the same time are available for interaction.

P: But still, probably, once you try to dissect it, it always disappears.

Act III

S: And all this, paradoxically, makes me think of a popular keyword these days – ‘care.’ I recently read a very good book by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, who warns about the commodification and misuse of this term (56). But I am curious to try and see how we can connect care and play? Can play be caring?

P: This makes me think of a therapy session I led. Some kids were pushing each other. I felt this image was somehow disturbing to me. I was wondering what to do. Should I stop them, or, instead, pay more attention to other things, like, whether this interaction was meaningful or not? I assessed the safety and thought about scaffolding their interaction. I found myself participating. But more than saying “yes” or “no” to their exchange I was signaling safety; for example, about my presence there at that moment. I was wondering how far this free play can go. As a therapist, you are always questioning what you are observing or what is happening in the room. The kids understood what I was signaling. They continued, but they embraced the element of safety and started to give their behavior a new direction.

S: Beautiful. You mentioned ‘scaffolding,’ and I understand it as a metaphor for support. I think it is a good start.

Conclusion

There can be no conclusion when it comes to play, only encouragement, as the play is open-ended. Play is how we design experiences, how we simulate them. Play is essential for healthy development and well-being. The authors of this play call for greater recognition of the importance of play and for more opportunities for play in both childhood and adulthood. The readers are encouraged to think more critically about the role of play in their own lives and to consider the ways in which they can incorporate more play-time into their daily routines. This was a play, a natural reality, and a possible encounter between two different mindsets. Let the play continue.

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Simona Žemaitytė (she/her), PhD from the Vilnius Academy of Arts, is a Lithuanian artist currently working in Vilnius and Naples. Her work was previously awarded at 15th Tallinn Print Triennial and nominated at Sheffield Doc Fest. She exhibited internationally, including at the 13th Kaunas Biennial; the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen; Kasa Gallery Istanbul; Galata Perform Istanbul; BAFTA and RichMix in London; CAC Lithuania; Galleries Vartai, Malonioji and Kaire-Desine in Vilnius; Riga Cinema Shorts; CreArte traveling exhibition in Pardubice, Linz, and Genoa. She currently teaches at Vilnius Academy of Arts.

Paolo Fazzari (he/him) has a PhD in Mind Gender and Language from the University of Napoli Federico II, Italy. He is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist. He works in a private clinical setting using a child centered approach. Author of scientific works on gender, health and history of psychology, he is a certified therapist in level 1 DIR® approach and works with kids presenting diagnosis of neurodevelopmental disorders, teenagers and their parents.

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