Chasing Play with Instagram: How Can We Capture Mundane Play Potentials to Inspire Interaction Design?

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Abstract

Play and playfulness permeate our daily lives and are often the target of interaction designers. Yet, designing for play while embracing the idiosyncrasies of users and their contexts is challenging. Here we address recent calls for new situated and emergent play design methods by turning to social media, which is currently a source of inspiration for arts, crafts, fashion, and more. We present *@chasing.play*: an exploration of how Instagram may help designers capture and share instances of mundane playful engagement to inspire play design. We report on the findings of a pilot study where we experimented with the tool, and raise a challenges and open questions we plan to address in the future. Our work can trigger discussions among researchers about the potential of social media as a design tool and inspire action towards collectively defining strategies to leverage that potential.

Author Keywords

Play; Interaction Design; Situated Play Design; Design Methods; Participatory Design; Instagram.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing~Interaction design process and methods**

Introduction

Play and playfulness are gaining traction in Human-Computer Interaction and Interaction Design. More and more, we see interventions that playfully augment mundane activities that have traditionally been considered non-playful, with diverse purposes, e.g. increasing productivity [18], supporting learning [20] and healing [17], promoting wellbeing [10] and pro-social behaviors [7] or, simply, making otherwise boring situations more engaging and fun [12].

The move towards designing for play that permeates our lives poses challenges for designers. One of them is embracing the idiosyncrasies of users and their contexts [2]. Designers of technology that brings playfulness to non-play scenarios must ensure that the playful augmentation intertwines well with the situation at hand. Recent works in HCI (e.g. [2,21]) have called for new methods that support designers to deal with the contextual nature of playful engagement in non-play scenarios. In [2], we proposed a novel approach to play design that focuses on *chasing play potentials*—i.e. spontaneous forms of playful engagement we find in everyday situations—and using them to inspire design. As part of our research agenda, we work towards making that approach actionable for designers.

In this LBW, we report on a preliminary exploration of the use of social media as a tool for designers chasing play in mundane scenarios. We explore how Instagram could help design researchers capture play potentials emerging around them, in the wild, when they are not particularly equipped to document or analyze them. We present our v0 protocol for, and pilot study of, the method. Presenting our work-in-progress at CHI'20 will initiate an interesting discussion about the potential of social media, in particular Instagram, as a design tool—one that will likely strengthen our work. We hope it will also inspire other researchers to join us to collectively define strategies to chase play potentials in the wild.

Background

Existing methods can be useful to design for play that intertwines well with everyday activity: from active interventions in direct interaction with stakeholders (e.g. *embodied sketching* [16]) to more passive non-disruptive observations (e.g. *design ethnography* [6]), or interventions with diverse degrees of designer involvement (e.g. *cultural probes* [11], *provotypes* [4], or *tangible conversation tools* [5,9]). While these methods have existed for a while, it was not until recently that they were explored as part of a design strategy and approach aiming at designing for play in mundane situations [2]. We recently proposed Situated Play Design (SPD) [2], a novel approach for this purpose that focuses on uncovering existing forms of contextual play, which we call *play potentials* [2]. We see them as meaningful playful acts that emerge naturally as users engage in their everyday context and activities; we take them as starting point for design.

SPD builds on and extends existing interaction design strategies. Similar to User-Centered Design [1], it includes users in the design process. Yet, it considers them as creative partners [8] like Participatory Design [19]. Differently to Participatory Design, SPD is mainly concerned with play and playfulness. Further, it focuses on participants' actions as they unfold in-the-wild, rather than on verbalized desires. The novelty of SPD is the proposal of chasing play potentials that emerge in real life—thereby supporting, rather than disrupting, mundane activities by realizing their play potentials.

v0 protocol for chasing play with Instagram

Step 1: If you see something that is playful, capture it without overthinking it. We can always remove later it if we decide it does not fit.

Step 2: Ideally, take a photo or a video of the play potential. Otherwise, use whatever means you can to convey what you saw—be creative! A drawing, a short text, a video of yourself describing the situation… Any format works as long as it conveys the play potential.

Step 3: Make sure you add meta-data about the play potential, e.g. where you found it or who uploaded it. Also, use hashtags to highlight keywords that are relevant to the play potential, starting with the generic *#playpotential,* and following with others about the players (e.g. *#children*), the context (e.g. *#urbanspace*), the type of play experience (e.g. *#thrill*), etc.

In SPD, there are open methodological challenges which we have yet to tackle [3]. Here, we address one: designers and researchers are not always prepared to document the playful things they see and experience in their daily lives, and that is a loss of knowledge that could otherwise inspire design. Play potentials are often spontaneous and hard to predict; chasing and sharing them is oftentimes difficult. As design constructs, they are ephemeral and carry elusive design knowledge, which brings about challenges: what to document, how to document it, what medium is used to portray the play potential, for which purpose, and for which audience [22]. Building on the call we made in [3], we wonder: How can we chase play in the wild, even if we are not fully equipped with our research tools? We see a need for mechanisms that help us to effectively respond to the emergence of playful engagement when we are away from our design and research environments. In this LBW we propose one that can be used to chase play potentials in early phases of SPD.

Social Media as an Inspirational Tool
People capture instances of their lives on social media all the time, creating a virtually endless online repository of mundane events. Social media use is considerably in-the-wild—content is produced by and for anybody, rather than professional designers. While "in-the-wild" does not necessarily mean "neutral"— social media accounts of daily life are not always spontaneous—we argue that social media use has inspirational potential and that it can open up design processes to new audiences. Further, social media has an element of crowd-sourcing: it allows sharing, commenting and reposting, enabling users to add to each other's content. Given the commonplace, transversal and communal nature of social media, we

wonder: could we use it to capture personal accounts of playful activity, and to share those play potentials so that they can be and cross-referenced with other people's experiences? Could social media be a platform for storing and sharing play potentials chased in the wild? We see a lack of design methods that address those questions.

@chasing.play: a Tool to Capture the Playfulness Emerging Around Us
Virtually everyday, virtually anywhere, people behave playfully. This is a source of knowledge and inspiration designers could use more, if it was accessible to them. Inspired by existing first-person research [15] and embodied ideation [22] methods, we see a need for new tools that help designers make inspirational use of play potentials that emerge around them. To explore that, we take inspiration from the creative community using Instagram for design purposes such as: inspiring design, documenting projects, creating annotated portfolios, etc. We settled on Instagram given its popularity, easy crowd-sourcing approach (hashtags as way of labelling and seeking content), and its core media form which, as opposed to other social media platforms, privileges visual content intertwined with text. We believed that that would be an important asset to our agenda of capturing ephemeral playful engagement. We set up a shared Instagram account, *@chasing.play*, and started using it to capture play potentials we encountered in our daily routines.

Pilot Study
Once the account was active, we defined a tentative *v0 protocol* that was simple and malleable enough for us to appropriate it and adapt it along the way. We engaged hands-on with the protocol, struggling with it
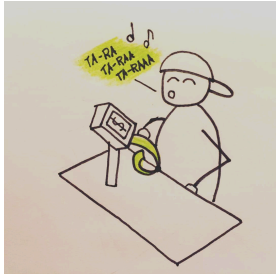
Figure 1: Post portraying an emergent playful interaction. Full post: https://bit.ly/2Mn2ebX

Figure 2: Post portraying a play activity trace. Full post: https://bit.ly/3963s4T

Figure 3: Post portraying a fortuitous playful trigger. Full post: https://bit.ly/2Zg8rvk

and experiencing what worked and did not. We agreed on using hashtags to annotate our posts: all posts were tagged #playpotential, and additional tags provided extra information about players (e.g. #children), context (e.g. #urbanspace), type of play experience (e.g. #thrill), and so on.

Four researchers, all of them authors, participated in the study as research subjects. We also invited an external designer—who did not participate as author—to experiment with the tool. Participants experimented freely within the loose boundaries of the *v0 protocol,* for periods of 1-3 months. Due to our current ethics approval, in this iteration we did not capture identifiable data in the posts. Instead, participants were asked to use sketches and other representative tokens of people and situations. We are currently extending our ethics approval to include identifiable data (e.g. deanonymized photos) as well, as we think it better reflects current inspirational use of Instagram and it is important for capturing and using play potentials.

To get a glimpse into a first-person account of the experience of using the tool, participants were asked to document their thoughts in autoethnographic narratives [14]. This request was open-ended: participants were free to document (in any form they wanted) what they deemed interesting, relevant, difficult, etc., concerning both the captured play potentials and their use of the tool. We analyzed the narratives using a thematic analysis approach [13]. Four authors did a first round of coding independently and shared their analyses. Then, one author clustered the individual analyses into

a final set of codes. To ensure inter-coder reliability, the final analysis was shared with the rest of the authors, giving all of them a chance to contest it.

Results and Insights

Instagram Posts

Until December 23, 2019 we produced 50 posts[1]. Some posts describe experiences lived by the authors; others are observations of other people's playful behavior. The play potentials documented relate to diverse areas of human life, e.g. food practices, urban space, leisure time, or social media activity, among others. We used different strategies to portray the play potentials, often in combination, including: videos, photos, descriptive texts, sketches, re-posts of existing social media posts, or screen captures of other forms of digital content.

Our collection of posts challenged our initial assumptions about the type of play potentials we would capture on Instagram. Our original idea was to chase play potentials in the physical world. Yet, we also found ourselves chasing digital ones in social media or online posts. That was not the only unexpected finding from the pilot study. Our initial aim was to chase *Emergent Playful Interactions*: playful things people do, captured as they happen (e.g. Figure 1). However, our posts also reflected other play potentials that could inspire design. First, there were several *Play Activity Traces*: tangible outcomes of playful engagement that took place before our presence (e.g. Figure 2). A few posts documented *Fortuitous Playful Triggers*: unintentional situations, or objects, that led to the emergence of playful behavior (e.g. Figure 3). Other posts showed playful acts of

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[1] See all posts on the Instagram account: https://www.instagram.com/chasing.play/

Figure 4: Post portraying a playful creation. Full post: https://bit.ly/2QfBYRB

Figure 5: Post portraying a playful message. Full post: https://bit.ly/2MmdepT
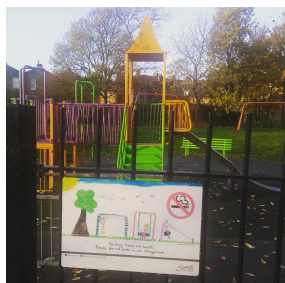
Figure 6: Post portraying a reflection about play. Full post: https://bit.ly/35RO4ab

creative expression, including: *Playful Creations*, careful designs that someone made to afford a playful experience to others (e.g. Figure 4), and *Playful Messages*, spontaneous and likely asynchronous communications that someone produced to make non-collocated others laugh (e.g. Figure 5). Finally, other posts portrayed situations that foregrounded *Reflections About Play* (e.g. Figure 6). Using those categories might help categorize future posts and cluster play potentials thematically.

Autoethnographic Narratives
We also analyzed our autoethnographic narratives and found issues we will address in the future. First, several struggles with the tool were reported, including: remembering to use it; thinking of emergent play as play potentials that can inspire design; capturing ephemeral playful interactions before they are gone; finding compelling ways of documenting interactions that were hard to illustrate; documenting emergent play without compromising the on-going activity; or linking existing posts that were thematically related. In future work we will explore how to address those and other issues that we found in our pilot study.

In the narratives, we also raised a series of open questions about the tool and protocol. We report them here:

Inspirational value: What qualifies as play potential and what does not? What might be inspiring and what might not? How could we narrow the type of content we post to avoid producing noise?

Portraying play potentials: Should we try to promote a unified style for the posts, or should we give space for diverse formats? Should posts be visually appealing, or is that not necessary? How descriptive should the posts be? Should they communicate clear ideas, or do we want to maintain space for interpretation?

Ethics of capturing and sharing play potentials: Some things that are playful for some people might be offensive to others, e.g. people mocking a stereotype. They might even be against our values as humans, and as designers. How do we deal with this, especially if the tool scales up and a lot of people add content? Should we filter or censor content? Should we create a code of conduct? Or should we just keep it open and unfiltered, at the risk of having polemic posts? Should we curate, add constraints as project initiators, or should we allow the constraints to emerge from and be policed by the community?

Further developing the method: What new functionalities should we support? How can we enable authors to better categorize their posts and cluster them thematically? How can we ease and speed up anonymization of posts to prevent risks in terms of ethics? How can we support designers and researchers to find inspiration in the posted play potentials in new ways, beyond scrolling down the Instagram profile? Some of the narratives reflected how to overcome the limitations of Instagram itself, e.g. the inability to make posts from a laptop forcing an author to create backlogs of posts in a note-taking app and then doing bulk-upload sessions.

The challenges and emerging questions we found in this pilot study will be the foundation we build on as we move forward. We will share those questions and reflections with CHI'20 attendees to collectively explore

relevant issues and ensure that our next moves reflect the ideas of the community and not only our own.

Future Work

We will work on the questions that emerged in our pilot study as we move forward with this work, which will grow and deepen as we engage with the design community at CHI'20 and other design research events. We will use the opportunity of presenting our work to invite others to have a first-person experience of the tool: we will suggest attendees to chase play potentials at CHI with Instagram and use hashtags such as #playpotential. #CHI20playpotentials, or #chasingplayatCHI20. That will allow us to, first, collectively gather a pool of inspirational posts at the conference and, and second, discuss some of the questions raised before, such as those related to inspirational value and portraying play potentials.

This CHI'20 intervention will give design researchers a first-person experience of the tool, allowing them to raise and engage with further and deeper questions. In turn, it will allow us to investigate what needs to be done for other designers and researchers to adopt our method at scale. Further, we hope that our CHI intervention will spark conversations about the methodological challenges of designing technology that affords playful engagement within mundane non-play situations.

On our side, the annotated portfolio of play potentials collectively gathered at CHI'20 will allow us to extend our preliminary analysis and insights. In conversation with the design research community at CHI, we will work on advancing the method and envisioning technical infrastructure that supports it. Overall, we will

further explore the idea of using Instagram to chase, document, and share play potentials found in the wild. We will later test and validate these outcomes through a full user study and/or design activity involving other designers. This activity will also focus on our envisioned subsequent phase to data collection: design. We will ask the question of how play potentials chased using Instagram can inspire technology design.

Conclusion

In this paper we presented an on-going methods research aimed at providing interaction designers and researchers with an actionable tool to find, document and share playful inspiration that emerges in their daily routines. Our work is as a small step within a larger ongoing research program aimed at foregrounding the socio-emotional importance of affording increasingly playful and social ways of experiencing our daily lives. We described the first version of an Instagram-based method to do that, as well as the findings from a pilot study. This challenged and nuanced our initial expectations about the potential of using Instagram to chase play; and raised a series of questions we will continue to investigate. We invite CHI'20 attendees to a playful exploration of our tool, which will: deepen our collective understanding of its potential usefulness in design projects; and jointly shape future versions of the tool and collection/analysis practices.

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