

# Democratic Design Through Play

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**Abstract** The theoretical paper explores the question how designers and children can interact as peer citizens in participatory design (PD) processes. By discussing and integrating Mouritsen's (2002) concept of child culture, approaches to child-citizenship and concepts of free play, we discuss how participatory design practices could stimulate child and adult cultures to permeate each other and by doing so, enable democratic interactions. Both children and adults are required to step away from their internalized normative ways of interaction. Adult designers are invited to also play and improvise whereas children are encouraged to play, but also to share responsibility for the process and outcome of PD sessions. The Ambiguity Approach (Vaneycken, 2020) is introduced as a methodological basis for more democratic PD practice with children. Two snapshots of PD processes illustrate the implementation of ambiguity of roles and ambiguity of materials respectively.

**Keywords** child participation, participatory design, play culture, public space, UNCRC

## INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) was made into Swedish law in 2020. One of the consequences is that public spaces need to be (re-)designed in order for children to exercise their rights as equal citizens. Inviting children as participants into design processes has become quite common practice in the wider realm of urban planning, architecture, design for play, and in the development of digital interfaces. Our question for this paper is how designers and children can interact as peer citizens in participatory design (PD) processes. In order to answer this question, the concepts of child citizenship (Jans, 2004) and play culture (Mouritsen, 2002) are discussed and integrated to provide a theoretical argumentation for conditions of equality between children and adults in PD processes. The 'ambiguity approach' (Vaneycken, 2020) is proposed as a methodology to create conditions for equality between children and adults in PD processes. The application of this methodology is demonstrated using two snapshots from PD design projects. The work presented is linked to the Child Culture Design teaching and research activities at the design unit of Gothenburg University/HDK-Valand.

## CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION AND INTEGRATION

### *Children as peer citizens in participatory design processes*

Understanding children's participation in design processes as an act of their agency as citizens puts focus on the political character of participatory/co-design processes. In this context the role of designers as those who scaffold children in pre-defined roles and processes of co-creation becomes increasingly questioned (Keshavarz & Maze, 2013; Lindström & Ståhl, 2016; Vaneycken, 2020). Taken for granted, adult-child roles and power relations manifest an expert-lay-person interaction. This hinders more heterarchical practices to emerge between children, designers, and communities.

For example, within the Scandinavian PD model, Iversen and Smith (2012) called for providing children with authority and legitimacy in co-developing design ideas and taking part in decisions regarding the role of design for their futures. To do this, designers must re-think their roles

and professionalism. Iversen, Smith, and Dindler (2017) explored the citizenship dimension of participatory design with children by inviting them as 'protagonists', i.e. central agents into entire design processes. The resulting mutual learning should enable children to develop design skills and to reflect on future roles of technology. This empowerment aims to teach competencies for democratic engagement in the design of future societies. The framework is directed at developing awareness and skills which adds a relevant educational aspect to PD processes. However, doing so still employs the expert–novice dynamic between designers as current citizens and children as future citizens. The need for mutual learning by both children and adults became apparent in practice when designers struggled to accept teenagers as protagonists in 'their' design process (Iversen et al., 2017).

Creating democratic design processes with children requires an understanding of how child citizenship compares to adult citizenship. Jans (2004) introduces what he calls child-size citizenship. He proposes to understand citizenship as a dynamic process for both children and adults, acting as peers in everyday life while using their respective competencies in dialogue. He rejects the almost taken for granted educational role of adults towards children as being future citizens rather than current ones. A peer relationship between adults and children should in his view be based on negotiation and contestation. Interacting in this sense as peers requires that the otherness of children compared to adults is respected and invited (Johansson, 2012; Mannion, 2007; Nishiyama, 2017). According to Jans (2004), the otherness of children is expressed in their curiosity and meaning making through play. Adults are seen as rather perpetuating given cultural meanings while children are re-interpreting given contexts. It is this agency of children as cultural meaning makers that should be more respected and taken seriously as an articulation of child citizenship.

The question of how such negotiations and contestations can work is strongly related to the notion of children and adults as both beings and becomings. Children as well as adults are seen as present and future agents shaping childhoods and adulthoods now and in the future (James & Prout, 1997; Uprichard, 2008). In current PD practices, children's agency is curbed while adults' agency might be overestimated. Therefore, not only should adults respect and interact with children as both actual and future citizens (Qvortrup, 2002), but the same should hold the other way around when children expect adults, particularly in institutional contexts, to act as the fixed model of citizens. The mutual acceptance of the other as having and lacking competencies, as continuing and changing, is a condition for children and adults to interact as peer citizens embracing their mutual otherness (see Kesby, 2007).

Our critique of Jans (2004) is that assuming adults as working and children as playing re-establishes dualities and power relationships. Adults need to 'read', represent, and translate children's meanings in contexts of adult decision making. Current co-design and PD processes, in which children are respected and listened to, do exactly that. Making children's voices heard, by e.g. providing a range of tools for expression, has transformed PD processes to be much more accessible to children (e.g. Bekker, Beusmans, Keyson, & Lloyd, 2003; Guha, Druin, & Fails, 2013; Yip et al., 2013). That said, the goals, available roles, tools, and decisions about the consequences of children's views for the design outcomes are still firmly in adult hands. In this paper we try to argue for a PD methodology which moves the dynamics between adult designers and child participants towards a peer relationship in which the mutual otherness of children and adults is continuously negotiated. Doing this requires learning on all sides.

### ***Free play and democracy***

"In play we have license to explore both ourselves and our society" (Silverstone, 1999, p. 64).

Free play is characterized by a greater availability of choices for engagement, less instructions, and less interventions by adults. It therefore enhances agency. Children use free choice and free

play to explore possibilities for and implications of their actions within a larger framework than that of prescribed or instructed play activities. Resisting and using strategies and techniques of power in play are seen as expressions of children's interpretations of their social and cultural environments (Wood, 2014). Child culture emerges in free play situations rather than in adult-instructed or adult-designed activities. It is understood by Mouritsen (2002) as re-interpretation of a given cultural context through play. In free play, children create meaning by shaping rules and power relationships according to their experiences and needs. New, for adults often surprising, configurations of given materials or spatial and social elements emerge as expression of action possibilities children discover and realize on their own terms. This does not mean that adults/designers cannot be part of children's free play, but they can and need to negotiate their roles and actions just as the other players.

In the context of adult activities, free play is similar to improvisation. The skill to improvise is understood by Nachmanovitch (1990) as an act of free play. The mutual willingness and skill to share control in improvisation enable an unpredictable dialogue at eye height. The interplay of interpretations becomes the creative driver for a resonant engagement between actors. Free play therefore is not just a juvenile expression that adults need to consider, it is a mediator for equality in action and for the imagination of alternative worlds at all ages. Sutton-Smith (2009) in his seminal book *The Ambiguity of Play* explores the ways in which play is part of societal discourses independent of age. Several of the identified rhetorics discuss free play in its subversive role as a means and context to resist existing norms and alter power relations. Children as well as adults, through their re-interpretation of contexts in play, assert agency in controlling their experiences. Intentionally or unintentionally, they ignore provided norms and rules and propose other ways of acting in concrete situations. In a PD context, widening and negotiating the space for these expressions will give designers much more insight in child culture than a narrower pre-conceived space for action. A more improvising free play attitude can enable democratic design practice. In this paper we share our exploration of such PD practices.

### ***The dynamics of goal-directed and free play activities***

PD processes are goal-directed and aim to answer design questions. This seems to exclude free play/improvisation at least for the adult designers. The taken for granted premise of playing children and working adults would prevent the above-described democratic improvisation-based engagements within PD practice. However, the static assumption of playing children and working adults has been questioned through more dynamic conceptualizations of the relationship between work and play over the lifespan (Apter, 2001; Henricks, 2015; Sutton-Smith, 2009; Turk Niskač, 2021).

Children might spend more of their time driven by the process of playing, but by no means do even young children only play. They are also highly driven by outcomes of their actions such as helping adults or by perfecting a skateboard loop. Likewise, adults move between goal- and process- or play driven motivational states (Apter, 2001; Van Leeuwen, Gielen, & Westwood, 2012). Inviting children as equal citizens into a design process in our view requires to support their ability to act purposefully and responsible as well as their ability to play freely. This requires designers/facilitators, within a safe framework, to negotiate and improvise the PD process accordingly. Democratic PD processes can only emerge when a multitude of different and changing interpretations of situations, processes and (power)relationships are possible. PD sessions can provide participants of all ages with the choice to engage in a more play-directed or a more goal-directed state and to switch between the two. In order to implement such openness in PD processes with children, Vaneycken (2020) developed the Ambiguity Approach as a PD methodology.

## AMBIGUITY AS A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PD

Using a research through design framework and auto-ethnographic analysis of her art-based PD practice, Vaneycken (2020) proposed the Ambiguity Approach to participatory design with children. This methodological framework aims to actualise democratic processes in participatory design practices with children through ambiguity in either activities, tools/materials, setting/place, roles, or in the agenda of a participatory design process. Ambiguity, or openness, invites diversity of interpretations and their negotiation. For children actively co-creating PD processes allows co-ownership and it introduces designers to their work- and play culture.

Vaneycken's work heightens awareness of the degree of taken for granted small-scale inequalities in interactions between children and adults. They are ingrained in everyday encounters to an extent that it feels 'natural' and responsible for adults and children alike to perpetuate them, even when trying to make their voices heard (Mitchell & Elwood, 2012). For example, when 8-year-olds enter a PD session, they usually expect knowledgeable adults to take the lead in providing a context, a goal, and a way to work on it. Adults in turn feel responsible to provide this for the sake of the participants as well as the design goal.

Loosening this framework of culturally engrained adult-child expectations and power relationships feels unfamiliar, uncertain, and somewhat chaotic for all involved. Interacting with each other in a partly ambiguous situation requires ongoing negotiation and the willingness to improvise. The designer/facilitator no longer has the task to realize a preconceived plan. Instead, his or her responsibility now is to become a partner in co-creating ways of articulating diverse meanings in the context of a shared goal and an only partially defined framework. It is paramount to provide a secure environment for diverse forms of engagement that turn from being probably dauntingly unfamiliar to being excitingly unfamiliar. The dynamics of childhood and adulthood change from a static to a fluid mode of being together with mutual respect and responsibilities (Johansson, 2012). In our view active citizenship of children and adults can emerge from that fluidity.

The following two snapshots from two PD projects aim to illustrate how concrete methods were derived from applying the proposed methodology: 1. The ambiguity of roles (Vaneycken, 2020) and 2. The ambiguity of materials (Paterson, 2021). Examples of the resulting PD interactions are provided.

### **Snapshot 1 - Ambiguity of roles in PD: Playful Rules (for more details see Vaneycken, 2020)**

#### **Context**

*Playful Rules* was a design research project initiated by the *Office for Public Play*, a design and research studio that works on children's participation in public space. The goal of the session was to explore the children's personal meanings of socializing in public space, in this case their local park in Brussels, and present the results at the art festival *L'incroyable Teleferique*. The process described here refers to one PD session in a series of three.

#### **Method**

- *Participants*: nine children, aged 6 to 10 years who live near the park; a designer and a playworker.
- *Fixed aspects of the PD process*:  
 Site: Park de Forest/Vorst in Brussels.  
 Shared goal: exploring the new and alternatives ways of socializing in public space/the park.  
 Topics of exploration: the designer prepared questions in relation to the shared goal to be explored by the children in the park and successive observations in the three sessions.  
 Materials: a camera  
 Rules of interaction: respectful conduct towards all participants and safety





*Fig. 1. PD example 1: Some children ran off to a big bush that harboured a large cavity where the whole group could shelter and hide from the other park visitors (Photo: Annelies Vaneycken)*

– *Ambiguous aspects of the PD process:*

Roles: there were no pre-defined roles. Adults and children were equally involved in decisions regarding the process, the required competencies, and the type of outcome. Free play was considered an opportunity for co-organizing togetherness and collaboration; it was encouraged rather than diverted to break time.

### **Procedure**

The designer initiated the session by asking the children to explain to her which places in the park they favoured. No instructions were given regarding the way of answering this question. The subsequent interactions emerged within the boundaries of the fixed aspects of the process.

### **Results**

In response to her question, the children started to tell their personal stories. But very soon story telling extended into a child-initiated tour in the park where they engaged in activities they typically employ there. Some children ran off to a big bush that harboured a large cavity where the whole group could shelter and hide from the other park visitors (see Fig. 1). The other children, the designer, and the playworker followed and participated in the child-initiated activity. Next, another child guided the group towards a somewhat desolate steep hill where he took the others on an adventurous and challenging path, ignoring the user-friendly path circling along the hillside (see Fig. 2). The child crafted his own path to the top by climbing the steepest hillside, penetrating a close-knit network of overgrown shrubs. Again, all, including the adults, followed the leading child, arriving slow and with a wheeze of excitement and exertion at the hilltop.

Designers, to a degree, needed to relinquish their own autonomy, knowing, and competence whilst highlighting and applauding the children's individual knowing, competence, and initiatives.



*Fig. 2. PD example 1: Two children showed a hidden place with an unexpected large pit, only accessible via a treacherous journey through stinging nettles (Photo: Annelies Vaneycken)*

This was put to action in small but meaningful gestures (e.g. the designer accepted the children taking the lead and followed them; the designer showed interest in the children by asking them follow-up questions and by showing them respect (e.g. “I would have never imagined that the park hosts such an exciting place”). The adults acted also as becomings rather than only beings by showing their own ignorance and incompetence (e.g.: “I would never be able to find this place by myself”; “I wish I could climb a tree but I can’t or maybe I am just afraid”; “Can somebody teach me how to descend this hill in a safe way?”).

It was this child-initiated shared experience which shaped the development of the design outcome – an artistic walk for the festival.

### **Snapshot 2: Ambiguity of materials in PD: Play in a “No touching!” environment (for more details see Paterson, 2021)**

#### **Context**

Lekkontoret (play office in Swedish) is a design studio which empowers children to become researchers of their environments in public spaces, in this case a museum space. Gathenhielska Huset museum provided a brief to make the museum and its contents more accessible to a child audience. Lekkontoret’s main design challenge was to design for child autonomy, ownership and play in a fragile museum space.

#### **Method**

- Participants: six children, aged 3-5; 2 designers; a translator; and an observer.
- *Fixed aspects of the PD process:*  
Site: Gathenhielska Huset museum in Gothenburg.

Shared goal: to explore and interpret a fragile adult-focused museum space.

Topics of exploration: designers prepared activities in the museum based on the shared goal and successive observations in the five sessions.

Rules of interaction: respectful conduct towards all participants and safety for children and museum exhibits.

Roles: children took the role of explorers of the museum by working and playing in the space. Adults initiated and supported children's emerging activities. They acted as listeners and observers.

– *Ambiguous aspects of the PD process:*

Materials: Lekkantoret provided a range of *Office Things* which were designed to encourage behaviours outside of the roles people usually assume for young children (Mannion, 2007). They aimed to give children agency in a context unfriendly towards young children while also requiring adults to listen and respond to child actions and reflections. The *Office Things* materials carried diverse physical and symbolic meanings for both children and adults, which became apparent during their playful and goal-directed use:

- The Uniforms: Each child and adult participant received a dickie collar made from men's shirts as their Lekkantoret uniform (see Fig. 4). The design was influenced by conventional adult office norms and was deliberately ambiguous regarding the idea of a uniform being both a sign of authority and of service. The materiality of the uniform appropriated and adapted an object from the adult-world to suit a child office's needs.
- The Flags: Each child got a small yellow flag and a large red flag. The small flag was used on a floor plan to indicate locations at the site, while the large flag was carried around the site during activities to mark areas of interest. The small flags and floor plan aimed to make navigation in the large museum easier for the young children and were used in on-site planning of activities when deciding where the design team would work (see Fig. 3). The large flags signalled an occupation to outsiders while also creating a physical boundary for participants to stay within, which assured the museum stakeholders that the children would not harm the museum's contents and signalled to parents and participating adults that the children would remain within a safe and monitored area.
- The basket storage seats: The *Office Things* also included storage seats on wheels, scaled to children's bodies. They gave the children more autonomy holding the tools and materials for their work at different sites in the museum. The children's storage seats in the museum communicated to the adults the presence and activities of children who were interacting in a space not meant for children.

### **Procedure**

The children came for five afternoons to the Gathenhielska Huset museum to work and play alongside adult designers. Each session consisted of guided activities as well as free play.

### **Results**

The museum exhibits became a trigger for storytelling and role-play with the Office Things working as props in these child-led activities.

The uniform became an apron, a bib and a visual link that brought all office members together, whether young or old. The children referred to their uniforms as 'arbetskläder' (work clothes), because they understood the activities they did inside the museum partly to be work and partly to be play. While the children were, to their understanding, working, the adults could use the uniforms to role-play or perform new ways of interacting with the children as co-workers.





*Fig. 3. PD example 2: The Office Things floor plan, which was used to help the children navigate the site. Small flags used to position the self in the plan in the foreground of the image with larger red flags in the background (Photo: Luke De Jager)*



*Fig. 4. PD example 2: Members of the Lekkontoret design team gathered around a basket storage seat, being used as an observation table. All members are wearing uniforms and some are wearing head torches, which were used for no-touch exploration in one of the museum rooms (Photo: Luke De Jager)*

The flags fulfilled their signalling functions. During play, children used the large flags to represent weapons, garden tools and oars. The smaller flags were also quickly co-opted with the children projecting themselves onto the flags and playing their way through the museum floor plan.

The baskets of the storage seats were emptied out by the children and used to create boats, homes and prisons to demonstrate and re-enact some of the museum's stories. During break time the storage seats became tables or seats to eat and rest. The *Office Things* assured museum stakeholders that the site would be left untouched, and also opened up for free play of young children providing objects meeting their action capacities as well as boundaries within the museum space. They aimed to make both adults and children feel they could share and occupy the same territory equally.

Lekkontoret aimed to provide young children with more choice and autonomy in a fragile museum space accessible only to adults. The *Office Things* were objects which played with children's and adults' preconceptions regarding each other's roles. They empowered children to do their work as well as engage in self-guided play. Children re-interpreted the given objects depending on the respective room in the museum and the site-specific emerging play themes. They engaged with their own skills and capacities and by doing so articulated their interpretations and competencies. The designers' improvisations enabled the children to leave traces in the museum of their work- and play culture, their otherness and their wishes. The resulting exhibition contained e.g. audio of the children talking about some prominent paintings in the museum. This literally enables other visitors to see them with children's eyes, knowledge and hearts. Also appropriating the *Office Things* in the garden of the museum resulted in the commission of a play hut for that space which relates to the museum themes as affordances rather than as mere decorations. This project offered children tools to engage and negotiate in an adult world on their own terms.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this paper was to propose a framework for PD processes which enable child and adult cultures to permeate each other and by doing so enable active child citizenship. The Ambiguity Approach (Vaneycken, 2020) was argued for as a means to expand the designers' singular interpretation of a PD process towards a plurality of interpretations, including those of individual children.

The two snapshots of PD processes with children demonstrated ambiguity of roles and ambiguity of materials as means to empower children to contribute their interpretations of the PD process. Children and adults engaged in both play/improvisation and goal-directed activities which were no longer preconceived in detail by adult designers. The letting go of some control by adults as well as the taking more control and responsibility by children re-shaped the culturally engrained power relationships between adults and children towards more equality.

Both groups of children engaged with their topics through a dynamic change between play and goal-directed engagement. They used the given freedom to appropriate spaces and objects as they saw fit and by doing so articulated their interpretations. They demonstrated their competencies through actively immersing themselves in the two public spaces, far beyond their existing 'made for children' aspects and adults' imagination. Designers accepted invitations to play if their protecting role towards the children allowed. Both PD processes required negotiation and reflection by children and adult designers alike to reach consequential outcomes.

Working in the demonstrated ways in PD processes is a time consuming, challenging and often messy endeavour. Goal-oriented and non-goal-oriented activities need to be balanced to reach an outcome that is satisfactory for all parties. Designers do not only need to make space for democratic negotiations when different interpretations emerge and probably collide. They also need to encourage all participants, including the youngest, to take responsibility for a common

outcome that is of value for everybody involved (Büscher et al., 2002). Awakening these more democratic dialogues requires designers and children to embrace themselves and others as beings and becomings.

Engaging with children as active citizens means to enlarge and partly change the methods, time frames and expectations of PD processes. The Ambiguity Approach is one methodology for designers to truly accept child culture as “a medium which enables children to cultivate themselves and their surroundings” (Mouritsen, 2002, p. 15). Designers and societies can gain more inclusive and imaginative outcomes for all generations.

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