

# The Diversity of Attitudes towards Play at the Workplace – A Case of an Academic Community

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the results from an experiment of playful videos are presented. In the experiment, leaders of an academic community participated in workshops where they playfully envisioned the future of the workplace. These workshops were videotaped and edited into short videos, which were made public within the community and used as a probe for exposing attitudes towards play within an academic environment. The study revealed diverse views towards play and its role at the workplace.

## Keywords

Playfulness, community, design, play at work, adult play, academia, university, attitudes towards play

## INTRODUCTION

Play and work are often opposite concepts in common language. However, it has been claimed that the opposite of play is not work, but depression (Sutton-Smith 1999). Work and play actually share some important properties especially when it comes to creative work, and recently there has been a lot of discussion about utilizing playful activities to enhance creativity, productivity, and commitment in the work environment. As basic human activities, both play and work are order-making and control-seeking and take an active, transformative relation towards the environment (Henricks 2006, 193-195). The key difference lies in their purposes. While work is instrumental and has an external purpose, play is usually autotelic; it is done for its own sake. In fact play is not always without external purposes; however, the purposes are negotiable (Sicart 2014, 16). Even though the workplace is namely a place for work, it is also a place where play and work often collide. Indeed, Proyer (2014) has found that adults see functions of playfulness in a wide variety of daily life situations, including playfulness at work with and without their colleagues.

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This research is situated in the tradition of play studies, where the connection between play and community is well-documented. Johan Huizinga (1949, 12) proposed that a "play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over". And while "not every game of marbles or every bridge-party leads to the foundation of a club", "the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game." For Huizinga, the "magic", the sense of community, is related to play being an activity which creates a temporary order in a world that is otherwise complex and even chaotic (see also Henricks 2006, 13-14).

We approach these topics through a research experiment, from which we present findings in this article. In the research experiment, leading figures of an academic community envisioned possible futures of the community in playful scenario workshops, results of which were shown to the larger community, and then the role of play was discussed together. The experiment emphasized the rich nature of different meanings that a single community can attach to the concepts of 'play' and 'work'. The experiment was conducted in a Finnish university; as such the results of the study depict most of all the working culture of a northern European academic community, and further studies should acknowledge this when extrapolating the results.

## **RELATED WORK**

There have been other studies that look at playfulness in the workplace from a similar but slightly different angle. Peter Fleming (2005) describes an ethnographic study of a call center work culture where the boundaries of work and non-work were blurred with a managed "culture of fun". A youthful work environment was enhanced with interiors of bright colors and kindergarten-like elements such as cartoon character murals, and further cultivated with metaphors of parties, school, and family in social activities. Rising cynicism was observed in half of the workers interviewed in the study, even though some workers internalized the approach. The study emphasizes the need to address the culture of fun in an appropriate way.

Jacobs and Heracleous (2007) describe a case where managers of a private banking group participated in playful strategizing workshops. The workshops included building models from physical elements such as Lego bricks. Their conclusions of the case indicate that when it is appropriately structured and resourced, strategizing through playful design is effective in exploring strategic challenges and agreeing on desired directions.

There are also studies that focus on academic work specifically. Vyas et al. (2008) have studied playful interactions in an academic work environment from the perspective of enhancing social awareness and community building. They developed organizational probes – sets of participatory investigation tools based on self-reporting – and gave them to 10 employees at their department. Space and place, social aspects, interpersonal aspects and instrumental aspects were recognized affecting the playful behavior. Based on the results, two playful designs were developed to further support community building and social interaction in work environments.

A study by Nummenmaa et al. (2015) exposed a work community to a playful experiment based on a card game, which used data from the members of that community as material for the cards. The results show that the ways of participation and means of play can be more diverse in the community than they are specified in the game rules. The study

results also point towards the need to emphasize the framing of the game and to support it as a continuous activity, if it is to become a mainstay in the community. An academic community was also found to have inherent contextual prerequisites that create their own requirements for these kinds of playful activities, such as challenges in communication and preconceptions towards play as a part of work.

Regarding leadership, studies show a contradiction in how leadership is understood. By interviewing academics Juntrasook (2014) found four meanings for academic leadership: 'position', 'performance', 'practice' and 'professional role model'. As the first two meanings are easily measurable and support the hierarchical nature of organizations, institutions place more value on these understandings of leadership, while at the same time most of the interviewed academics supported the latter two meanings that place more emphasis on personal recognition and leadership achieved through professional identity. These results also support an earlier study by Macfarlane (2011) in which professors from several UK universities felt that their personal priorities conflict with what universities expect of them as academic leaders. Amongst other things, they felt that their expertise was under-utilized and that they could contribute more towards the management of the institutions. Juntrasook (2014) argues that there is a need for space of dialogue to find a shared understanding of leadership in order to develop the academic workplace towards a more inclusive and socially just environment.

## **THE EXPERIMENT**

The experiment was conducted within an academic community, and it consisted of two distinct phases: playful workshops and presenting videos created from those workshops.

### **Research Setting and Research Background**

The experiment took place within the School of Information Sciences (SIS), a multidisciplinary University faculty at the University of Tampere, Finland, with research and teaching in the areas of Information Studies and Interactive Media, Mathematics, Statistics, Computer Science, and Interactive Technology. SIS employs around 170 people and its current structure is the result of a series of mergers. This has resulted in a community which consists of multiple social groups, many of them based on older organizational structures. In another study (Nummenmaa et al. 2015), the staff members described the school with terms such as "fragmented", "cliqued", and "loose", but also "dynamic", "versatile", and "multifaceted". Due its interesting past and colorful composition, this multifaceted community is an interesting target for researching the views of the staff towards play and its role at the workplace.

The experiment was designed by the research team in such a way that the management of the school in question was also consulted on two occasions. During the design phase, constraints were designed for the experiment which ultimately resulted in pleasant, stress free, playful but non-competitive 2-hour workshops, designed to feel useful to the participants. The workshops were also to be such that they could be captured on video to be presented to rest of the School staff in an edited format.

It is important to note that the authors were a part of the community in question. This provided important insight to analyzing the results. However, it can also be regarded as a methodological limitation of the study. The authors worked to reduce this effect through the design of the setting and by collectively analyzing and discussing the data to restrain the effect of the limitation.

## **Experiment Outline**

The experiment was designed with two distinct phases. The first phase was organizing playful workshops and the second phase was to use videos created at the playful workshops to gather data from staff members.

Four different workshops were executed with playful methods and aimed at drafting different future scenarios for SIS. 17 staff members in management positions were invited to participate in the workshops. 9 teaching and research staff members volunteered, and the group comprised heads of research centers or groups and heads of degree programmes. Participants were randomly assigned into a 2-hour workshop among the ones that fit their schedules. The participants of each workshop chose one of three target year options for the workshop (2020, 2028, or 2035). Each workshop was based on a different future scenario (Preferable, Unpreferable, Business as usual, and “Wildcard”), which would determine how the future should look like by the year they chose. Each workshop also employed a different playful method to formulate a vision (cards with SIS keywords, improvisational performance, drawing, and toys, respectively). The selection of future scenarios as the workshop subject matter was inspired and informed by scenario planning (Amer et al. 2013) and also work on envisioning the future of SIS which was an ongoing task, practiced throughout SIS, at the time when this research was conducted.

The aim of the workshops was to utilize the given playful method in producing a vision of how the given future scenario could unfold and what its impact on SIS would be. The workshops served a more practical purpose as well, as future scenario planning was something the participants had already been tasked with. Another objective was to record a video depicting the scenario. Each workshop consisted of a warm-up and preparation phase, building the vision using the given method, performing or explaining the vision for the videos, and a debriefing discussion as a group. The workshops were targeted to be 2 hours long, and the whole duration was recorded using 3 cameras.

The videos were later shown to SIS staff members at a regular staff gathering and later released online for the staff to watch. The videos were shown to staff members again at the SIS Summer Day, a recreational staff event. The videos were used as a probe for exposing attitudes towards play within an academic environment.

## **From Workshops to Videos**

The workshops resulted in videos with the following topics (the method, vision type and target year are also given):

1. What is the future of SIS? Sudden halt of change? (toys, wildcard, year 2028)
2. What is the future of SIS? Tech, information and experience: Towards a human-based activity architecture? (cards, preferable, 2028)
3. What is the future of SIS? Interactive information streams and learning? (drawing, business as usual, 2035)
4. What is the future of SIS? Stressful parallel play? (performance, unpreferable, 2020)

The first video, aiming for a wild card future, describes how an ever changing organization is under outside pressure. As a defense mechanism, a wall is built to block

that outside pressure and all organizational change is stopped. In the workshop, the participants first had time to familiarize themselves with a set of toys on the table of the workshop room, after which they chose the toys that they would use for the video. The participants ended up choosing Lego bricks, Duplo bricks and monster figures, and also utilized adhesive tape when performing the scenario (see Figure 1).

The second video, aiming for a preferable future, shows how architecture and environment can integrate to support the social and experiential research and learning at the school. During the workshop, the participants first familiarized themselves with a set of keyword cards spread on a table. The keywords were based on a list of things the staff are interested about, and they were collected during a previous phase of the research project. The participants then formulated a story based on their selected keywords.

In the third video, aiming for the future that awaits us if business continues as usual, the participants envision a future where people are constantly connected between the school, each other and online stores: the people visit the school mostly just to eat and visit larger events. The participants started sketching the vision right away using their pens, transitioning quickly to creating the video.

The fourth video, describing an unpreferable future, depicted a scenario where three neighboring universities join to work together but do not really communicate very well between each other. In the workshop, the participants first did a set of three improv warm-ups. After that, they came up with a vision rather quickly and moved on to film it.

The footage from each workshop was compiled into approximately 3-minute-long video. The editing process was made with the aim of producing an entertaining result for use as a part of the overall experiment – the edited video material itself was not used as research data. The workshop participants reviewed and gave feedback on the material before final edits were made and the videos shown to staff.



**Figure 1:** A screen from one of the workshop videos showing leaders envisioning a wildcard future in 2028 with toys.

## **DATA AND METHOD**

The data used in the analysis comprised three data sets: leader group discussions after the vision workshops, individual leader interviews conducted at a later date, and questionnaire responses collected from staff members at a SIS Summer Day recreational event. As the study focused on attitudes reported by the staff, video material from the workshops was not analyzed.

### **Leader Interviews**

Directly after the workshops, the participants engaged in a group discussion directed by the workshop facilitator. The facilitator presented questions, providing the participants with time to discuss the topic. The discussions covered many topics due to how the format of the interviews allowed the discussion to progress naturally, while still being based on key questions. Some of the most important topics being discussed were the resulting vision, work done during the workshop timeframe, comparison to previous workshops, feelings on participation, workshop balance and the aptitude of the participants to the workshop tasks.

1–3 weeks after the videos had been first shown to staff members, the workshop participants were interviewed individually about their experience of the workshops and the experiment, their thoughts on the videos and associated exposition and feedback, and their views on playfulness and leadership in work and at the workplace.

### **Summer Day Questionnaire**

After the videos were shown at the SIS Summer Day, staff members formed groups to discuss predefined topics relating to the videos. The first topic was the future of SIS and the scenarios seen in the videos. The second topic was leadership and play and the play of the leaders in the videos. Feedback was gathered individually using a questionnaire after the group discussions. The questionnaire featured three open-ended questions, each designed to avoid asking direct questions about play or attitudes towards playfulness:

- Pick and explain your favorite point from your group’s discussion on the future of SIS.
- Pick and explain your favorite point from your group’s discussion on leadership and play.
- If you were a dictator, what would be the role of play in the future of SIS?

The leaders who appeared on the videos were asked to form their own group. This way they would not influence the other groups, and their responses could be separated during the analysis phase. As responses are from individuals, but are written after group discussions, an increase in the alignment of some of the answers of respondents from the same group is possible. 9 groups of 4 to 9 people were formed, and we received 51 individual responses.

### **Data Analysis**

Each of the three data sets was processed and coded by two researchers. The summer day questionnaire responses were coded separately from the group discussion and interview data, so that the two sets of data could form a discussion between each other. These two sets of data were processed separately, but in succession, using affinity diagramming

(Beyer & Holtzblatt 1998). The data clustering and group forming of the affinity diagramming procedure was conducted by 5 researchers.

## **RESULTS**

The rich data of interviews and surveys revealed a wide variety of opinions, experiences and conceptions towards play at work. The views of the leaders and the community members were both versatile in nature. Whereas the leaders were more neutral and cautious of negative tone, the community views represented some critical views among the positive and neutral. This was well in line with the community view of the leaders: leaders should be focused and positive, not focusing only on the threats of the future. They should have a positive outlook on the future, although forward-looking thinking might sometimes be difficult. Future views emerging from the community itself were mixed in nature: some were optimistic and focused on opportunities while others expressed concerns over disruptive organizational changes and destabilizing uncertainties.

The data exposed a wide variety of the views/multitude of the views/complex nature of play at work. The results shows the ambiguousness of how the community views play. The views of the community on both the benefits of play and also its obstacles and what the requirements are for it are also shown, along with their view on play at work. The data also shows how the community felt about the videos created for this research. Data from the community questionnaire is marked as C, leader interviews as L, and leader group discussions as G.

### **Defining and Delineating Play**

Examining the different ways the respondents and interviewees understand play and playfulness suggests that they are not unambiguous concepts. For example improvisational acting in one workshop was considered to be something other than actual playfulness: “[L4] Maybe in this case the playfulness came from it being acting, but maybe it was more like acting than playfulness per se.” One leader saw playfulness as a freedom from rules, yet to another one the lack of rules was not so self-evident: “[L1] After all, play is, as you might think, to some extent a free activity, not strictly limited by any rules. But naturally there are some rules that are agreed upon when the playing begins.” Some in the community expressed that in order for play to be successful, rules are required: “[C40] Play requires rules to be successful. Therefore a good policy making is still required. And a good policy making is equal, transparent and open. ;-)” The rules should also be clear and all the participants should understand them in order to have a safe and relaxed state of mind to play. In the questionnaire responses, one leader felt that a certain amount of control over playfulness is needed in order to not just stop caring about the task at hand.

Playfulness was seen rather as a mindset than inherently belonging to certain situations. Situations can be approached either with serious mind or with a playful attitude: “[L5] If the (playful) perspective hadn’t been maintained, the people involved in the workshops might have taken a very humorless approach to them.” The leaders’ approaches differed somewhat: one interviewee did not regard the workshop as especially playful and said that “[L4] if it had been introduced as a serious-minded future vision workshop, it probably would have played out just the same”, and another noted that in the workshop context, he was not as playful as he felt he could have been. Another leader noted that workshop participants might not have perceived the elements present in them as playful because of past experiences with similar elements present in workshops that were framed

as a serious goal-oriented activity. However, one interviewee also said that although the workshop method (keyword cards) first created a negative association based on prior experiences and the workshop itself felt more like support for creativity than a playful activity, in the end the playful aspects increased the value of the workshop.

Regarding the role of play in an academic community, the community had a more detailed view of the role of play at work, compared to that of the leaders'. This was most likely due to the fact that the summer day questionnaire design directly prompted respondents to address this aspect. The community made notions about the general role of play at work: how big it should be and what the role should be as a work practice. Generally the notions were divided between play and playfulness having a larger or smaller role than it currently has. Only two of the respondents clearly stated that they did not see any role for play in academic work.

### **The Benefits of Play**

The community saw the benefits of playfulness more from the perspective of daily work, for example in introducing playfulness to work practices in meetings, projects and general ideation: “[C19] It would be fun to sometimes have meetings through means of play. This could bring up new ideas that wouldn't be expressed in an ordinary meeting.” For an individual, play and playfulness improve work-related well-being and aid in freeing one's mental processes, increasing creativity and imagination and helping find one's true interests in work, break free of norms, and think outside the box. As one respondent put it: “[C18] Imagination and an atmosphere of freedom make daily work easier and more fun and improve those ‘results’ that shortsightedly would not be valued in and of themselves.” Playfulness was also mentioned to generally benefit the workplace and working environment, for example by facilitating getting to know co-workers, and as being something that could benefit leaders.

The leaders saw playfulness as having a positive effect on SIS, especially in shaking up old routines, conventions and fossilized organizational structures. Playfulness was seen as a way to liberate oneself from too much seriousness and to stimulate thinking. In shared work practices it is useful for changing perspectives and gaining common understanding, enabling engagement with serious matters that are otherwise unwieldy or with topics that might sound unconventional at first. A playful process can also bring spontaneity, experimentality and randomness into a collaborative situation such as a workshop. On an individual level, play offers support for creative work, ideation, problem solving and critical examination of phenomena through concretization and visualization. One such example was using the distance of keywords to present information: “[G2] For instance, you can use the whole table and put ‘emotions’ here in the far corner and something like ‘knowledge’ in the other and see how they're this far apart from each other.” Playfulness can also be an activating working method and help unload the heaviness of work: the very static nature of the physical aspects of academic work can be interrupted with playful exercises, while also having fun at the same time.

While not shared by all, there were views that exploring a current topic through the playful workshops was different from normal activities and stimulated new perspectives on the subject as well as new ways of thinking. This was seen as a preferable outcome of play that could possibly be utilized more widely within the organization. Framing a workshop as playful can also create a more playful and relaxed atmosphere where it is easier to be excited about what you are doing. Two of the interviewed leaders remarked that the workshop methods were different from what they had been used to and that they



affected the end result; another leader brought up that using Legos as an instrument of ideation guided the whole process.

Collaboration was requested to happen within leadership itself. Some respondents actually saw team spirit to be more important than leadership, although it was also brought up that researchers are difficult to lead as they are individualists. Another commented that a leader should also act as an example to the others in the creation of a free, relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere. A desirable atmosphere is one where play is possible, and where trying and failing is allowed and even supported. A leader is the one who can create a playful atmosphere and enable playfulness, and a leader must define the boundaries of play. According to one community respondent: “[C47] The leader should balance between structure and freedom, create the environment and the boundaries inside which play is possible.” The leaders also commented about the aspect of being an example: “[L9] It was in a way nice there were these ‘leaders’, who in a manner of speaking legitimize these kinds of things”.

Some community respondents brought up hopes and suggestions in their visions of what playfulness at SIS might look like. One hoped that different kind of sports and physical exercise would be encouraged but not demanded, another that “[C16] ‘play’ will mean kindness, cheerfulness and happy faces in SIS.” It was also suggested that there could be a “[C42] Joke of the day for fun moments.”

### **Obstacles to and Requirements of Play**

A major trend, most noticeable in the leader interviews, was that attitudes and values related to work and play were perceived as an obstacle to playfulness. According to the interviewees, work and play are easily seen as mutually exclusive categories: “[L9] Culturally, we tend to see work as a more or less serious thing to which playfulness does not really belong, and we might not see it having value within the work community or in how we do our work.” A community respondent explicitly stated that scientific work cannot be done by playing. Accordingly, the leaders expressed the view that playfulness at work requires changing prevailing attitudes or work habits, and one community respondent pointed out that play as a concept might provoke resistance in a work context: “[C46] Perhaps the word ‘play’ should be switched for something else, so that people would find it easier to accept and adopt it as a part of adult working life.” Consequentially, while many of the leaders expressed that there are benefits for playfulness at work, justifying playfulness and showing its usefulness is a challenge, and in their view, pressure to produce concrete results at work can prevent playfulness.

Another major obstacle to play the leaders brought up was lack of time: play should not take time away from busy and encumbering work schedules. Community responses echoed this view, stating that in the middle of busy daily routines, there is no time for rethinking set work habits, and that there ought to be more time for play and creativity. The leaders also felt that lack of existing models for implementing useful playfulness into daily work as well as organizational rigidity and administrative culture that restricts the freedom in academic work contribute to this problem. Lack of enthusiasm was also perceived as a potential challenge: getting adults to engage in playfulness requires some amount of facilitation and motivation.

In the interviews, the leaders suggested that playfulness requires a suitable mindset, and that transitioning into that mindset is not an instant process: “[L3] Jumping straight from your desk into that [playful] situation, that has a substantial effect, in that you can’t turn

your head around quickly like that.” Sometimes the serious nature of the topic at hand has an effect on playfulness: play can be seen to be in conflict with the subject matter. When you are used to handling certain subjects in a serious mindset, it can direct you into a more serious mindset as well. However, things that are usually connected to play, such as toys, are not enough to create playful activity, as the activity depends on what one does with them. While the nature of a tool may suggest playfulness, it does not reinforce or prevent play, and more so than the tool, the attitude and the approach matter: “[L3] The instrument itself does not really prevent playfulness, but how you engage with it and how you are lead to it probably has even more of an effect.” Likewise, serious or negative subject matters or frames of mind can inhibit playfulness. A negative subject matter, such as thinking about an unpreferable future, compared to thinking about a preferable future, is however also something that is seen to be easier to approach through a playful method.

The community responses showed that for playfulness to have a bigger role as a part of work, a suitable environment to facilitate the playfulness is needed: “[C37] I would shape the work environment in a way that would enable playfulness to be a part of everyday working life and not just a disconnected and separate thing.” A need for a suitable playful physical space and social environment was reported in several responses. One respondent remarked that there should be more playful elements and tools in the environment to cultivate ideas, and another said that “[C48] I would give a chance to and promote freedom of play, being able to voice ideas, creating an environment where there is freedom of innovating and being curious.”

There were many opinions in the SIS community that play at work should not be compulsory, but rather self-originating. It was seen that playfulness should not be forced from above: “[C12] But you can’t force play or playfulness – you have to want it and feel good and safe about it.” However, some people thought playfulness could be supported in the community: “[C27] One cannot be forced into playfulness, it would feel forced and awkward. Maybe it would be possible to create opportunities for it [playfulness] to emerge.” There was also a notion that playfulness is an attitude that could be created and cultivated with support from the leaders. In line with these notions, it was felt that spontaneity is the key element in playfulness, and that freedom of play should be promoted. One respondent also expressed concern that even at social gatherings that are meant to be relaxing, playfulness might easily end up in competitive, not collaborative play.

Utilizing playful methods is easier if the tools or skills needed for it are familiar from everyday life. In the drawing workshop, the method was analogous with skills needed in everyday working life, for example from using a flip chart, even if that kind of activity would not exactly contain drawing. One of the leaders remarked that drawing, or similar activities, would also be something that could be utilized more often: “[G3] Drawing should probably be used like this much more, especially in brainstorming and such. Or making something out of clay or whatever.” One of the leaders mentioned that the use of the body is common when working on certain scenarios. A familiar topic is also something that can make play easier: “[G2] Right, the easy thing about today was that the keywords came from our community”. Regarding the workshop videos, a few of the leaders commented that getting the hang of the play activity was relatively easy.

Playing together requires a certain dynamic between the people playing. Sometimes it helps to have someone else playing with you, making it OK for you to play as well: “[L5] And maybe he seemed to have a clearer vision, about going into the Lego stuff, I mean,

and I then thought that, OK, that's OK for me too." One of the leaders described that ideation itself can be seen as similar to playing a game, something where you enter a state of flow: "[G3] Then it starts to take the form of something like, 'Oh, you came up with that thing, I'll add this here'. There's this kind of interaction when there's someone else there. Pretty soon it'll sweep you away! It's really fun, in fact."

A shared background or culture can also facilitate playfulness. Building culture in a large community like SIS might be difficult, but it forms in the smaller sub-communities paving way for the larger community wide culture. The interviewed leaders as well as community respondents also agreed that playing is not easy and that it requires practice: "[C4] Play is not an easy and trivial thing, it requires creativity, credibility and hard work from those who wish to do it well". The community responses also stated that playing requires rules and trust to work as intended.

Both the leaders and community members identified that different kinds and amounts of playfulness are suited for different people: playfulness and propensity to engage in play depend on the individual person and their personality characteristics. According to some respondents the ways of implementing playfulness should account for different personalities: "[C9] Playfulness should come in many different forms, so everyone could find a pleasant way to play". Responses from the community indicated that while some people are playful, others should not be forced into playfulness, and that organized playfulness or play imposed from above are not desirable. One interviewed leader suggested that playfulness can also create or reinforce group boundaries in cases where the playfulness within the group draws from insider-outsider distinctions.

### **Play at Work**

In the questionnaire responses from the community, playfulness in academia was seen as freedom from external pressure and productivity requirements. One interviewed leader also linked playfulness to academic tradition: "[L3] Then again, in a traditional sort of academic community this kind of free thinking and atmosphere has been emphasized, and I'd say that the playfulness is in a manner of speaking a part of that system." Playfulness was also seen as an alternative way of doing things: "[L3] On the School level, others have had similar experiences, in that they've at least passively realized that there are different options for doing things as a group."

Playfulness, or a loose and relaxed atmosphere, should be an integral part of daily work and culture for it to take root, as strong conflicting traditions of serious-minded attitudes towards work still easily hinder gaining full capacity of playfulness. Indeed, one respondent advocated adopting a more playful mindset overall: "[C18] Throwing yourself into new things and a light, playful attitude are cool! There's no need to be stuck up all the time". By trying out different playful methods, the best ones can be discovered and then integrated into practices. They can be a good addition in the future to what is already there. Furthermore, it was noted that although playfulness has its uses, certain limitations should be observed as it might not fit everyone and every situation: "[C36] Playfulness should not be ignored altogether. It can be used to liberate the atmosphere, but it should also be accepted that play does not suit everyone or fit everywhere."

In a questionnaire response, one leader saw play as something that is not productive, and forcing it to be productive might result in something that is not play anymore. Additionally, a respondent from the community pointed out that routine aspects of work are not conducive to play.

Playful activities are to some extent a part of the leaders' work. The leaders see that playfulness is something that could be used, perhaps in teaching. It was seen that there should be space for playfulness in leadership and that playfulness should be part of the individual persona, not something structural. Play and leadership were seen to be connected: play is something that does not undermine prestige and being a leader must not kill playfulness. However, only play is not enough: "[C29] Good leadership is playful, but playing does not equate to good leadership". While for some it was hard to see the role of play in leadership, one respondent also commented that "[C30] Leaders need to play more!"

The community saw that there should be room for playfulness in leadership, and that combining play and leadership is useful but challenging; it is possible, but it needs to be practiced. Leadership was seen as a something that requires the same kind of qualities as play, some examples being creativity, credibility, hard work and throwing oneself into it. It was, however, seen that play is not creative or meaningful if limited only to the leaders of the School, and further: "[C25] Especially the female perspective is left out if the male leadership of SIS play among themselves". Another respondent commented that: "It is not reasonable that only bosses (men) play, or that people imagine that only leaders have a playful attitude."

It was seen that play can be used as a leadership tool, and that it should be possible to create a motivational work environment through leaders embracing play. Several of the leaders brought up the connection between play and dealing with serious issues as a specific use case for using play as a tool.

### **Public Play through Videos**

None of the leaders performing on the videos rejected the idea of making the videos fully public (as opposed to them being only available for the staff to view); indeed, some considered them as a potential tool for PR. However, others voiced concerns over how the videos might be received and interpreted in an unpredictable online environment. Such a public display of playfulness would need to serve a definite purpose and the videos themselves should be carefully contextualized if they were made available for a wider audience.

In the individual interviews, some leaders expressed that the intended purpose and publicity of the video artefacts affected the playfulness of the workshop situation and that recording spontaneity and displaying playfulness to others could feel uncomfortable. However, none of the leaders had received direct feedback on the videos from the work community; the video with improvisational performance had come up in a break room conversation once.

The leaders reported that making the videos and showing them to the community could be seen as being playful in and of itself, and that the videos had potential for entertainment as well as communication: "[L1] On the other hand, I would believe that the value of these [videos] is in that we can share these thoughts within the School in an entertaining way." In the view of the leaders, the videos, considered as a playful medium of communication, could serve a purpose in stimulating and inspiring thinking and discussion within the work community, and in the questionnaire responses, one leader said that the workshop results displayed on the videos were more experimental than usual. However, one leader expressed concern in that the original showing of the videos at a staff gathering fell somewhat short of that goal, since there was no facilitated follow-

up discussion on them at that point, and that they could be regarded more as comedic than communicative. Indeed, a follow-up discussion was something that was only later implemented when showing the videos at the summer day. One interviewed leader had also shown the pre-release version of the videos to his research group, and some felt that the videos might be useful for the community later, as well.

However, some leaders also expressed that video as a medium can constrain the impact of the content, and that more traditional methods of communication can work better than a playful video. The different videos also conveyed the sense of playfulness in different amounts: most leaders reported that the video with improvisational performance was the most memorable and displayed playfulness best. One of the leaders, who did not participate in the workshop where toys were the playful method, commented that the toys seemed to provide a large amount freedom to play and break boundaries in thinking. In the questionnaire, one leader mentioned, almost as a reminder, that the play in the videos was happening upon order or request.

The community received the videos and gave feedback on them in various ways. The videos gave an impression of innovative leaders, and the performance of the leaders was evaluated in a range from “good” and “lively” to “wooden” and “in need of practice”. Some thought that the portrayed playful methods were interesting, while others felt that there was a lot of discussion but no practical results or interesting ideas. The responses also indicated that the scenarios in the videos sparked both safety and discomfort, with an emphasis on how a lot of negativity and threats were portrayed and that it is easier to show how things might go wrong. “[C11] It was fun to see various methods used although some gave room for more creativity than others” described one respondent, and continued: “These methods could be used in the future in different situations”. There were also a few comments that pointed negatively to the composition of the workshop participants, which was a natural limitation due to scheduling and school staff composition.

## **DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK**

For the academic leaders the playful workshops served as a platform to construct personal meanings on academic playfulness to be shared and elaborated in joint workshop debriefing discussions. Later, after viewing the video presentations the leaders were interviewed separately to record their individual views. The video presentations served to showcase playful leadership for the whole community, the members of which could reflect and build meaning on play and playfulness in their own workplace.

It became evident that it was important for the staff to collectively view and discuss the videos together so that understanding on workplace related play and playfulness could take form. The edited videos of the workshops can actually be seen as cultural artifacts (Holland et al. 1998). Making the videos approachable through editing them into entertaining 3-minute format enhanced the spectacle effect of collective viewing.

There were several occasions where the play activities in the conducted workshops resembled activities that take place in the everyday working life of the workshop participants. The participants of three workshops mentioned connections themselves. The workshop featuring cards had a resemblance to workshops where topics are grouped using Post-it notes. The workshop that featured drawing shared a resemblance to drawing diagrams on flip charts. The workshop featuring physical performance was seen to be similar to using one’s body to work certain scenarios. This is done, for example, in the

bodystorming method (Oulasvirta et al. 2003), where participants of a bodystorming session may act out activities to solve design problems. While the participants of the workshop that featured toys did not themselves describe a connection to everyday work, toys are an element that can be used in brainstorming sessions (Fullerton 2014).

The creation of a video depicting a scenario can work on several levels: the fact that a vision is going to be recorded in the form of a performance can have an effect on a workshop. The resulting video can act as a tool for communication. It can also be used to initiate discussion on the topic. It can also be used as a way to display the leaders to the rest of the community, letting the community see the leaders work on a goal using certain methods.

Huizinga (1949, 7) and other theoreticians have stressed that play is voluntary in nature, and thus forced play ceases to be play. The desire for play to be voluntary was seen in our data as well. It is, however, useful to distinguish between playfulness as an attitude and play as an activity (e.g. Sicart 2014; Stenros 2015). Both have creative, destructive and disruptive properties, but while the latter is a socially recognizable activity, the former is an attitude that can be taken to any activity, including work and management.

As a conclusion to the view of the community regarding playfulness, it can be determined that play is something that is already a part of everyday work, be it recognized as such or not. The views of the community are somewhat spread, and they do not have an exact consensus on the role of play in the workplace. Still, play is seen to be somewhat normal, though not always easy, and something that has its own requirements to be successful. Playfulness is something that can create a more creative and relaxed atmosphere. In regard to play and leadership, the view of the community is mostly positive, but cautious. However, how workplace play and playfulness is brought into the community, and by whom, matters. It has also been noted (Baldry & Hallier 2010) that if playful elements are imposed from above, employees might see them directing the behavior or limiting free playfulness, thus being a threat for the established social identity in the workplace context.

This glimpse into the role of play and performance in academia, both in leadership and as a part of the work community, gives important insight that can only be obtained from within these kinds of communities themselves. Though fruitful, the research conducted is far from conclusive and the discoveries made during the study warrant continued investigation. As one respondent reported in the questionnaire, if they were a dictator, “[C2] Research of play would continue.”

Due to our findings, we have determined that it is essential to properly understand the attitudes of a community if one were to implement playfulness in a community. In the future, based on the findings of this research, we will work towards creating a toolset for reliably probing the attitudes of a community towards play and playfulness. This toolset will be coupled with a framework for creating playful solutions for different types of communities.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The aim of this article has been to examine the attitudes towards play at a work place. The study described in the article was based on an experiment that put management level personnel of a northern European academic institution in playful ideation workshops. In edited videos of the workshops, the leaders used playful methods to assess future

scenarios for their school. The workshops were then discussed with the participants in groups. Short edited versions of the workshop videos were also screened on two separate occasions for the rest of the personnel in the institution. After the first screening, the leaders were further interviewed individually on the workshops and on the videos. The personnel present at the second screening were asked to give feedback and share their thoughts on the videos through a questionnaire after jointly viewing the videos.

In the conducted experiment the act of leadership was turned into spectacle and entertainment, a way to bond the community together, for the purpose of creating a probe to expose attitudes towards play within an academic environment. The views of the leaders and the community members proved both to be versatile in nature, revealing a wide variety of opinions, experiences and conceptions towards play at work.

Examining the different ways the respondents and interviewees understand play and playfulness suggested that they are not unambiguous concepts. Attitudes and values related to work and play were perceived as an obstacle to playfulness and justifying playfulness and showing its usefulness was seen to be a challenge, especially with busy work schedules to think about. Playfulness is still seen to have a place at the workplace and it has the potential of being beneficial and effecting the work environment in a positive way. The leaders and community members did provide some differing views on playfulness at work; the leaders were generally more neutral and cautious of negative tone when interviewed, whereas the questionnaire replies from community members had slightly more critical views among the positive and the neutral feedback. In general, both community members and leaders, however, saw a place for playfulness in leadership.

Due to the diversity of attitudes in our findings, play and playfulness at work has proved to be complex issue, not to be taken lightly when planning to implement playfulness in the work place. This is also highlighted by the ambiguousness of the meanings of play and playfulness, apparent in our findings. As such, this study shows the importance and need for further studies in order to better understand the multitude of phenomena in the topic area of play and playful attitudes at work places.

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