

# Ludic Interventions in Studying Urban Play: Learning from Lack of Participation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines challenges, such as lack of participation, encountered with ludic interventions within a project focused on public urban play. It presents three interventions and contemplates whether these interventions failed or whether their outcomes signal a sensitive nature of play and a reluctance among participants to disclose these activities.

## Keywords

cultural probe approach, lack of participation, ludic interventions, play, urban space

## INTRODUCTION

This paper delves into the issues faced with ludic interventions designed and executed within the Pelikaupunki Turku project (2022–2024). The project was intended to study the historical, current, and future trajectories of gaming and playful activities in the urban landscape of Turku, Finland. The primary objective was to map out the utilization of public urban spaces for gaming and play within three areas, including a park, the historic center, and the market square, and to identify potential scenarios on how to develop playfulness in future Turku.

One of the key questions for the project has been as follows: How do the residents and the visitors of the city currently use the urban space of Turku for gaming and playful activities? For this, we conducted participatory observation across the areas. Furthermore, we developed interventions inspired by the *cultural probe approach* to see how people engage in play and what kinds of places are associated with play.

Cultural probes approach was originally developed by Gaver et al. (1999) to gain insights into the everyday life of people in a playful manner. The original idea was to give study participants different tangible objects, postcards, maps of the city area etc., that enabled self-documentation and self-reflection of everyday activities. The

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'probes' were then returned to the researchers. Later, especially design researchers and social scientists appropriated the approach and modified it to different purposes: it has been used, for example, to gain design inspiration, to evaluate technologies, or in combination with other qualitative methods such as interviews (e.g. Luusua et al. 2015; Mattelmäki 2006). The main strengths of the approach lie in the fact that 'probes' can travel to everyday places in which researchers cannot always be present, and playfulness motivates participants to document and reflect on their practices and perspectives.

In our project, the cultural probe approach was loosely adopted for the project's endeavors. While common features, such as tangible objects and self-documentation, were integrated into the ideas, we argue that, instead of calling our methods as cultural probes, a more proper name for these is *ludic interventions*. They can be described as design elements or additions to the urban landscape that offer alternatives to traditional adult pedestrian norms, fostering happiness, joy, and encouraging play in the urban space. (Donoff 2014, 66; Donoff & Bridgman 2017.)

### **THE THREE LUDIC INTERVENTIONS**

Ideas for the ludic interventions were initially generated in a cultural probe workshop organized for the project's members and students. Eventually, three interventions were designed: the Elf, the Peekaboo Wall, and the Magic Circle.

The Elf was based on toy tourism and adult play (see. e.g. Heljakka & Ihamäki 2020; Heljakka 2013 & 2022) and the traveling garden elf in the film *Amélie*. The core idea was for users to travel around the city with the Elf and accomplish certain tasks assigned to them. The first version was strongly based on the cultural probe method; it was a package formed from a travel case, a handmade Elf figure, and a notebook containing the assignments. We set out to find testers for the pilot version. The recruitment process was lengthy, as people stated not having enough time, but still claiming it interesting. It was tested by only two young adult users, revised, and then placed in the city library's children section, where parents together with their children borrowed it three times. Although successfully borrowed, the tasks were not completed as intended.

The second version of the Elf was left in a local café, with only a QR code attached to it. The code led to the instructions telling people to take the Elf to their favorite place in Turku, fill out the questionnaire form, send a picture of the Elf, and then leave it for someone else to find. From March 2023 to October 2023, the code was opened 43 times, with only three respondents. By November 2023, it was safe to assume that the Elf had gone missing.

The Peekaboo Wall was donated by the Turku Museum Centre, and relocated to the campus area of the University of Turku. Its QR code led to a questionnaire regarding the use of the wall. Additionally, the same questionnaire was shared in a paper format. Altogether, 20 responses were received. The QR code was opened 123 times before it was closed on Monday September 25, when some students with permission destroyed the wall. The destruction was also documented, and attempts were made to collect feedback via Google Jamboard, with only one response.

The Magic Circle was formed from two different hopscotch routes drawn on the stone yard of the university's campus area. Both routes were observed for 1.5 hours for

statistical purposes: how many people hopped through, acknowledged its presence and went around it, or disregarded it. For both routes, only two users engaged in hopping or other playful activities. Additionally, around half of the passersby went around the routes, while the other half walked right through them.

## CONTEMPLATING THE LACK OF PARTICIPATION

These interventions attempted to serve as invitations to play; we wanted to observe how individuals of various backgrounds and ages would respond. While there was initial interest and some participation, the overall outcomes suggest a reluctance to take part in these playful activities.

This led us to contemplate several questions: Did these interventions fall short, indicating sensitivity surrounding play, potentially linked to shame and reluctance in disclosing these activities? Is the unique and intimate nature of play disturbed by research or the potential public exposure in urban spaces? Do the QR codes, lacking playfulness, disrupt or undermine play? Can they be considered dangerous? It is also possible that people suffer from survey fatigue (e.g. Field 2020), or these interventions simply did not interest the audience.

Nevertheless, this project highlights the multifaceted nature of play, signaling the need for future studies aimed at fostering engagement in play within public urban environments. Likewise, failures in research lead in many cases to new reflexive methodological insights that can be used in follow-up studies (Högbacka & Aaltonen 2015).

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