Design implications of feeling playful: Play moods + atmospheres in dialogue

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ABSTRACT
Based on a research project Play Stories about play design and embodiment, the aim of this paper is to explore how a fruitful combination of theories about play moods and concepts of atmospheres can enrich the field of play design. The paper explores the implications of this conceptual pairing through two design experiments. It shows how, while it is possible to design for different moods, play’s atmospheric qualities insist that designers attend to how these moods emerge, and the shifts that happen when the moods emerge. The main contribution of the paper is to point to the following design implications: Atmospheres help us understand the dynamic of moods, and we therefore have to design for several moods; atmospheres show us the multiple elements that can configure when designing for several moods; and atmospheres orient us to emergence, and show the importance of designing for fluency, which does not mean that the design itself has to be fluent. The focus on atmospheres hints at ‘the space intentionally left blank’, the ineffable and felt qualities that always evade precise description.

INTRODUCTION
An understanding of play as a particular way of being in the world has a long history in scholarship (Sutton-Smith, 2001; Henricks, 2015; Karoff & Jessen, 2014), which is relevant to the emerging field of play design (Christiansen & Gudiksen, 2022; Poulsen, 2022; Jespersen, 2022; Feder, 2022; Skovbjerg et al. 2022). In this literature, play is conceptualised in a way where the meanings of what people do “make sense in relation to your [play] set-up” (Karoff 2013, p. 3). That is, play engenders new, experiential meanings and insights precisely because the setting, time and mood of the actions are understood by people as playful. An important concept for play design to help explain this is ‘play moods’ (Karoff 2013, p. 1), or “a state of being in which we are open and ready, both to others and their production of meaning and to new opportunities for producing meaning”. Play moods distinguish particular encounters, actions, times and places as specifically playful, and in doing so enable novel and distinctive understandings of the world that makes it possible to design for play (Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020). Understanding of play moods differ from psychological understanding of play, aiming at describing not an inner state of mind, but a connection and relation to world. Play moods are dynamically constituted in people’s experiential worlds, and as such, arise in situations understood as playful, which are not always known in advance.

Recent scholarship on the concept of atmospheres, mostly located in human geography, relates closely to the notion of play moods (Sumartojo and Pink 2019, Anderson 2014). Atmospheres are distinctive conditions of feeling, co-constituted by the ‘perceiving subject’ and her surroundings (Anderson 2009), that share affective charges and create meaning for the people who participate in them; atmospheres concern connections
between people, material and space, as a shared middleground (Kinch & Højlund, 2013), a blank opening where unexpected practices can happen. Whilst not limited to play, atmospheres offer an attentiveness to people’s experiential contexts that can be applied to play, and by extension, how we might best design for play.

In this paper, we explore how a concept of atmospheres can come together with play moods, and how a dialogue between these concepts can support new understandings of, and possible interventions in, play moods, relevant for play design (Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020). Based on a number of design experiments (Bang & Eriksen, 2019; Brandt & Binder, 2002) created in relation to the 2022 event Worlding Play, we explore the combination of their concepts and the value for design. The main contribution of this paper is to show how this theoretical dialogue can point to the development of novel design methods that can reveal, engender and shape play moods, and probe the understandings of the world that a play-ful framing makes possible.

In the next section, we trace the links between the concept of play moods and the concepts and methods of atmospheres. We then turn to the specific play moods themselves and, using examples from the Worlding Play event, show how they can be brought into dialogue with atmospheres. The paper concludes by discussing the design implications for this conceptual pairing, how an atmospheric attunement to ‘play moods’ opens up new approaches to design methodology, and the specific design methods that can emerge as a result.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PLAY MOODS + ATMOSPHERES

The aim of this section is to bring together the conceptualisation of play (Skovbjerg, 2021; Karoff, & Sand (2022), Skovbjerg Karoff (2013) and Skovbjerg (2021), play situations are understood as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play order (the organization of play)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Play media (tools you play with)</td>
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<td>Play practices (what you do when you play)</td>
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<td>Play moods (the experiences of play)</td>
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Table 1: The mood perspective

In this paper we are especially interested in the concepts of play moods and play practices. Through the notion of play moods, developed in design contexts, Karoff (2013) articulates how people can ‘be in play’ in an affective, spatial, material and imaginative sense. Her concept of distinctive play moods, that we discuss in more detail below, supports the development of design moves that engender them, thereby helping participants become open to others in new ways, and enable new meanings and learnings in interactive situations (Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020). This receptivity to the world and to other people in it, and to the ongoing possibilities engendered by such receptivity, is an important quality of a playful orientation to being-in-the-world. Building on Heidigger’s notion of Dasein, or an emplaced being that ‘exists in relation to the world’, Karoff describes play mood as: “the state of being where you are distinctly open to new meaning production and where the possibilities exist for that to happen. It is not something that comes from within the players or from the outside, but instead it is happening through our engagement with the doings of play and in our relations towards the people we are with” (Karoff, 2013, p. 8).

Atmospheres have been similarly described as co-constituted by people and their perception of their spatial contexts (Anderson 2009), thus alwaysemplacing them. However, ‘while atmospheres cannot be reduced to the conditions that help them arise, these particular empirical configurations must at the same time be understood as absolutely implicit to them’ (Sumartojo and Pink 2019, p 4). Their emergent qualities imply ‘unacted out potential’ (Massumi 2015) where what might happen next cannot be known. At the same time, like play moods, atmospheres can be characterised by particular feelings - of dread, joy, excitement or anxiety - at different scales of collectivity. For example Edensor (2015) writes about how atmospheres change quickly at a football match, and the emotional effects on the people who co-constitute it. Shifting her focus to how atmospheres, like play moods, might be shared, Closs Stephens (2022) writes about atmospheres as a political force that play out at multiple levels, from the potential micro-interactions between strangers, to the feelings shared across national communities.

These are examples of collective moods in which things become possible - shared joy at a national sporting win, for example - that can bring people closer and dissolve other forms of difference, even if only temporarily. These might not always be playful in their openness, but they do transmit meaning and help to enclose some forms of identity, even if only temporarily (Closs Stephens 2022; Sumartojo 2016). What is important in terms of a dialogue with play moods is how people are receptive to participating in such atmospheres, and what this receptivity does to create shared meaning with others. Karoff (2013) also addresses this collective,
To four different concepts for play moods, which means the practices that everybody does. Even if these are not necessarily discussed, there is a shared understanding that they are valuable. We know about their value, because people keep participating in them, even though they are not naming the value in a positive way (Skovbjerg, 2021).

Like play moods in design practice (Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020, Skovbjerg, 2020), the concept of atmospheres is composed of different elements that configure in such ways that atmospheres emerge from them (Sumartojo and Pink 2019). These can be expressed spatially, for example in the material forms of a particular room and the sensory affordances of its arrangement, aspects which link directly to design. Atmospheres have ongoing qualities - that is, they are always on the cusp of change, often unpredictably, because they are constantly being made in the relationship between a given site and how people perceive and understand that site. As we will show below, this dynamism also characterises play moods.

Moreover, atmospheres shimmer somewhere between the person and the place, pulling the subject in, permeating their bodies but also with the potential for feelings of dissonance or resonance to emerge. Atmospheres are always felt (in a bodily, sensory and affective sense), and the indeterminacy of feelings means that atmospheres can be ambivalent or ambiguous. Sumartojo and Pink (2019) note that atmospheres do not precede the people who perceive or participate in them - they do not cling to a particular place. Rather, they emerge in the perception of people who help to constitute them. Like play moods, they are enacted through people’s perception of them. They are activated by the presence and actions of people.

To activate play moods and their atmospheric qualities, play practices are a key anchor. Skovbjerg (2021) defines play practices as actions of play, and as such they take place in the rhythm between repeating something and breaking with the rhythm of something. These practices are are akin to the elements that contribute to the emergence of atmospheres.

In the mood perspective on play, four different concepts for play practices have been developed, and they point to four different concepts for play moods to help conceptualise and design for play situations. Put differently, play practices help reveal how designers might shape or intervene in play, even if play moods are not able to be fully controlled. Below we will unfold the four concepts of play practices and play moods based on Skovbjerg (2021) and Skovbjerg & Sand (2022). Thinking with these play moods atmospherically offers new implications for design practice, as we will show in the analysis.

**SLIDING FOR DEVOTION**

Sliding play practices point to the play mood devotion: The aim is making as little change as possible from doings to doings. Imagine a play situation with LEGO, building with one brick, then another and another. The practices follow each other repetition, with the aim of creating the flow of continuity, where resistance or friction is not intended or desired. A play mood of devotion follows, which is characterised by an atmospheric feeling of lightness, of predictability and of settling into a well-known space.

**SHIFTING FOR INTENSITY**

Shifting play practices point to the play mood intensity. The whole body is often in the center for these play practices, and the direction, height and speed of practice changes bodily experience. On the one hand, shifting play practices have strong repetition as a play quality, but the practices, more or less unexpectedly, can change and thereby create shifts in experience. Think about a wild roller coaster trip in an amusement park: the trip starts quietly, repeating sounds, movements and intensities; it then moves towards the highest level; and then drops down suddenly, until coasting towards the end. It is precisely those shifts in speeds, heights and directions that creates the intensity of mood. The experience of nervous butterflies in your stomach as the rollercoaster carriage climbs, and an acute experience of tension in your body as you hold your breath and your heartbeat increases, only to be released before the next cycle of the ride, are qualities of the play mood intensity. This intensity points to change in the atmospheric conditions, and in that sense the ambiguity is more foregrounded.

**DISPLAYING FOR TENSION**

The play practices displaying contribute to moods of tension, and here the performative part of play is at the core. Displaying practices put the player and their skills on stage, either by dancing, or singing, or involving themselves in dramatic role play. The focus is about showing off and making oneself into an object for evaluation. Social interaction is the core of this play mood, not only involving the following of others but also being able to make the play practices “swing”. This means making changes from one action to the next, by having the courage to interpret and find inspiration in how the social interpretations are met and judged. The common understanding of the atmospheric qualities of the play mood must be confirmed constantly, by asking, through the body and senses, if this is a shared experience. The play mood of tension goes together with the atmospheres engendered by these practices because of the need of the player to tune into and hold...
the audience through changes in performance, and because the audience must remain attentive to the performative display.

EXCEEDING FOR EUPHORIA

The play practices characterised by exceeding focus on breaking, teasing, or destroying as the core of a play situation. Exceeding is about breaking cultural codes for what is expected in the play situation, to make change, and to make sure that play takes unexpected routes. Where the play practices in sliding for devotion focus primarily on repetition, the rhythm of exceeding is characterized by breaks or ruptures in play. A play mood of euphoria comes with the exceeding play practices, because an intense feeling of being the moment is generated, even if it is not possible to stay there forever because of the intensity. Think about a case of hilarious laughter where your body is drawn into the atmosphere - if you are outside this mood, it can be difficult to join the intensity, but within it, you may not be capable of stopping as your whole body is involved in the euphoric mood.

In this section, we have brought together play moods and their atmospheric qualities to highlight the moods’ about-to-happen potential, the things that could emerge, but not yet released. We also show how connections between rhythms of play practices, spaces and materials are co-constituted. We will apply those elements to the analysis, after the methodology section.

METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

This paper is based on two design experiments created in connection with the research project Play Stories (2021-2022). The project includes researchers from Monash University (Australia) and Design School Kolding (Denmark), as well as a number of PhD students from both institutions, and external partners. In Play Stories, a number of design experiments were initiated in different contexts involving a range of participants and collaborators over a two-year period. The two experiments we discuss below were carried out in connection to the Worlding Play symposium, held in Melbourne on 19 September 2022 and co-convened by Professor Lisa Grocott (Monash University), play researcher and facilitator Roger Manix and Professor Helle Marie Skovbjerg (Design School Kolding). Associate Professor Shanti Sumartojo (Monash University) did the video ethnography work of the activities taking place, and Professor Stacy Holman-Jones (Monash University) was a key collaborator.

The research project builds on Design-based research methodology (Barab & Squire, 2004; Brown, 1992; Ejsing-Duun & Skovbjerg, 2019) in combination with Research through Design (RtD), reflected in its emphasis on the importance of the design experiment (Bang & Eriksen, 2019; Brandt & Binder, 2002; ). The design experiments in Worlding Play were structured and organized based on models from Christiansen et al (2012) and Jørgensen, Skovbjerg & Eriksen (2021). In the context domain we investigated how play and atmosphere could be thematized; in the lab domain we planned the workshop based on design principles aiming at play moods; in the experiment domain we undertook the experimental activities together; and in the reflection domain we followed up with a reflection about our and the participants’ experiences with the experiments (Skovbjerg, 2020).

To account for the atmospheric qualities of Worlding Play, we also turned to visual and sensory ethnography (Pink 2021, Pink 2015), and dialogic autoethnographic analysis of our experiences (Sumartojo et al 2019). This approach allowed us to bring our reflections on Worlding Play together with concepts we had developed in this and other scholarly work, in a process described as “productive of embodied theory: ways of feeling and knowing that emerge from experiences that are framed theoretically as they come about and become known on those terms” (Ibid). This was similar to what Sumartojo et al (2019) describe of their own dialogic and reflective approach – “the research exercise was a form of mobile and collaborative attunement to our atmospheric surroundings” - where we attended to the play moods during the symposium, and considered their relationship to atmospheres as part of our shared conceptual commitments as co-researchers in subsequent analytical sessions. In doing so we had to exercise our capacities as designers in devising and running the design experiment of Worlding Play, to “calibrate our bodies as instruments” (Brigstoke and Noorani 2016, p. 2) that could tune in to what was happening and how it felt to play with others during the symposium itself. We also brought our critical analysis to the research materials we made during and after the symposium - images, videos, notes and collective reflections amongst the researchers.

ANALYSIS: WORLDING PLAY - EXAMPLES FROM DESIGN PRACTICE

In this section we explore play moods and ethir atmospheric qualities by analysing two design experiments made in connection to the symposium Worlding Play.

The symposium sought to explore the intersection of technology, design, learning and play, taking inspiration from the notion of worlding, or specific ways of being-in-the-world made available and apprehensible through, in our case, creative and playful practice. We enacted
this by moving, playing, performing and thinking together with our whole body-minds, and collaboratively reflecting on our experiences throughout the day as we went. In practice, leadership of the activities was shared amongst the different co-convenors, and they passed this responsibility amongst themselves as the group moved from activity to activity. In the examples we discuss here, each was led by a different person, and unfolded in a bodily and imaginative context. In each, different play practices gave rise to distinctive play moods, which emerged as part of the atmosphere of the event, as we will explain.

DESIGN EXPERIMENT 1: PLAY MEMORIES

In the first design experiment, we wanted to work with sliding for devotion, as it is often the way in to designing for play (Skovbjerg, 2020). The repetition, the quiet bodies joining the situation through what they already know about materials, spaces and relations is a good way to lean into a safe space and set possibilities for atmospheres to emerge. We also wanted to link how memory can contribute to the emergence of atmospheres (Sumartojo, 2019) more deeply to the cultural experiences of play practices (Skovbjerg, 2021).

In the early afternoon the group of participants entered into a quiet, reflective and memory based activity, led by Lisa Grocott. The prompt was to think of a past play experience that connected somehow to participants’ current ways of being in the world, and then to construct a small model of that experience from playmobil people and other materials - card, string, sticky eyeballs, plastic sheets, cotton balls and more.

As people played quietly in parallel, recalling and interpreting their play experiences from the past, a sliding practice and devotion mood were evident in the concentrated atmosphere in the room. The task of devoted attention was to bring a childhood experience into the immediate present of adulthood and find ways of relating these two times and mindsets. This play practice was akin to sliding because people worked concentratedly with no attempt to shift the mood, focusing on repetition, moving slowly from one action to the next. The play mood was co-constituted by the individual practices of small gestures and manipulations of the materials, by participants’ memories and imaginative capacities, and was heightened by the relatively short time that had been assigned to this activity. It was also conditioned by the reference of the play activity to the past, which required a form of quiet concentration, using materials at hand while sitting.
The third phase took place after around fifteen minutes, once the models had been constructed. In this step, participants paired up and explained their models to each other. This dialogue between people also created a dialogue between the past and the present, between the play memory and the adult ways of being, where participants were invited to reflect on how their memories of play could help surface their particular ways of being in the world.

During this stage, Shanti was able to interrogate some of these explanations, and video the replies, as when Helle Marie explained her creation (Figure 2): “I have always thought about play as this space where I could create the world that I wanted to create...and [in the model] I used different types of materials to create the space [around the figure]. But of course I’m missing somebody, because if I think about my childhood memories, I’m never alone. So there are always people involved in the space, because otherwise I would find it boring”

As Helle Marie explained her play memory, she arranged the string, paper discs and pierced marshmallows in a rough circle around the central figure. She patted the ground around the figure and tapped it up and down as she thoughtfully explained the missing playmates, looking down on her model as she spoke.

Figure 2: Helle Marie’s play memory represented by and narrated through a model using a Playmobil figure.

Helle Marie’s account exemplifies how the play mood shifted in this stage as people started to talk to each other, explain and even act out their models, as displaying play practices emerged. The volume in the room went up as people talked, laughed, demonstrated and asked questions of their partners’ modeled experiences, transforming the atmosphere from one of quiet concentration to animated conversation, showing their models off to others, linking ideas from one play practice to the next. Even if the memories were not always pleasant or untroubled ones, the model-making allowed the maker to playfully reflect on changes and continuities in their lives, and the activity ended with a lively, engaged and curious feeling imbuing the group.

How can we understand the connection between play practices and the past? Sumartojo (2016) argues that atmospheres are constituted in relation to the past, because our memories of previous experiences are an important part of how we always experience the world. Memory is foundational to worlding, even if these memories are challenged or reframed by new contexts. In this activity, where play memories were a central animator of the play artefacts being made and the play practices of making and sharing them, the reflective, concentrated atmosphere was unsurprising as people cast back to their childhoods and reflected on the implications for themselves in the present. In terms of play moods, atmospheres here help us see how reflective, considered moods like devotion or tension emerge as imaginative realms are accessed and brought into the present play situation.

Moreover, even though the anchor of the activity was a prompt to engage with memories of the past, this was expansive enough to allow the play mood to shift from quiet working on models to animated discussions, gestures and recreations of what they represented. Thus a pairing of play moods with atmospheres can also show us how play moods emerge and change, and how the design elements of sequential instructions, construction materials, and the invitation to share creative insights configure into constantly emerging experiences during one brief play activity.

DESIGN EXPERIMENT II: WATERGUN

In the second design experiment, we wanted to work with exceeding euphoria, as it is of crucial importance for play design, but very difficult to design for (Skovbjerg, 2020). We wanted to explore how special attention to the senses atmospherically and teasing the tenses could change the atmospheric possibilities for play practices. We wanted to link the atmospheric point about emergence (Sumartojo, 2019) more deeply to the enactment of play practices (Skovbjerg, 2021).

Watergun was one of the last activities on the day of Worlding Play. Led by play facilitator Roger Manix, the room was set up with one person sitting on a chair, and the rest of the group gathered at the other end of the room. Under the chair was a small toy, and the person sitting in the chair was blindfolded and armed with a watergun (Figure 3). The challenge was for two people from the larger group to sneak up on the person in the chair and try to snatch the toy from under the chair. The sitter’s goal was to defend the toy, by shooting water at the approaching snatchers - if they were hit with the water, they were disqualified from the game. The two snatchers could work together, for example by one
distracting the sitter with noises to draw the squirt of the watergun, while the other one approached from another direction. They could also each devise their own strategy independently, competing with each other to snatch the toy first.

The game, however, was not competitive in the sense that no points were given and there was little stake in who won. However, it was extremely intense for both the players and the audience because of the concentrated sensory engagement with the sounds or air disturbance that accompanied movement, and the possibility of being suddenly squirted with cold water.

For the snatchers, working out a strategy to quietly sneak up and get the toy without speaking, or even necessarily working together, was a physical challenge. For the sitter, they were required to tune in with their non-visual senses to the room and attempt to apprehend where the snatchers were, and how close, and to aim the watergun at them.

The group of watchers were not allowed to intervene, and were encouraged to stay as quiet as possible so that the sitter could hear the approach of the snatchers, who also tried to be as silent as possible. The physical challenge alone of trying to remain silent was difficult. This meant that everyone in the room was enrolled in a tense, precarious atmosphere, where the game could change rapidly at any moment.

Over several iterations of this game, the different players experimented with different approaches. Some snatchers worked together to try and fool or distract the sitter. Some went their own way, ignoring the other snatcher, or trying to direct the sitter’s water squirts towards the other snatcher. The atmosphere in the room was tense, as the sitter suddenly reacted to the sound of the approaching snatcher, or the snatchers tried new strategies to sneak up on the sitter, moving more slowly or quickly, creeping along the edges of the room, or swiftly approaching before the sitter could aim the water spray accurately. They moved between silent strategies and noisy strategies. In some of the games, the sitter successfully shot one or even both of the snatchers, whereas in others, the toy was successfully snatched and the sitter was defeated.

Interpreted in terms of play mood, the game was characterized by shifting for intensity, as the bodies, movements and practices of the players could shift at any moment, in speed, direction and relation, and the shifting created an unpredictable space. After the game, the sitters reflected on the intensity and even exhaustion of listening intensely, knowing they had the attention of everyone else in the room without being able to see anyone else. Displaying practices of the sitter’s actions at the centre of attention added to the play mood of tension as the eyes of the others made it possible to judge, be judged and play yourself out in the game. The use of water and the watergun, and that you were supposed to play with water inside also made the exceeding for euphoria possible, and we all experienced the mood fluctuating when water was squirted.

Because of the heightened attunement required of the players and the audience alike, this was a strong contrast to the Play Memories activity, which moved through different play moods. Bringing an atmospheric lens to this event, however, helps to connect the different play moods and the design of the game because it shows how the mood had the potential to change, break or fluctuate at any moment. If atmospheres are always emerging from a given situation or setting, then they help us identify how the play mood always had the possibility of suddenly shifting into either a more tense state as players moved closer or the sitter suddenly shot water, or one of resolution as the snatchers were eliminated from the game, or they reached the toy from under the
sitter’s chair. It also helps us attend to how these shifts might be anticipated or designed for from the beginning.

Another important aspect of this game was that the social relations that unfolded during the activity were much more complicated in comparison to the first experiment. The mood of the game was influenced by a lot of people’s actions and this diversity meant that the atmospheric shifts were much less predictable. In Play Memories, the players only interacted with one other person at a time, and this primarily dialogic set-up meant that the play mood, although it shifted throughout the different stages, remained relatively stable in each phase. However, in Watergun, the mood felt as if it could change at any moment, and the exceeding for euphoria also gave the participants a sense of the emergence always being about to happen. Indeed, the sitters reported the exhausting intensity of remaining sensorially attuned to their surroundings, combined with a precarious feeling that the toy might be snatched at any moment, and an awareness that they could be observed, but they could not see anyone else in the room.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN PRACTICE

Our analysis of the two design experiments showed that despite their ineffability, atmospheres are a valuable analytical tool. They can help us attune to our surroundings and consider ourselves as emplaced, embodied and subject to the affordances of the environments we inhabit. In discussions of atmospheres, some authors have argued that they cannot be designed (ie Edensor and Sumartojo 2015), despite attempts to do so, because they are not uniform and their effects on people cannot be predicted. However, the concept of play moods can help to define and make sense of atmospheres, and what actions might emerge from them; and atmospheres can help to complicate play moods by highlighting their contingency and the different spatial, material, imaginative and relational elements that participate in them.

Atmospheres also help us see how play moods might change quickly, because they emerge from the specific conditions of play. ‘Mood tells you something about your relation to the world or how you are tuned in to the world and to the people around you’, writes Karoff (2013: 8). Mood helps to connect your body and feelings to what is happening around you, to find resonances and alignments or discordant moments and potential locations of resistance. Relatedly, atmosphere can help us analyse the different elements that configure together for play moods to emerge - the spatial settings, the rules of any games, the materials, the bodily moves, the sensory affordances of the situation, and the imagined and remembered experiences that entangle with the here-and-now of the play situation.

In terms of design implications, based on our analysis we suggest three main points.

Firstly, atmosphere helps us see how dynamic play moods can be - they can shift quickly and unexpectedly. Atmospheres suggest that play moods resist stabilisation or completeness. An implication is that when designing for play, we must understand that a moment of play could just as easily be fleeting as it is sustained, prompting the question of the value or possibilities offered by fleeting play moods. For example, a momentary play mood might provide relief on a stressful commute or a shopping trip with a toddler, and play design could attend to these possibilities as much as a longer play mood. Gudiksen & Skovbjerg point to play experiences as having key ingredients, where experience and surprise is one of them. However, in addition to identifying these experiences, we must also say how the design decisions are made (2020, p. 17) that can influence them. For example, we can design for the fluidity, but the design itself is not necessarily fluid.

Instead, we argue that there has to be some sort of anchor or a transparent ‘first action’ asking ‘what can I do here?’ (Skovbjerg & Jørgensen, 2022, in press). This ‘first action’ has to be very clear, and needs to be designed in a way that we never lose track of it. Understanding atmosphere can help us recognise the importance of this fundamental starting point by associating the anchor with the existing memories of players. This means that the fluidity of play moods can settle temporarily by anchoring them, but not by trying to force them to remain static, but instead design for a play mood to emerge. This means we can design for the play moods of devotion and intensity – and at the same time create the space for euphoria and tension to happen. This supports Kinch & Højlund’s (2013) idea about the middleground, an unfilled space where play practices can emerge.

Our analysis show that devotion and intensity are at least two moods where we can settle in or seek to anchor our actions. Attaching those to individual stories, however, is only one way that play can be anchored for the players. This anchoring can be made transparent, even if it results in very different play stories (and play moods) for different people. For play designers, atmospheres can help us see where you could anchor play activities, for example in the memories, the materials, the spatialities, the sensory affordances, or the other people engaged in the play experiment. This is not to say that all of them should be anchored, because this would mean artificially stabilising or freezing the play mood, potentially stripping out meaning for the players and not taking the qualities of the moods seriously.
(Skovbjerg, 2021). Sumartojo and Pink (2019: 101) underline that point when stating: “Here it is not atmosphere that is being designed, but a set of possibilities”.

However, making the anchor points for play visible or transparent gives a way for designers to start to grapple with the complexity of play moods. For example, in the Playmobil exercise, everyone was asked to remember a significant childhood play experience (the anchor) although the play moods that resulted varied for each person. The importance of the anchor is not that it stabilises or overdetermines the potential outcome of the play experience, but that it gives the players an understanding of what is possible within the ‘rules of the game’ and then becomes accessible for the players if they know where the anchor possibilities are.

Second, if atmospheres orient us to emergence, then they can help show how play moods can arise from playful situations, even if those are not in contexts necessarily considered as sites of play, such as the office, on public transport or at the gym. For designers, this means that designing for play is not limited to designing for special settings intended primarily for play, such as the classroom or playground, but rather recognizing that a play mood can characterise any everyday setting.

The design challenge then becomes how we can design to allow play moods to emerge from settings or situations not usually thought of as playful. Or, put differently, how can we design to allow play moods to enliven everyday life and routines? This is valuable because it asks us to look with playful eyes at the possibilities of our everyday lives, and thereby shows how play might be able to generate new experiences, connections, insights or possibilities. It gestures towards play as an animating force that might be able to bring new things into being.

Lastly, atmospheres also help us attend to the multiple elements that configure into the emergence of play moods. This can help designers to identify where and how design can intervene in these elements, and therefore potentially shift or encourage play moods to emerge. Because atmospheres can help us see beyond the play design itself - for example to the materials, spaces, sensations or memories that configure into play situations - it expands where designers can place their interventions and understand their contribution to play moods. Atmospheres can thereby reveal where the ‘blank spaces’ (Kinch and Hojlund 2013) are in play design, where they should be filled, and where they should be intentionally left blank.

REFERENCES


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