

# Designing for Playful Democratic Participation

By Mathias Poulsen

## Background

Both national and international studies suggest that democracy is in decline and that there is a need for a stronger public debate about democratic ideals and values [38, 52, 86]. This state of democracy has been described as a ‘post-democracy’ [20, 21], in which the main challenges are a declining legitimacy of democratic principles [10, 14, 34], a reduced room for democratic participation and a limited potential to impact political decision-making [58]. This in turn leads to increased political apathy and alienation [73], resulting in a lower quality of citizens’ decision-making capabilities [65]. This research project suggests that if trust in democracy on a large scale is to be rebuilt, it is necessary to design and examine new spaces for participation where citizens can rehearse their democratic agency in everyday life [71]. Accordingly, the project explores how “everyday democracy” [23] can be revitalised through a participatory design [1, 11, 80] and co-design [60, 74] approach to the constructive play found in the Danish tradition of “skrammellegepladser” and “byggelegepladser” [76], which translates as “junk-yard playground”

The project will investigate and recontextualise the concept of the “junk-yard playground” as a potential space for democratic participation, also outside the pedagogical sphere from which it originates. The project will develop a theoretical approach to constructive play in which play is both understood as an activity [45, 79, 81] and a mental state [49, 68, 79, 87]. In this regard the project will investigate how “junk-yard playgrounds” and constructive play might reconfigure democratic participation not only through the act of constructive play, but through the deliberation [32, 36, 42], agonism [58] and the imaginary [83] that potentially follows these kinds of playful engagements. This also entails that the project draws on the tradition of deliberation as democratic participation in the public sphere, while expanding it to include embodied, playful interactions and “material dialogues”.

The project builds on knowledge obtained through the international CounterPlay festival [67]. At this three day event, a diverse community of practitioners, educators and academics engage in close, personal interactions through play, as they build and explore different ways of being human and living together [43, 57, 72, 82].

## Research questions

The main hypothesis of this project is that by recontextualizing and designing junk-yard playgrounds, it might be possible to create new arenas for sustained, playful democratic participation. The project is guided by these research questions:

1. How might we conceptualise playful democratic participation by combining research from the fields of play, design and democracy within the context of junk-yard playgrounds?
2. How might we recontextualise and design junk-yard playgrounds to study playful democratic participation?
3. How might we develop and design a 'flexible junk-yard playground kit' that makes it possible to bring junk-yard play to new contexts across education, culture and business?

## State of Art

By drawing on the tradition of “junk-yard playgrounds”, the project refers to a concept invented by Danish architect C. Th. Sørensen who in 1931 [85] suggested the creation of “skrammellegepladser” for children in the city. The first junk-yard playground, Emdrup Skrammellegeplads, was created in Emdrup in 1943. In this playground the focus was on the relative autonomy of the children and a democratic culture [76]. While the playground in Emdrup still exists, there are only few others left in Denmark, and there is limited research in the field. In recent years, there has however been some interest in the phenomenon elsewhere in the world, where a number of both permanent and temporary “adventure playgrounds” [54, 77] have been emerging with roots in the Danish tradition. Some of the experimental and politically engaged - yet temporary - examples have been developed by artists such as Palle Nielsen’s “The Model” in 1968 [53], which was reimaged at Arken in 2014, “The Playground Project” [15], and even more recently Rachel Clarke’s “Working Model”.

The political and critical ambitions behind the junk-yard playgrounds, especially found in the artistic reinterpretations, mirror those of Freire’s “critical pedagogy” and his aim for emancipation [39]. These ambitions are also found in critical design approaches which suggests that design should actively contribute to political [27] and social issues [30], both of which is addressed in this project. In the design field there is also continuously a strong tradition for exploring the “material driven design process” [5] and how processes of making can be seen as fundamental to enabling participation and exploring “ways of living” [75]. These critical perspectives are, however, largely lacking from playground research.

Within play studies, the majority of the existing research focuses on children’s play [63, 68] and on play as an instrument to children’s development [88]. Furthermore, research on adults’ play is often marginalised [13, 24, 95], and tends to focus on the potential outcomes of play, seen explicitly in concepts such as “gamification” [25, 40]. Thus, if the potential for democratic participation in junk-yard play is to be studied and realised, it is necessary to study playful activities amongst adults as well as children and to revisit the relationship between emancipation, constructive play and social issues, in this case democracy.

In contrast to studies that focus on specific outcomes of play, this project follows a tradition that frames play as “everyday existentialism” [88], a universal human activity and life phenomenon [81, 92] that not only has the capacity to produce specific outcomes but also to challenge the ways in which humans interact with materials and the social world. In this regard constructive play is seen as a form of human expression, where people communicate and explore who they are [81] and how they want to live [45, 79]. This is crucial because the ability to see other people as human beings is a prerequisite for the functioning of democracy [59].

Where play research tends to focus on children and specific outcomes research on participation and democracy tends to either maintain a narrow focus on representational, “electoral democracy” [71] or follow the Habermasian tradition of participation through deliberation [33, 42, 56, 65]. Yet, both of these traditions tend to neglect the significance of embodied and playful engagements with materials and our physical surroundings. Based on results from a pilot study in relation to the CounterPlay festival [66], this project suggests that democratic participation should not only be understood as rational deliberation, but rather as an inclusive [97], embodied, material and playful practice that bridges the traditional mind-body dualism [78] by designing also for the body and movement [46, 47] and for affective engagement [58, 61] with materials - i.e. in a junk-yard playground - and fellow participants.

## Theory

The project’s theoretical framework draws upon research from the fields of play, design and democracy. These distinct fields are connected using three concepts: deliberation, agonism and the imaginary. The project studies how constructive play can enable a dynamic interaction between these three concepts as they are transformed into embodied, material deliberation, playful conflicts and the playful imaginary. It is through this framework that the project will study the potential of junk-yards to foster playful democratic participation.

By combining the above mentioned concepts the project seeks to understand how playful encounters in and with junk-yard playgrounds potentially work as a democratic [93], everyday practice, where “everyday democracy” [23] consists of “day-by-day working together with others” [26] in “everyday environments” [50].

The project understands junk-yard playgrounds as related to the concept of a “magic circle” [51], i.e. a safe space that is created through ongoing, social negotiation [90]. In these kinds of magic circles play designates a social laboratory where people collectively “create models for living” [45]. Here, participants can ask and investigate the question, “how ought we to live together?” [16], as common assumptions and practices can be “questioned, problematized and made political again” [17], similar to what has been described as “democratic design events” [9].

The playground in this project will also be designed as a “school of citizenship” [65] where participants can experiment with materiality as well as conflict in a safe space. To examine the potential for “maximalist democratic participation” [17], the junk-yard will focus on the participatory nature of the play experience [45, 81]. Participants continually co-design the playground and choose how they engage with it and others in order to explore how they can find new ways to experience agency in their own lives [31]. This makes for an open-ended [94] framework with room for unexpected occurrences and uncertainty [64].

The challenges posed by post-democracy are too immense for any one project, but this project suggests that everyday democracy and small steps of democratic decision-making can lead to ongoing societal transformation [62]. The project studies how, in these instances of decision-making, the playful processes render quality conflicts possible [81], which mirror the political ideal of “agonism” [58] where conflicts are seen as “cooperative undertakings” [26]. This is linked to the concept of “adversarial design” to make it for the playground to allow for constructive confrontations [27]. Furthermore, play, not least constructive play, must be understood as an embodied affective experience, which entails that constructive play must be conceptualised as an experience partly or completely outside of conventional language [69]. Drawing on Spinoza and affect theory, it becomes possible to study how play allows the body to affect and be affected, how the body imagines [22] and how people in play “think differently with their bodies” [4].

Through embodied deliberation and playful agonism, “the playful imaginary” can be conceptualised. The playful imaginary draws on the “democratic imaginary” [83], i.e. the ‘capacity to imagine alternatives’ to the current conditions [48]. Play is often seen as a catalyst for the imagination [8, 13], challenging the familiar through “disorderly play” [91]. By engaging in “negotiation and adaptation” play can produce unexpected outcomes and experiences [3], also demonstrating a collective form of creativity [89]. Through the concepts of embodied deliberation, agonism and the playful imaginary, it is examined how in junk-yard playgrounds “the impossible can be made possible” [35] as well as *what is* and *what might be* [41, 64, 84].

## Research methodology

The project’s methodological approach is a triangulation that will work in conjunction with the theoretical framework described above. First, it is based on “research-through-design” [37] in which design and construction - of junk-yard playgrounds - are key aspects of the research process [51, 70]. Secondly, critical design [7, 27, 28, 55] is utilised to frame and shape the junk-yard playgrounds as a space for exploring critical positions and possible futures for the participants. Finally, design-based research [2, 6, 12, 90] is used to structure the research process. This entails that the project is organised in iterative research cycles with four phases, 1: context, 2: lab, 3: intervention and 4: reflection [18].

## Applying Design-Based Research

The *context* phase will generate knowledge about the domain [2] through an initial domain literature review on the available research within junk-yard playgrounds, constructive play, design and participatory democracy. Furthermore, junk-yard playgrounds are examined using strategies from design anthropology [41], particularly participant observation and interviews, involving staff and users of existing junk-yard playgrounds in Denmark and the UK. In this phase focus is to uncover how opportunities for democratic participation in the remaining playgrounds are currently utilised. Finally, a pilot group is established with 8-10 volunteers, who will be involved in designing and setting up the prototype playground. They will represent three different domains, education, culture and business, to ensure the possibility of exploring the democratic potential of junk-yard playgrounds in different contexts.

In the *lab* phase, a set of design principles for the recontextualised junk-yard playground is formulated [29] in collaboration with the pilot group, and based on the literature review and empirical insights from the context phase.

In the *intervention* phase, the first junk-yard playground is set up, using a variety of recycled materials identified in the context phase. It is set to run for 8-12 weeks with a combination of fixed group events and “opening hours” where it’s open to the general public.

The activities will be observed and recorded on video, capturing not only verbal exchanges, but also embodied expressions and interactions. The participants will be actively involved in gathering data through their own video recordings. The video footage will be analysed using “interaction analysis”, focusing on the interaction among people, their surroundings and physical objects [44].

In the *reflection* phase, the experiences from the play event are examined in a collaborative, playful reflection session. All participants are involved in creating “design research artifacts” [19] through activities such as creative writing or physical prototyping, and the project researches feasible methods to capture the “richness of embodied methods and experiences” [96].

These steps are intended to generate a new analytical understanding of junk-yards as well as a theory of the relationship between constructive play design and democratic participation, which will lead to operational design principles for setting up junk-yard playgrounds in new contexts.

## Research plan, feasibility and dissemination

The research project is rooted in the research environment at the Lab for Social Design and in collaboration with Lab for Play and Design at Design School Kolding (DSKD). Knowledge from this

project will be implemented in MA courses at DSKD and it will engage with ongoing research projects. The following research plan structures the projects' planned activities:

- Spring 2021: 1: Domain literature review. 2: Establish pilot group. 3: PhD course: Design-based research, action research and co-creation (3 ECTS). 4: Design anthropological domain study 5: refining methodology. 6: Setting up blog for communication throughout the project. 7: BIN conference: Designing for Play in New Nordic Childhood
- Fall 2021: 1: Co-design playground with pilot group. 2: Setting up first iteration of playground. 3: revising playground concept. 4: Teaching DSKD Applied Play
- Spring 2022: 1: PhD course: Technology and Social Interaction (3,8 ECTS). 2: Second iteration of playground 5. 3: Revising playground concept. 4: Teaching DSKD Play Experiences
- Fall 2022: 1: Analysing data from field studies. 2: PhD course: Understanding Play – Designing for Emergence (4 ECTS). 3. Presenting preliminary findings at Playful Learning Conference.
- Spring 2023: 1. Research stay at Parsons School of Design (3 months). 2. Completing theoretical framework. 3: PhD course. 4: Conference: Design Research Society 2022.
- Fall 2023: 1. Final analysis and conclusions. 2. Recommendations and design principles 3. Finishing monograph.

## Letter of Motivation

Throughout a decade as self-employed working with games and play across private, cultural and especially educational sectors, I have maintained a focus on creative approaches that might foster individual and collective empowerment through play. I have worked closely with organizations, educations, municipalities and companies and in these collaborations, it has always been my goal to simultaneously implement research-based knowledge on play as well as playful processes and playful design thinking. This line of thinking has driven my work and has among other things resulted in the co-design of a number of communities on a national and international level, including the international play festival CounterPlay. During my time as self-employed I often felt the need to investigate the playful design processes more closely. Therefore, the job as a research assistant at Designschool Kolding, where I was hired in May, 2019, provided me with an opportunity to begin further investigating the connection between design, play and democratic agency. The communities that I had initiated and co-designed - such as CounterPlay - rendered it evident that a better understanding of the ways in which playful forms of engagement might lead to more vibrant forms of democratic participation in everyday life was needed. In this regard my personal and professional background and my design and academic curiosity are closely intertwined and my motivation for applying for the PhD position in Lab for Social Design is a natural continuation of this. If I am given the chance to carry out the proposed project, I will continue to build communities, bridges and foster dialogue, both amongst practitioners and Designschool Kolding and also internally, between the departments at Designschool Kolding where I consider myself lucky to feel at home in multiple labs. On a personal level, I thrive in the dynamic atmosphere at the school, and I deeply appreciate the relationship to my colleagues, many of whom I have been collaborating with on multiple projects, courses and across departments.

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