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**City Play: Exploring temporality and space  
in Cairo's play dynamics**

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## **Instructions**

To read this research, first open the companion text. The videos will appear as extras to the text. You should refer to the indicated video at the moment suggested in the text as each video is there to illustrate or justify a specific argument being made. The main video of this research is the documentary City Play, the other videos are complementary to the companion text.

The videos can be found in the DVD or in the vimeo link provided in the text

The password for all videos is: play city

The order that the videos should be watched is:

1. Three testimonies on Egyptian education. Link: <https://vimeo.com/129018044>
2. Mini-Medina and Mini-Muenchen staff defining play. Link: <https://vimeo.com/129022246>
3. Educator's visions on the play city model. Link: <https://vimeo.com/129111986>
4. Documentary City Play. Link: <https://vimeo.com/129587325>
5. My name is Ibtesam. Link: <https://vimeo.com/129004738>
6. Contrasting time and space of the German and Egyptian Mini Cities Link: <https://vimeo.com/128430800>

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**Note to the reader: all videos are available in the research DVD and can also be found in the indicated vimeo link. The password for all videos is: play city**

## **Abstract**

This research seeks to explore the characteristics of play from a children's perspective in the current context of Cairo using visual research methods. Play, although very present culturally in Cairo, is seen as a form of entertainment and never a biological trait deserving the attention of researchers. As such any debate of play is excluded from educational policies and consequently from the schooling system. The research I've conducted explores the characteristics of play through visual methods, and focuses on the dialectic between spatio-temporality, and the disposition to play. The analysis is made comparing and contrasting the everyday situations in which children see themselves at play, especially pretend-play. The children identified and observed play in topics as broad as politics, womanhood, city planning, the role of the police, and the mechanisms of money and the monetary system. The research findings suggest that in play the child learns to adapt to cultural norms and activities while acquiring tools to think about, engage with, and potentially, to recreate and reinvent the structure of society.

## **Introduction: *Playing with PLAY***

This study uses different filmic techniques for eliciting children's understanding of play as a mode of experience in Cairo, Egypt. The research explores the characteristics of play through visual methods, and focuses on the dialectic between spatio-temporality, and the disposition to play. The analysis is made comparing and contrasting the everyday situations in which children see themselves at play, especially pretend-play, which is a simulative “as if” mode associated with imagination, make-believe, fantasy, and drama (Garvey 1977; Reynolds 1976).

This thesis argues that a discussion of play in Cairo should not only observe children's games and their outcome, but also focus on the situational and culturally specific spaces of the city in which a disposition towards play can be expressed or not. Observing the disposition that leads children to engage in play, the research findings suggest that in play the child learns to adapt to cultural norms and activities while acquiring tools to think about, engage with, and potentially, to recreate and reinvent the structure of society. This argument has been explored through the dialectical relationship between the temporality and the physical nature of the play space, and the imagination and motivation of the player. The dialectic is observed in the player's relation to objects in the play space, looking at objects as the physical channel through which play arises, and in relation to temporal frames that shape the game events, which are firstly, real-world time (physical world), and, secondly, game world time (events within game world) (Zagal, 2007:516). Because

play evolves socially and historically, what is significant in this research is how play is subject to the present volatile social reality of Cairo. Exploring the nature and characteristics of children's play in Cairo, as well as analysing children's perception of time and space in play is needed to understand how children are making sense of their present and how they formulate their future.

The Egyptian formal education system has administrative, logistical and educational flaws. Reports show over-centralised control, entrenchment of social inequalities (Loveluck, 2012), a culture of teaching through repression often leading to abusive and violent behaviour from teachers towards the students (Farag, 2012, Ajami, 1981, Anabtawi, 1983), overcrowding (over 40 children per class), poor facilities (Hartmann, 2008), and poor working conditions for teachers with salaries under 180 pounds a month – a salary too low for current Egyptian cost of living (500 pounds per month for medium size family) which often forces teachers to take secondary jobs – (Makar, 2012). Egyptian ethnographer Kamal Nagib explains, “the authoritarian nature of the Egyptian state is reflected in an authoritarian culture of schooling” (2006:53). During the past four years, as the revolution has developed in Egypt, there has been a social transformation of order and chaos, as Mubarak's authoritative rule was challenged. The initial eighteen days of the revolution in 2011 are remembered by the order and cleanliness that prevailed in Tahrir, as people built a sit-in camp and refused to leave the square. This order became dominated by chaos as the revolutionary aims started to be repressed and saw its first ideological shifts. As the city changed, reports from fellow teachers and educators, showed the social order of the schoolyard to be changing through a mimesis reaction of children (a biological feature of adaption to the environment often associated with imitation). Instead of playing cop and robbers, children turned to play 'revolution' with pretend scenarios of the army against the revolutionaries, and later the revolutionaries against the Muslim Brotherhood. The revolution was no space for children; however children still used their imagination to make sense of what it actually meant, even if parents and teachers kept them from understanding. “*The chaotic space of the playground of school, now turned into revolutionary-clashes site for the purpose of children's play, becomes one of the few spaces that children can experiment with the wide social changes they are presently seeing and hearing around them*” (from an interview with Khairy, an Egyptian educator). Play is dynamic, this means that it is in constant change according to the interests and needs of the characters at play. The context is shaped, by the subjective aims of players, as content for their individual games. Through playing the individual learns to comprehend, problematize, laugh at, and adapt to the context that shapes their lives.

*Link: <https://vimeo.com/129018044>*

'Play' in relation to the 'city' refers to situations where the player steps into a sphere of activity with a disposition of its own, while still rooted and located in ordinary life. The prerequisite for these moments to take place is freedom; play can be proposed but it cannot be imposed (Huizinga, 1938:8). The disposition can manifest itself as a game-like activity, or as a daily action in which body and language are used in a playful manner. When exploring the characteristics of 'play in the city' and of 'playing the city' we can examine the city as a complex structure of social dynamics in which play takes place, and the city as a game-like activity. On one side, observing the city as the producer of play, with a direct correlation between the social interactions in the city and the object of play; and on the other side, analysing pretence play as the means to formulate the city, locating play as a component in the materialisation of the city.

I am a founding member of an educational project that works with simulated city play scenarios, developed and built by children, under the guidance of adults who are interested in educating children informally about what it means to inhabit cities. The project, Mini-Medina ('mini-city' in Arabic), works from Cairo to implement different mini-city experiments around Egypt. The project aims to create a simulated real-size city scenario where children learn about the mechanisms of a city, imagining their ideal city and exploring their role in society. Mini-Medina works with learning through experience, placed within the framework of Lave's Situated Learning theory (1990), or Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978), aiding educational theory to understand what the children learns on their own, in public and private spaces, and what they need to be taught in relation to more experienced members of society.

This research explores the experiences of two independent groups of children in Cairo. Group 1, in which seven children, external to the Mini-Medina project, were asked to produce individual short movies about everyday situations of play. Group 2, where filmmaking was introduced as a profession, among other professions, in the simulated children-city carried out by Mini-Medina. The research provides a parallel observation of play in pretend and real-life city scenarios, and also includes scenes of staged filming produced by the children to deepen the understanding of play. Themes have been developed to describe the kinds of things children were interested in themselves while playing. These are: politics, womanhood (marriage and pregnancy), city planning, security forces (police), and the mechanisms of exchange and the monetary system. Many of these aspects became relevant in the analysis of their play behaviour, as the children were not self-consciously choosing these themes as they played. These aspects of social construction are

not often associated with play, although they are recurrent in children's and adult's physical and play behaviour (Fein 1978, Millar 1968, Weisler 1976).

The participatory methods used in the filming process have been previously used in ethnographic documentary. However, the editing process takes distance from traditional ethnography, as it purposefully tried to de-construct the different stages of the play process to provide a coherent narrative of something as abstract as the disposition to play. The children's material was not planned for any specific montage, and did not follow a coherent nor collective story line. Rather, they all played with the camera as they saw fit for their individual play analysis. The montage is a means to re-assemble the world, bridging recurrent social themes the participant children used in the different situations of play. Shaped by the different feelings the children wanted to represent, which transcend verbal articulations of experience (Ewing, 1990:268). A linear montage of the filmed events would have emphasized the game aspect of play, whereas the snapshot-based montage, where the context revealed through the parallel screen, aims to provide a wider view on the repeating thematic in play, and the dialogue that these have with the city of Cairo. The split screen gave the opportunity to transport the audience in the way Robert Gardner aimed, driving the viewer to a singular partially-real space that communicates with them personally, so that regardless of the viewer's proximity to Cairo, they identify themselves with the disposition to play. This approach to ethnographic film drives away from the 'plain' style of observational cinema, using non-traditional montage tools to get the viewer's full attention, providing subjective visions on play, containing implicit selection assumptions for the viewer to assess (Loizos, 1999:83). Reality is an experience of fragmentation, and the footage, a fragment of the children's perception (Dalsgaard, 2013:105). The double screen is reminder to the viewer of the fragmentation of experience but also of vision, providing an interaction with the viewer that transcends the image, playing with attention and focal points.

The montage is representative of the children's world views as rather than focusing on a constructed narrative of their lives and games from the perspective of the filmmaker, it is structured around the different topics of discussion which were recurrent in their own play narratives. Ibtesam, and Naglá, while being in different sides of the city were both playing with the idea of womanhood; Andrew, Khaled, and Ragab, although coming from opposite extremes of the social strata, all played with the idea of politics, whether through their choice of images, or through their own statements and re-enactments. The montage offered a possibility of contrasting how different children approach the same themes, and how each of them negotiates their position through the game experience, providing a reflection of reality that lies beyond what it is visible (Suhr,

2012:283). However, it is important to note that the process of montage used in the final film was mainly dependent on my own opinions and interpretations as I reviewed and analysed the seventy hours of footage and the field notes. I tried to portray the footage as close to the expression and representation of how the children visualised the outcome. However, I interpret most of my editing work as a product of my disposition to play. The creative editing process behind the film was my own dialogue with the images, and as such, it reflects my personal perception of play. What provides an added value is the intention, or the motivation to build the creative outcome in coherence with what children had hoped to communicate.

This thesis has four sections. The first presents an overview of the theory and methods of play in the city vs. playing the city, explaining the choice of location, subjects of research and visual representation. The second section looks at object, fantasy, and role play to explore the social dimension of play. The third section explores the dialectics of spatial, temporal, and motivational factors in play dynamics, focusing on the relationship between film and montage with play, firstly as a mode of research collaboration, knowledge elicitation, and generation, and secondly as a mode of representation, dissemination, and argument development. The final section contains a summary of the theoretical orientations directing particular avenues of inquiry and some suggestions for future research.

### **A position in the discourse of play; play as a human disposition**

The study of play, although marginalised in anthropology, has been central in the development of psychology, because it is understood to be essential in human development. Piaget recognised the value of play in the formation of spatial constructs in early child development (1951:275). He argued that play helped children understand the space they inhabit, as well as the spaces of the wider world. Bettelheim refers to play as a tool of self-mastery, “a bridge between the unconscious world inside us and the external reality around us” (1972:5). Giddens observes play as a type of agency, subject to consequences outside the scope of the agent’s intent (1984). Other scholars, like Huizinga, have referred to play as the primary formative element in human culture; a mode of experience that is irrational and has no moral function, as it lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, good and evil, truth and falsehood (1938:5). Huizinga uses the term 'play-element', “a function of the living, not susceptible of exact definition either: logically, biologically, or aesthetically” (1938:7). The findings of this research show the disposition to play to have no specific purpose, and thus, not a defined logical or moral function, however they also show that the play experience influences the morality of the individual once the play state is over. The scope of

play varies, but it is always shown to be central in human development from childhood to adulthood (Cohen, 2006). Winnicott emphasized, “on the basis of playing is built the whole of man’s experiential existence . . . We experience life . . . in the exciting interweave of subjectivity and objective observation” (1971:64).

The anthropology of play has developed two theoretical forms. One explores play as a cultural form, observed as a game-like activity regardless of the playful engagement of the actors at play (Caillois 1961). Ellen Oxfeld offers the example of the game mahjong, which teaches the adult player about Chinese entrepreneurial ethic through a popular betting game (1993). In a similar way, for Ortner working Sherpas (1999) and Geertz working with Balinese cockfight (1973), the research focus lied on the mechanisms of the game conditioned by social structure as the reason explaining human action, rather than proposing playful engagement as conditioning of social structure. The second school in the anthropology of play refers to play as a mode of cultural experience, exploring the disposition to play of social actors rather than the activities played (Stevens 1980; Csikszentmihalyi 1971:45; Huizinga 1971). Here the focus lies on the actor's readiness to improvise, where agency is marked by the contingency of events (Giddens, 1984).

It is important to make the distinction between game and play, whereby the game activity promotes a motivation to engage in the act of play, while play, itself, is a complex biological feature, which is a product of mammalian evolution characterised by a readiness to experience the world through experimentation (Shutton-Brian, 2008:122; Riss, 1976; Brown 2007; Miller, 1973; Vandenberg, 1978). A game is an activity with a temporal life, while play is more difficult to clearly define, because it is a way of engaging the world that can't be strictly separated out from other human activity (Huizinga, 1971). The disposition to play can arise under any activity, therefore often is not possible to “differentiate categorically between activities that are play and those that are not” (Malaby, 2009:208).

The evolutionary relationship between different organisms and play has been studied in biology as a phylogenetic trait. However, this literature has been often focused exclusively on locomotor play, or movement play (Pellegrini, 1998). In the disciplines of psychology and sociology, in child developmental studies, social forms of play such as object and fantasy play are shown to take up to 50% of children’s behaviour (Bakeman 1990, Sigman 1988, McGrew 1972). The term phylogenetic derives from the Greek term phylon, denoting "tribe", "clan", "race", and genesis "origin", "birth" (Linddell, 1968:1961). Object play involves the manipulation of objects and is found among most mammal species (McGrew 1992; Power 2000; Tomasello 1997). Fantasy

play involves taking a perspective outside the realm of reality (Lillard 1993) using imagination as part of an enactment (Lillard 2001). This shows that play does not only evolve as a physical activity, but is also shaped as a trait through experience and memory.

Playful behaviour is central in all human cultures, both in language and physical action. Play anthropologist Huizinga argued, “Civilization does not come from play, it arises in and as play, and never leaves it” (Huizinga, 1938:173). In light of a centralised bureaucracy, high unemployment, and a wide range of social taboos and prohibitions, through which the colonial legacy uses discipline and obedience to penetrate body and mind (Mitchell, 1988:176); the inhabitants of Cairo use play as a means to distract themselves, or even contest, everyday life oppression. Increasingly, to process and accept the number of social changes, and human loss lived since the revolution. What makes Cairo's culture different from other societies is the strict line that separates play and non-play time, the first associated with chaos and the second with work. However, practice shows play is subversive and adaptable to all scenarios as a tool to break with predefined modes of behaviour constituting the status quo. A mosque can be both a space for play and non-play, a space of play while girls play with water in the mosque's hammam as they escape from the midday sun. But also, a non-play space during the hours of prayers. However, verbally, the average Egyptian would not recognize the mosque's playtime. Critical ethnographers try to determine complex social processes that occur between a particular aspect of culture and the culture of the macro-society by assuming that the “micro-culture of the subject at focus reflects a microcosm of society and an element of social production” (Nagib 2006:53). If the aim is to comprehend how the disposition to play of the participant children places itself in Cairo's social culture (the culture of the macro-society). Examining children understanding of play, as the carriers of the society (microcosm), serves to understand how play develops as a social production. Bearing in mind play is a phylogeny that is present before culture; the object is to understand how children negotiate their daily tensions and problems through play, challenging their own oppression. Following this rhetoric, this research argues the study of play/work division from a children's perspective and serves to understand the elements of social production that children adopt or reject through play.

### **Framing play in visual research**

Visual anthropological research on children, although small, has produced novel understandings of the verbal and nonverbal expression of children at play. MacDougall and Filibert have used visual ethnography to reveal the children's world and imagination from the children's perspective. Following the principle that the image is a reflexive object of the moment being lived

by the filmmaker (MacDougall 2006:3), if the image is to be reflective of children, the children should be active participants of image production. The visual analysis of children at play should be reflective of play recorded in film, but also of the children filming whose own world perception is revealed in the frame of play they create through the camera. This study places itself in the juncture between visual anthropology of children and the anthropology of play, proposing a participatory play-based research model as a means to explore the relationship between the image and play (Blier, 2005)<sup>1</sup>.

The visual representation of children has either provided the view of the socially accepted child, or created a flat description of children, focusing on children's views of adult worlds rather than how children themselves see their own world. In the words of MacDougall: "films have a way of reducing children's lives to formulas, replacing their strangeness and individuality with more comfortable notions of what children should be" (2006:76). The aim of postcolonial ethnography is "not to include the Other within modernity but to revise the terms of realist representation" (Russell, 1999:6). This research does not aim at creating an adult oriented view on children, instead it uses experimental participative methods to engage with children and have them define their own terms of representation. Experimental ethnography is an openly defined form of anthropology that seeks above all to dismantle the impulse of realist aesthetics into a clash of games, cultures, bodies and voices (Russell, 1999:xvii). The selection of participant children, the fieldwork, and the montage processes of this research, have been experimental. This is not a usual way of proceeding with participant observation anthropological research, but due to time constraints I had to develop a context of film workshops that gave me a reason to spend time with the children, with their families' consent. I chose to compare the play experiences of a randomly selected group of children from different areas, with a control group of children coming from a single neighbourhood (Bernard, 2006:110). The workshop which should be seen as an intervention, allowed for a space of creativity, where there was an openness for children to discuss concepts and propose a filmic experience they were comfortable with. The film activities and exercises although proposed a common problem of understanding play, were developed in collaboration with the children, serving to develop a true relationship and engagement to each other and the research. Finally, the montage drove away from traditional observational aesthetics, while still representing the voices of a marginalised community of youth using new forms of subjectivity articulated through juxtaposed

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1 Anthropology has used visual research to elucidate children's perspectives within the subjects of health and illness (Geissler 1998; William 2000), social change (Katz 1986; Stokrocki 1994), tourism (Gamradt 1995), identity (Walsh 2003; Cowan 1999), time (Christenson 2000), place and mobility (Aitken 1993; Orellana 1999). However, there is a research gap in using visual methods to understand children perspectives on play (Grimshaw, 2005). This thesis aims to begin to addressing that gap in the literature.

moving images that stand as evidence (Clifford, 1988:34). The method proposed aims, in its utopian frame, to overcome the binary positions of us and them, self and other, in the specific context of children perception of games (Russell, 2006:19). The context is important, as it is the volatility of the current Egyptian political situation which has given the population (old and young) the opportunity to exchange ideas, address old confrontations, and unveil hidden taboos. This offers a unique opportunity to frame research projects around spontaneous activities and responses, opening the possibility to redefine what is known about the social culture of play in Cairo (Penley, 1977:4). Furthermore, the experimental and participative filmic process with the children serves as a case study on interactive visual research with unrepresented communities, and as a document to the long cinematic discussion on the position of film in the construction of history (Le Grice, 1977; Russell, 2006:15).

### **Methodology: Creating trust and engagement with children through interactive workshops**

This research has observed two independent groups of children in Cairo. One that is actively playing in the city and another that pretends to play the city. The group actively playing the city, group 1, had seven participants who were selected through opportunity sampling. I contacted different education projects across Cairo and chose the first seven kids that volunteered to participate in the research. I worked in cooperation with the Jesuit Cultural Center, the Kayan Theater Group, Alwan wa Awtar, Mini-Medina and Safarni, to select the children. These are cultural NGOs doing different art and education activities with children around Cairo. I had contact with these NGOs while I worked as an organiser of Mini-Medina in 2012 -14, and I re-established contact for the research, which they all found relevant to the current education scenario of Cairo. The facilitators of the NGOs explained the research idea to the children, and put the seven interested children in contact with me. The children worked independently, producing seven individual play record experiences in their neighbourhoods. The fieldwork was conducted from April to June 2014, using participant observation, collaborative filming, and ethnofiction; a blend of documentary and fictional film in the area of visual anthropology in which the portrayed characters re-enact their own roles as part of a social group (Sjöberg 2008:232).

Group 2, observes 'playing the city', where the city is proposed as a game-like activity. Mini-Medina is one of the few projects in Cairo working with a simulated city scenario for children. My affiliation to the project as a co-founder, and my position as a project researcher, gave me access to selecting participants. My role of facilitator of the Mini Medina edition June 2014 in Alwan wa

Awtar<sup>2</sup> allowed me to introduce the research into the city play activity. By introducing the camera, the children proposed a filmmaking profession claiming a need to report the activities and events taking place in the city. The sample of children was also opportunistic, taking advantage of the situation and the children's interests to participate. The two samples are not representative of children in Cairo; however, the visual material provides a detailed record of the expressivity of play (verbal and non-verbal expression) that could nurture future macro studies.

### *Locating play in the city; the city as the subject of play*

Since the 2011 Egyptian revolution, there has been an increase of initiatives working towards a transformation of the educational services offered to children. In opposition to the government's educational structure, these projects have sought to make available numerous forms of art-based and play-based activities for children in different communities in Cairo<sup>3</sup>. The projects that helped me select the participants of group 1 are all examples. The Jesuit Cultural Center has been working for ten years in the mixed Christian and Muslim neighbourhood of Cairo El Faggala. They provide a space for inter-religious integration through cinema, theatre, street murals and children workshops. The Kayan theater company uses theatre to work with children in marginalised neighbourhoods. Safarni does interactive travel experiences to break children's taboos towards foreign cultures in the popular neighbourhood Ardellewa. Other projects like Alwan wa Awtar have a long establishment, and have continued to work and adapt with the current times.

The objective of group 1 was to explore the different forms and interpretations of 'play in the city' from children's perspectives. I carried out the research with each child independently in their neighbourhoods, to be able to observe their usual spaces of play, meeting them three times a week for three months. The idea of making a short movie about play was proposed, and they all gave their consent together with their parents. Our initial meetings would consist of trying to build the film allowing the children to experiment with the camera and each meeting after we would discuss different approaches to look at play through a critical dialogue, critical in the sense that every

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2 Alwan wa Awtar is situated in El Hadaba El Wosta, an impoverished social housing area of Mukattam Hill, in Cairo. The houses are precariously built flanking the Zabaleen municipal dumpsite, lacking paved roads and basic sanitation. It is a conservative Islamic community, although it has experienced a decrease in religious pressure towards the younger population, partially due to community centres and NGOs such as Alwan wa Awtar, that give the youth space and tools for critical thinking. I did a two month film workshop with a group of five children from the NGO, part of the first part of this research, and the NGO hosted the later edition of Mini-Medina where I filmed the second part of this research.

3 Appendix 1: Brief note on the current state of Egyptian NGOs

meeting we would review the assumptions of previous days, and that the conversation was multi directional, with children's opinions having equal, weight or value, to my own. The activity I was carrying out became a game in itself as we were trying to make sense of each other, and the children were trying to make sense of the film idea and the camera.

### Groups 1 Participants

Name and Age	Contacted through	Background	Participants of the film
Sarah, 11	Jesuit Cultural Centre	Descendant from a Sudanese family. Came twice a week to the JCC to an art workshop. We filmed in El Faggala, a Middle class Christian-Muslim neighbourhood	Ofei 6, Nardeen 11, and Andrew 14, Nardeen's brother; they all participated in the art workshop.
Meina, 15	Alwan wa Awtar (A&a) and Mini Medina	Social housing area, coming from protective families, but most girls were unveiled, and had no taboos for politics and love. We filmed in A&A	Ali, Meriam, Khaled, Mohamed, Dunia, friends from the NGO
Ibtesam, 11	Kayan Theater company and Safarni	From Ardellewa a popular neighbourhood East to the Nile. We filmed in her street and her house.	Eia 11, her family, and other friends of the neighbourhood
Alex, 7	A friend's cousin	Upper class Christian conservative family. Protective environment. Attends private schools and is rarely in the street. We filmed in his house	Rita 6, his sister, his family, and his nanny
Naglá, 13	Encountered in the market	Works six days a week in the market with her mother, does not go to school, lives in a popular neighbourhood and is waiting to get married. We filmed in the market	Her whole family (10 people) and the merchants of the market
Aisha, 11	Daughter of Uli, Mini-Medina's co-founder	private education, has access to learning and play materials, and come from liberal international family. We filmed in Mini-Medina, Mini-Muenchen and in her house	Mini-Munich and Mini-Medina children, and her family and friends

Sara became interested in dreams as play, and carried out interviews with children and adults asking what they were dreaming to be. Ibtesam filmed game-like play scenes in her street, as well as, short interviews in a street weeding and the bakery, where she explored with other children the relationship between marriage and play, and of food subsistence programs and play. Meina and her friends decided to film re-enactments of daily-life play, what visual anthropologists would call ethnofiction. This approach was widely used by anthropologists like Jean Rouch drawing on surrealist ideas of the subconscious as a creative source, developing a game of collective reflexivity (Sjöberg 2008:240). The group of children working with Meina, created three sketches, one on love,

one on politics, and one about exam cheating, representing and observing playful behaviour in the three scenarios. Alex, Aisha and Naglá were more interested on having me do the filming while they played. Although all three experimented with the camera, they felt more comfortable being themselves the actors of play than observing other people at play. Alex did a TV food program in which he would teach other children how to cook. Aisha played with her friends at home and later I filmed her in Mini-Medina working in the bank, and in Mini-Muenchen playing taxi driver. Naglá asked me to film her singing and then asked me to film scenes of play she would find in the market, she also played with the idea of marriage and talked to me, and to the camera, about it. All of the children watched and selected the material to be shown about their stories. My agenda through the research has been making children understand the power of their imaginative capacity for their own learning, through the filmmaking workshop, as well as, making adults understand imagination and play from the mode of experience of the children, as they produce a physical image with the camera (Schachtel, 1947:301). The film then becomes a channel of transmission of the children's worldview to the adult audience. The comparison of the play scenes and the child filming through a double screen, allows the adult to understand the mode of experience that led the children to share a specific imaginative experience within the particular space.

David Harvey said, "The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city" (2008;1). Children stand outside any debate about urbanisation; they are neither heard nor represented, actively marginalised from the construction of what is to be their future homes. Children are actively trying to make sense of the world, first through mimesis, and second through critical-thought, developing opinions of their own as they analyse the different perspectives to certain subjects. Different projects have been initiated to give an inclusive voice to children in the formation of society. Mini-Muenchen, the largest children city in Europe was initiated after the Western youth anti-structuralism uprisings of 1968 and is still active today. Mini-Muenchen, "may differ from the real adult world, but draws on its experience and references, which are used by the children in their own game" (Grüneisl, 2014). The basic rules are working, studying, earning and spending money. Over the years children have increased the realistic dynamics of city life by introducing taxes, fees, a regulating banking system, as well as real incentives to work<sup>4</sup>. All of these concepts are borrowed from the real world.

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<sup>4</sup> It is a private initiative, partly funded by the Munich commune, led by a group of critical educators with liberal ideology. The simulated city is held in a big warehouse, in Munich, during summer holidays. The organizers build the city space with wooden frames, each station hosts a different profession supervised by a facilitator. The rules, setting, and environment, aim to create a productive frame within which the children can act in a self-organised way. Mathias Grüneisl, a facilitator in Min-Muninch, told me, "Most children will grow up and won't be able to experiment with the different jobs they would like to do. Rather they will have to accept an underpaid job outside of their field of interest out of necessity". Mini-Muenchen offers an opportunity for children to experience with different city mechanisms as they

However, rather than being a negative enforcement to the children, they provide a learning opportunity for children and adults. Nowadays, the city hosts over 2500 children per day for three weeks from various parts of Munich. The facilitators' function is to guide the children through each profession, allowing them to make decisions and give direction to different activities. Each individual facilitator reproduces his own social understanding to the children, and the framework of the project has in itself a particular ideology, upholding democratic and civic values. Mini-Muenchen and Mini-Medina share a common ideology, what makes them different is that in Munich the project is approved and partially funded by the government, while in Cairo it remains a marginal activity not supported by the government. In both scenarios, the game is designed so that the children can change the rules and challenge the ideology brought up by the game and the facilitators, through the game experience.

The play city model has been adapted to over 70 countries of the world. Mini-Medina started in 2012 inspired in the mini city educational model of Mini-Muenchen. As I worked as a facilitator in Mini-Muenchen in 2012, some German and Egyptian friends and I formulated a project idea for a similar city experience in Cairo, launching it in January 2013. The apparent purposelessness and lack of specific function of play, stood as an obstacle when creating Mini-Medina (Brown, 2009:29). Our advisors (mostly friends) considered there were other pressing goal-oriented objectives when improving education, more important than a play-based model of education. Nonetheless, we carried on with the idea. The pilot phase has had nine editions up to the moment in various neighbourhoods of Cairo, Alexandria, Aswan, and Abu Sir. These have been attempts of making the project known, exploring how children react to the Mini City in different neighbourhoods and cities. All these editions have been pilot experiences of up to three days, dealing with up to sixty children of the local neighbourhoods<sup>5</sup>. The Mini-Medina board shares a common ideology regarding the Egyptian educational system, seeing it as an incomplete mechanism lacking critical thinking in the classroom setting. The motivation to tackle this problem through the simulated children city has led us to continue experimenting with the project. As a

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imagine it to be, creating experiences of learning that can help them make sense of their future.

5 Mini-Medina contacts a local NGO working in a particular area of the city. The NGO is set in charge of selecting the sixty children in the neighbourhood, while Mini-Medina provides the facilitators of the organization with a theoretical and practical training on the Mini-Medina model. In each location, the facilitators are taught how the model works and then apply what they have learned in the mini city edition with the neighbourhood's children. This promotes the sustainability of the project, as every time more facilitators are trained around Cairo. In the last four editions of Mini-Medina there has been a decrease in external training due to lack of commitment from the local facilitators, mainly because the work is unpaid. There is also a lack of organizational capacity of the Mini-Medina board, composed by Mohamed, Nairy, Uli and myself, due to our need to have other employments to sustain ourselves.

group, we also share an understanding of democratic culture, as the direction towards which the Egyptian society should move forwards. On the words of facilitator Karim el Rawy, “*I'm passionate about finding my passion, but from another perspective, trying to find my passion is a way of setting change, somehow I'm passionate about change*”. When interacting with children we propose our social views, however, we expose them in a question like framework, encouraging the children to understand our position but also make their own arguments and draw their own conclusions.

Video: Mini-Medina and Mini-Muenchen staff defining play

Link: <https://vimeo.com/129022246>

Mini-Medina often takes place in small spaces often limited to the grounds of the organization we are cooperating with. Children often don't know the purpose of the activity before arrival; they are just given an invitation to the simulated children city. What they imagine the city to be is what drives them to attend; Mohamed and Ali informed me in an interview. The biggest assumption of the project is that children know what a city is. As the children arrive to the space, the facilitators tell them they have come to build their own city, however, at no point they provide a solid definition of the city, nor do they seek to create such a definition with the children<sup>6</sup>. The children are sat in groups of ten, engaging in a discussion about what they think the city should have, each group has a facilitator that moderates the debate. The facilitators ask: “Do we need houses, police, entertainment, roads, politics, water, money?” At first, the children are making sense of what the adults want them to do, giving some ideas and drawing some maps together. After half hour, the children are left alone and are asked to collectively decide the structure of the city that they are going to build. The project is open to children aged 6 to 16, and it is often the older children who organize a voting scenario deciding the priorities in the city<sup>7</sup>. After deciding on the needs and infrastructures of the city, the facilitators promote a discussion about laws and rules, questioning the need of bounding limits in the play city. Once there is a decision on the rules, the children are given access to different recyclable materials, cardboard, plastic, rope and tissue, to build the real size model of the city. Some children simply get the material and make their own

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6 In the preparation meetings the facilitators often saw as an obstacle the initial shyness and formality of the children, proposing different methods to engage in action before the children got bored. The facilitators choose to ignore the abstract concept of the city to engage in more practical and material debates of the functioning of the city as the children know it, this is beneficial to the flow of the debate as it concerns aspects of the city that the children are familiar with, but misses a wider point of interest which is defining the city as an entity as well as determining its functioning.

7 In the last edition, the one I filmed for this research, the children decided the city should be divided into fun and city needs. In one room they chose to build the hospital, the school, the bank and the houses, and in the other the theatre, the hairdresser, the photo studio, and the fun park.

structures; other children take longer to engage in the creative play. The facilitators hold individual conversations with the children to explore the role that they want to have in the city, by exploring the children's interests. Children learn they can use their real-life imagination to actualize their position in the game, coming to understand what the adults want, and what other children are doing within the game. Once the structures are built, the facilitators invite the children to inhabit the city; this is to explore the city built by taking roles and interacting in the space<sup>8 9</sup>

The project aims are (1) create a simulated scenario for children to learn about the mechanisms of the city, (2) explore the possibilities of play-based learning in the context of the Egyptian society, through pilot editions combined with research; (3) promote critical thinking, for children and adults alike, working with the resources available. As an anthropologist I can also see that the project introduces to the children the particular political, economic, social and cultural viewpoints the project's facilitators present in their arguments. I have worked with Mini-Medina as a founding member, facilitator, organiser, and trainer. Currently, I have adopted the role of the project's researcher and filmmaker, pursuing my own research goals but in active collaboration with the organizers and children of Mini-Medina.

As an adult, I cannot experience what the child experiences, neither imagine it (Schachtel, 1947:301). To understand the child, the child should be allowed to have a voice of its own. Studies focusing on what children think include, Blubond-Langer, exploring children's views on illness and death (1978); Sharp, on memory (2002); Scheper-Hughes, on children's agency in relation to the social context (1998); Downe, on identity (2001; 1995); and Thorne, on gender (1993). These studies show there has been a conceptual shift towards children as social agents, which requires anthropology to rethink the toolkit of methods thinking of children as agentive subjects (Mitchell, 2006:60). A specific research question "may miss or overlook children's interests and concerns" (Aitken 2001). Researching with group 2 in Mini-Medina, the scenario of the city and the professions play, offered a self-explanatory justification for me to hand in the camera to the

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8 Professions are used to illustrate the different characters possible for the children; it is familiar to them as it is a common projection of their own character towards the future. Some children rapidly choose their role and engage in it through the whole game, others make sense of their role as they play, at times changing profession to try another character within the city game.

9 Video Extra: 'Educator's visions on the play city model' *Link: <https://vimeo.com/129111986>*  
This video was excluded from the main body of the thesis as it overshadows children's visions on play. The facilitator's discourses are quite formative, but also normative and complex, showing different means to interpret and theorise about play, explaining how facilitators interpret the children city and its pedagogic framework. The video is very useful to see how adults see play in contrast to the children. Also, it should be noted that there is a bias toward German testimonies as it was in Germany, while Mini-Muenchen took place, that I had the opportunity of making these interviews.

children. The role play of the photographer fits naturally into the game activity, thus placing the children at play with the camera in the core of the city play. During the three day Mini-Medina that took place in June 23-25, 2014, I stopped playing the role of researcher and adopted the role of a filmmaking facilitator. The play began by building a photo booth as had been defined in the morning voting with the sixty children. Then, we decided to adopt a rotation system in which all 'photographer' children would have the camera for 20 min. and then pass it on to another child. Since we only had two cameras, the 20min-filming limit gave all children a chance to play with the camera, which would provide different children's views on the play scenario. They worked individually or in pairs, and they filmed according to what they found important in the simulated city<sup>10</sup>.

The filming purpose was not defined and with 60 excited children in our hectic space, this gave little room for speech, a common problem when focusing on a specific problematic when working with children (Downe, 2001). I would try to coach them individually, being present with them in their filming play, helping technically when they needed it, and creating a dialogue about possible story ideas. I was not approaching the situation as an impartial researcher; rather, I was playing my part of the game. With sixty kids and ten adults in three small rooms, it becomes impossible to detach from the events taking place. Together, we filmed thirty hours of the three days. First, there are interviews and records of scenes in which the children participated, revealing the different conflicts and interactions taking place in the city. Second, there is shaky footage showing the bodily expression of the person filming, and the overall relation between the camera holder and the space.

The product of the children's filmic experience can be effective in revealing the complexity of their experience (Nieuwenhuys 1996:55). Participative filming is particularly beneficial, as it minimizes the power imbalance that characterizes top-down approaches to research, when the child is being directly questioned by the researcher (Mitchell, 2006:60). The participatory aspect reverts the 'communicative advantage' of the adult researcher (Clark 1999:40), giving a voice to children

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<sup>10</sup> In August 2014, I repeated the same experience I had with the children of Mini-Medina in Mini-Muenchen, where two children from Mini-Medina had been invited. I continued the work by handing the camera to the children so they could film at their will. I also conducted a film workshop with six Egyptian and German children playing as filmmakers. I proposed that they explore what they wanted to document in the children's city. The children developed the ideas and went around the city to do their research. When they finished we viewed the material and commented on it. The experience provided simple answers; to the question "what is the essential component of the mini city?" the children answered "the bank and the city hall" (Katya, 11 yrs and Martin, 12 yrs). Nobody commented on the facilitators, on the space, rather on the features that are relevant in the reality that they are living at that moment in the game. They don't look at themselves as "mimicking society, but rather as building their own society" (Aisha, 11 yrs).

(Clark 1999; Theis 2001), and exploring how children's knowledge can serve to educate adults (Rich 1999). However, carrying out participant observation with children and youth is not an easy enterprise (Sharp 2002:21), proposing methodological challenges for the anthropologist that has been trained to research among adults (Downe 2001:166). Through the research I came to understand that the least control I had of the situation, the more the filming flowed naturally. The moment I began reflecting on my own play, the more I allowed myself to engage with other people's play. I tried to limit my personal will in the interaction with the children, to allow them to include me into their personal plans, which in this occasion were naturally particular due to the presence of the camera. The camera as an object was already actively transforming the experience of children. The children had to establish their own dialogue as they became familiar with my presence and with the camera as an object.

The documentary *City Play* is a journey shown in two screens contrasting the different roles children can take in the city and later how those roles transform as they grow up. Exploring the different interpretations and desires towards everyday life that children have in the city, revealing how in play the child learns to adapt to culture while acquiring tools to recreate and reinvent society. The film, shot in Cairo, with juxtaposed scenes of Group 1 and 2, seeks to portray the different ways children have of playing the city and play in the city, experimenting with the thin line that distinguishes play from reality.

### **Watch documentary City-Play**

*Link: <https://vimeo.com/129587325>*

### **Situational and culturally specific play in Cairo**

This section first explores how children use creative scenarios to make sense, through fantasy play of their current and future social role. Secondly, it explores object play through the child's relationship to the camera, analysing the role of objects in defining the social sphere of play assigned to children, and the social sphere of work associated with adults. Thirdly, it reflects on the presence of play in the wide sphere of social structure, whether in simulated or real life scenarios.

#### *Fantasy play*

*"I always imagine myself when I'm big, but I can't. This is what I can't imagine, when I imagine about myself, I can't. But I can imagine about other people"* - Aisha (11)

Aisha kept explaining to me<sup>11</sup> that she could imagine herself being like some of the people she knows, like her mother's friend, or one of the carpenters working as a facilitator in Mini-Muenchen, but she couldn't develop a character of her own. Aisha was observing different personalities that attracted her; the professions of these people were not so relevant, rather their way of interpreting the world, (she liked her mother's friend and she could imagine having her personality). For this reason, dreaming herself to have a specific profession was not possible. She needed the human side of the character to decide whether she liked it for her future. Aisha's example makes clear that children have complex thoughts about their future, whether these arise from their own realisation, or from the imitation of the people surrounding them. In the developmental process of becoming a child, fantasy play has the role of allowing the child to experiment with different worlds and characters.

With the children of research group 1, when defining the narrative idea that they wanted to develop in film, it became a collective interest among the children to explore the moments of fantasy play related to future projections. The main observation that arose is that children think significantly about their future and that their arguments have a dialectic relationship with the social context; whether conforming or opposing, the children always composed their arguments in relation to what they thought the social context to be.

In the children city, the possibility of changing roles often altered the children's views on their future. Mohamed, a 12 years old child attending Mini-Medina said: "*I want to be a petroleum engineer like my father*". However, as there were no other engineers, when the play started he chose to work building the houses. After a while, he got bored and started playing the drums, he dressed up, made his own instrument and went out playing around the city. Then he wanted to go see the performance in the theatre but did not have mini money to pay for the tickets, he went to the performance anyhow and later got arrested for not paying. Once he got released, he worked as a housekeeper of the houses in cooperation with the police. Mohamed's formal projection for the future as a petroleum engineer seemed to be a constructed idea product of his father's profession. As he continued to fantasize with his future, he kept developing his ideas through different professions, playing with the limits of legality. Playing to be a thief in Mini-Medina was part of his

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11 A note on method: The main three questions that I asked the children were: what do you want to be? What does play mean to you? And how do you play? What makes your play or game special? The intention was to understand how they felt about play and about their future, rather than to obtain concrete answers of their games. Once they had given me a pragmatic response I found that by repeating the same question with different words they started developing the answers giving more personal opinions that mattered to them. The questioning method then became one of repetition, leading every time to more complex and developed answers from the kids.

game. He was testing his fantasies to understand where the limit was.

Fantasy play can serve to contest social norms, create acceptance of one's own virtues<sup>12</sup>, and explore the limits of civic behaviour. It can also serve to surmount current life obstacles. Nur (9), a kid of the market who will grow up to take over his parents stall selling fruits in the market said, "*I want to be a police officer*". Nur, who does not attend school, and works seven days a week, will have access to change his life when he joins the mandatory military service, as he turns eighteen. In the market, none of the stalls have a license, making the police the highest market authority as they can legally dissolve the market at their will. By fantasizing to be a policeman, Nur is imagining himself in the position of maximum authority in the market surpassing his current reality of vegetable seller. Simple street play can bring Nur to imagine different future possibilities that go beyond the values, dispositions, and expectations that he has acquired from his lifestyle as a child of an ambulant merchant family (Bourdieu, 1977). Nagla (13), also selling vegetables in the market said "*Now I just go to work and go back home, I don't go out. I want to stay at home. I don't want to work again. I want to go out*". Nagla imagines a future without work. Having worked since a little kid, she imagines the possibility of not working and having fun. Her means to revert the status quo is by projecting a situation in which she can feel and experience rest and play without the responsibility of work.

Finally, there is evidence that fantasy play helps the individual acquire a sense of identity to justify his or her own existence. Aisha (11), whose testimony is at the end of the film<sup>13</sup>, comes from a mixed religious family; her father is Muslim and her mother Christian. However, she does not use God to justify her existence, she uses a fantasized mental image on a man playing with humans through predetermined actions and speech. Fantasy allows Aisha to feel that she is something. Fantasy can serve as a tool to grant emotional stability when the actor feels at distress. As children grow up, their fantasies evolve as a natural mechanism to tackle future subjects of distress.

The Egyptian state, while adopting neo-liberal economic policies in an ever growing globalised economy, still holds a centralised control of different state services, including the

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12 See appendix 2 for additional testimonies on fantasy play

13 Transcript of Aisha's interview, also on '29 of City Play documentary: "*We are not copying the other world, we build our own world. We imagine it, and then we build it. How can I move, what am I? Because everybody says that we are a person, and now, I have this feeling that there is somebody controlling me. And I always have this feeling that we are a huge video game that somebody up there is playing us. Now when I feel that, I have a feeling that there is one guy that has lot of buttons and he always presses on them and he moves us. When I don't think that anymore, that we are a big video game, I think that we are nothing*".

schooling system (Starrett, 1998:6). The government sees the school as a site of national citizen building, and uses tight monitoring practices, largely through religious instruction, to control extremism and establish social moral codes (Herrera, 2006:29; Starrett, 1998:84). In this context, fantasy plays a crucial role in identity making. The integration of fantasy play in formal education might serve to understand how children negotiate their morality to address the different levels of distress to which they are exposed at school and in their personal lives.

### *Object play*

One of the frequent reactions the children had was to complain when I was explaining something related to the camera functioning<sup>14</sup>. In the cases of Naglá and Ibtesam, with whom I always filmed in busy locations, as they gained familiarity with the camera, when they didn't like the image, would come tell me "*Paloma, fix the image*". By doing this they were experimenting and seeking assistance when needed. Initially they felt that the technical explanation were useless, but as they got familiar with the camera, they developed a learning intention to find out details about it. As I helped them adjust the camera parameters, I would try explaining again. Ibtesam would then say "*you touch here and then there and it becomes light, I know Paloma, I know*". Then she would take the camera from my hands and go show it to the other kids. The position of teacher would allow Ibtesam to view herself from the view point of the other (Mead, 1934), of the teacher by imitating my role, and of the children she was teaching, whose behaviour was similar to her own behaviour when being taught by me (Piaget, 1962: 123). She really took joy in the possibility of being a teacher to the other children, being very protective of the camera at these points, in contrast to moments of carelessness with the camera when I was close to her ready to assist. Peer-to-peer learning can be especially beneficial in dealing with physical objects, as the comprehension of the manipulation mechanism can help integrate other children into the activity, transforming it into a collective game. Socially the object finds its meaning and importance. For example, Ibtesam would only like to film the days in which her friends were out in the street, if not she would repeat "There is nothing to do, there is nothing to do". When other kids were present (although there was nothing special happening), the fact that other children were around would transform her attitude and she would find different things to film in the street. In developmental psychology, Piaget and Vygotsky (1962; 1966) identify objects as perceptual-tactile-spatial support for the child character representation. Using the camera not only serves for the symbolic representation of their character as filmmakers, but also to make a symbolic representation of the reality surrounding them. As the

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14 When explaining in a closed space, I managed to teach the children basic notions of the shutter speed and aperture, but when filming in the street, the permanent activity of the city would always take the children's attention.

character of the child holding the camera changes, so does the image representation, where the filmmaker's intention or *action-scheme*, as Garvey and Bernard define it (1977), determine the transformation of the object, and the image production.

In Mini-Medina, the profession game gives children an initial perspective that I am a filmmaker and they are children playing to be filmmakers. This seems obvious in the sense that children play and adults work. However, we were virtually doing the same thing, recording images from our perspective in the same frame of space-time. The difference was that I have practical experience in making films and that I had prepared to do this research. Whilst the children consented a hierarchy from the beginning and continued filming, they started treating me more like a friend than as a facilitator. There was a task of documenting the city, and while this was within a game context, it was a serious task that needed to be done for the game. The children and I shared a responsibility to this task within the game context and thus we needed to get into the game activity collectively. The children started collectively taking tasks, Mohamed (12) rushing and talking to Marwa (14) said, “*I go with one camera to film the houses and you go with Paloma to film the theatre*”. The important thing was to keep filming, the camera as an object was guiding our actions with no apparent script. This is what Bateson referred to as *metacommunication* (1972), referring to the coordination arrangements among players defining the play, as opposed to non-play. The experience of filming in the children city confirmed what Bateson pointed out, although there are two levels *out of frame metacommunication* and *within frame acting*, in play they are often intertwined (Bretherton, 1984:24). As a facilitator, I was filming and trying to understand the game as children developed different conflicts, as well as supervising the second camera. Both my images and the children are product of a game experience and our work as filmmakers. To say I was working and they were playing is unjust to the experience. Object play with the camera can serve to question the distribution of social roles as well as hierarchy of expertise associated with age (Lillard 2013:160). The natural human curiosity of objects opens up the possibility of play at all ages although the playful motivation remains different to each individual (Winnicott 1971:64). Fantasy and object play reveal play as a tool of interaction and collective learning, as well as, a potential tool of resilience to deal with stress and daily life tensions.

### *Role play*

Azmy, an active Egyptian educator cooperating with Mini-Medina makes a distinction

between physical play and verbal play in the Egyptian context<sup>15</sup>. Physical play works in opposition to the rigid behaviour that is required in non-play settings, like the school and the workspace. Verbal play can arise from interactions in any setting, defined by the re-enactment of a particular character that the individual represents socially. Verbal play is often not categorised as play, especially if it takes place within work or ritual spaces. The character representation, or role play, embodied through physical and verbal play, is defined by the different settings of the city, and can change from one space to the next (Lave, 1991:81).

Ibtesam is eleven years old and lives in Ardellewa, a popular neighbourhood of Cairo, it is an old residential area but still lacks paved streets and proper sanitation and sewage systems. Ibtesam lives with her parents and two brothers in a two-bedroom house with almost no furniture. Her relationship to religion is interesting, both because of her family background and her age. Women in Egypt start using the veil permanently by the age of 11-13 years old often marked by the age they get their first period. Ibtesam is thus now about to cross that threshold. What remains significant is the play of characters she puts forwards when she wears the veil, versus her daily life character without the veil. On normal days, you see her wearing girly clothes with short sleeve shirts, very aware of space and very outgoing, talking to everyone in the street. She also does beatboxing and dances to *shaaby* (popular) music in an explicit and gestured manner, just like a boy would do. However, this character transforms radically two days a week when she has Koranic classes in the mosque. On these days she wears a full back habaia (long Islamic dress) and a hijab (veil covering her hair and neck). While still quite friendly with people, she embodies a virtuous personality, being much more controlled in movement and speech. In the mosque, while still playful with her friends, Ibtesam's tone of voice is much quieter, and her discourse much more pious, defending the teachings of Islam as holding basic human values of tolerance and coexistence that all humans should adopt in their daily lives. This duality of character serves to understand the bridge between child and woman. Ibtesam's family is not particularly religious, but her social surrounding led her to adopt and develop a new character looking towards her womanhood. Rather than a conviction or a moral imposition, it becomes a play of imitation and discovery, in which young girls try to integrate into their character behavioural aspects they see in the older women of the neighbourhood. This process suggests learning takes place through participation in the 'community of practitioners', a process defined by Jean Lave, and Etienne Wenger as *legitimate peripheral participation*, whereby learners adapt to the socio-cultural practices of a community through the

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15 Transcript of Azmy's testimony can be found in appendix 3, and can also be found in the film extras 'Three testimonies on Egyptian Education'.

process of learning a specific skill (Lave and Wenger, 1991)<sup>16</sup>.

Ali Azmy emphasizes that the transformation of play from physical to verbal is one of the dominant adaptability mechanisms that are acquired through the process of skill learning, working, or praying. In Ibtesam's case, the playful behaviour transforms from a physical to a verbal form. Certainly, Ibtesam cannot dance shaaby in the mosque, but she still sings, laughs, and jokes with her friends. The mode of interaction changes, as she cannot be as physically active as in the street, however the role-play allows her to discover new forms of communication that allows for play in serious settings. The ethnography of Linda Herrera carried out in the Amira and Zahra schools in Cairo was pioneer in showing specific objects as 'agents' breaking the line between ordered and chaotic behaviour, using order and chaos to define what Azmy refers to as serious and playful behaviour. Herrera uses the school bell to explain the transformation from the ordered behaviour in the classroom to chaotic behaviour when children are left alone playing (Herrera 2006:186; Evans, 2006). Ibtesam's example shows that while public behaviour is dictated by a number of objects, rituals, and social conventions, there is a degree of chaos and order in every situation. Children grow up testing the limits of play and chaos, or seriousness and play, in their everyday life. This concept, framed within situated social practice, where the use of language is both a social activity and a channel of individual transmission of information, argues meaning is negotiated, making cognitive and interpretative theory convergent (Rommetveit, 1987). As proposed in theories of situated social practice, the knowledge process (learning, thinking, and knowing) is a "relation among people engaged in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (Lave, 1991:67). The unstructured curriculum of apprenticeship (non-exclusive to professional skills, as shown by the case of Ibtesam whose apprenticeship process concerns womanhood as a social role) implies learning provides an individualized and realistic learning setting (Becker, 1972). The outcome is a "skilled testimony" whereby the individual "gains validation from others as they demonstrate appropriate understanding" (Cain, 1991).

Children continuously deal with the rhythm of the city and the different inputs of order and chaos to define their own characters in each situation. In the market of Saad Zaghoul, I had the opportunity of filming with Naglá (13), who works in the market with her mom, her brothers, and her sisters. She does not go to school; her inputs and values come from her family, the extended family of merchants of the market, and the different situations in the market. This situation is quite

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16 Watch video extra: 'My name is Ibtesam' *Link: <https://vimeo.com/129004738>*

This video was made to illustrate with images the story of Ibtesam, discussing a disposition to play that can be understood through her physical behavior and verbal play, but which is not revealed through her personal spoken analysis of play.

common in poor merchant families, as they need all family members to contribute to the family income. Also, in the case of Naglá, the whole family is illiterate, and the mother does not give much importance to education, instead she often talks about her daughter's future marriage. For Naglá, going to the mosque is linked with the pleasure of having five minutes on her own, as well as the possibility of sneaking a phone from one of her relatives to call her fiancée. There is little private space in the market and in the case of Nagla, this expands to her life at home as there are seven people living in a two bedroom apartment. Being underage, and entering the age in which she can get married, her mom is increasingly protective, and does not allow Nagla to go anywhere by herself but the mosque. Thus, the mosque transforms into a paradise of self-discovery for Nagla. Compared to Ibtesam, it is in the mosque where Nagla takes off her veil and feels comfortable walking around with her hair loose. Making use of the praying space to sit, rest, and imagine a different life. During fieldwork, I accompanied her to the mosque, where she would ask for my phone to call her fiancée. However, she wasn't always talking to the same man. On one occasion she was talking on the phone whispering "not like this, not like this". After she hanged up, I asked her if it was Ahmed she was talking to (a 21 years old market seller she had introduced to me as her fiancée). "No, it wasn't Ahmed, it was Karim", "who is Karim?" I asked. "It's Ahmed's friend. He is been talking to me these days... I love him". "But weren't you engaged to Ahmed" I said. "Yes, but it's over. He didn't treat me properly, he wasn't answering the phone. And Karim has bought me an engagement ring, look!" I knew Naglá's mother had already been talking about the marriage with Ahmed's mom, and I asked "She knows that you are engaged with somebody else?" "My mother?" I nodded. "Yes I told her downstairs. I like Ahmed's mother, but it's over".

During the three months of fieldwork she changed fiancée four times. I came to understand that the idea of engagement was Naglá's source of play. Although, acting in a very serious manner, I call it play because it is the re-enactment of a daily life situation, without the consequences of real life. Considering her age, she cannot yet get married, so her husband decision can keep changing without the actual consequence of getting married. Once, I asked her when she intended to get married, she answered, "I don't know, it will take a while, I'm still small". Although she was playing with the idea of engagement in a very serious and emotionally charged manner, she remained very aware that she is still a young woman, and that the serious consequences of marriage are still distant.

In the market Naglá is dealing with a chaotic surrounding which she confronts with the strong personality of the market's women. Naglá builds this character by being badly spoken, loud voice, never intimidated by men and often challenging them, wearing a veil but also girly clothes,

showing superiority towards smaller children often by hitting and shouting, bargaining with customers, and advertising loudly the products she sells in the market. Such personality can be also observed in the women around Naglá, for instance, Zeinab (15) her sister, while talking to older sister's baby son, she would say "*Eh ia ibn el mitnaka, eh ia ars*" which literally means "*hello motherfucker, how are you little pimp?*". However, her smile and her gesture showed she was saying "*hello beautiful*". The use of different expressions is just a play that characterises of the people of the market, defining their position in the social game<sup>17</sup>. What Uhl referred to as the "woman's expression of domesticity" which renders real intentions imperceptible in the public context (1991:92).

Psychologists have long studied the knowledge acquisition outcome of situational learning, a model grounded in the theories of cognitive and social psychology in which knowledge is gained from and in experience (e.g. Sindelar 2001; Wilson 1993; Brown 1989). On Wilson's terms, children do not only "learn from experience, they learn in it, as they act in situations and are acted upon by situations" (1993:75). Hendricks further argues that "learning and doing are inseparable and that learning is a process of enculturation" (2001:1). It is through learning that children come to understand and incorporate their own context as the social practice and activity structures undertaken by community members (Brown, 1989; Evans 2006), what Bourdieu defines as *habitus* (1973). However these studies have largely focused on classroom communities, the cases of unintended situational learning that result from the children's own experiences in daily life have been left out from scholars' attention. A closer attention to chaos<sup>18</sup> and play would be beneficial to understand the scope of situations from which children learn through their own role play outside the frame of any external educational intent.

Integrating role-play in education projects is not an easy task. The role of the educator is hardly ever exempt from normative views on the children, even in projects like Mini-Medina where the facilitators aim to limit their normative assessments. As Paulo Freire understood from his

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17 In the safe space of the mosque, Naglá transforms into a soft, sweet girl, unveiling herself to other women, and talking to her lovers. While being very different from the transformation of Ibtesam, as the stage of self-discovery is different, the duplicity of personalities is present in both cases defined by the different spaces and bound to time. The role play they perform transforms their character in different settings. The learning outcome depends on the experiences they gain from the worldview they chose to enact in each situation.

18 The testimony of Ali Azmy makes clear a need to allocate a space for chaos in Egyptian education: "Learning can happen anywhere, but when developing an educational program where chaos doesn't happen it means that there wasn't space for the different perspectives to be put on the table. The discussion space where diverse inputs are brought together to create something is the chaos that needs to happen for sincerity and creativity to emerge. If we agree on the outcome from the beginning, then why go through the process?"

experience as an educator, “we cannot fall into a naïve idealism when thinking it is possible to create a 'province of freedom' outside a specific society where the material conditions of that society work against the affirmation of freedom” (Freire, 1994:144). In this sense we need to allow for chaos to happen while acknowledging the different social factors that influence the action, to then question and redirect them through dialogue. By dialogue it implies that all actors, children and educators expose their concerns and views of the experience with honesty so that other actors can understand how they are making sense of the situation<sup>19</sup>.

The game is proposed outside the context of chaos; however the interaction within the game needs to deal with the chaos of the city and the social factors affecting it. The experience of chaos through role play, allows the children to unveil how they actually experience the city. The discussion that arises serves to share the different points of view that result from the conflict as well the means to readdress them for the game to continue. The experience is normative in the sense that the game gives power to the facilitators to stop the game and initiate a reflection, however it is with the objective of increasing the points of view that children would have to make sense of the experience. This does not imply that in the future the children will behave differently in the same situation, but it means that they have more perspectives from which to build their opinions.

### **Time, Space, and play**

The disposition to play is in constant dialogue with time and space. We have explored situations in which play arises through objects, imagination, and re-enactment of everyday life experiences. However, to understand what children learn from the play experience it must be understood how they live the experience. One of the limitations of working with children is that they often don't have verbal tools to define or analyse their lived experiences (Downe, 2001:166). The choice of film as a research method was to provide a physical description of time and space in the play setting, recorded in dialogue with the filmmaker's child own perceptions as an agent in the play setting. The camera served as an object of play. It recorded external situations of play, but also the play between the camera as object, and the 'filmmaker' child as subject. The subject defined as a unique individual, or a self (Morris, 1994:10), who has his or her own particular view of the world. Therefore the footage can be referred as the product of the playful interaction with time and space through the lens of the camera.

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19 Appendix 4: How facilitators deal and negotiate with chaos in the play setting; an experience from Mini-Medina with Egyptian and Syrian refugee children

## *Play in dialogue with real-world time-space*

Temporality of the real-world time (physical world) refers to all connections between social interactions with material and institutional elements (Albrizio, 2003:156). In the context of play, it refers to all events taking place at the game space and the body of the player. It also refers to all background knowledge that the players have at the starting point of the game, shaping its imaginative course. In Cairo, a city that has recently lived a revolution, people's relation to politics has become rooted in everyday life discussion and events. The three events that follow show, with the example of politics, the dialogue between real world time, space, and play.

After president Mohamed Morsi was overthrown by the army in June 2013, an interim government was formed until the following democratic elections in May 28<sup>th</sup> 2014. By then, I was already in Egypt doing the fieldwork. I was surprised, because a year before, people in the streets were still resilient of the army, and remembered it as the oppressive force that had led them to the street to overthrow Mubarak in 2011. However, a year later, there were high hopes in the street; many people had changed their minds in regards to the military following the positive media campaign Sisi had developed. The days before the election, I was filming in Hadaba el Wosta with Meina (14), she had proposed we do a sketch about the elections. Weeks before, Sisi's media campaign had released a song that encouraged people to go vote. The song called *Bushret Kheir* (a good omen), called for nationwide participation. Critics argued it was another of Sisi's mechanisms to gain popular votes. Sisi's media campaign had spread across Egypt with billboards, mainstream speeches, and public events. The campaign had tried to highlight the role of the military as humans. Big billboards showed soldiers with babies on their arms, advertisements showed Sisi riding a bicycle followed by a crowd of army men cycling on civilian clothes, and the picture of Sisi dressed as a civilian spread through t-shirts, banners, flags, and children's toys. The elections song, although it did not support Sisi explicitly, was widely associated with his campaign and had already been mocked through sketches and re-mixes on social media. Meina and her friends proposed to do their own mockery video of the song. Meina said: *"today we do the play of Busheret Kheir. This song talks about politics, that's also play"* The song would start playing and they would not move, looked bored, and in the middles of the song they would get up, dancing and singing<sup>20</sup>.

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20 The translated lyrics are the following:

*"This is an easy task, and you will do it  
To the world you will speak out  
And take an oath to make it better*

Talking about what they thought their sketch meant, they said:

Meina – This song is about Sisi

Khaled – No, it's about the vote, the elections

Meina – It says go down vote. Go down vote for whom? Sisi!

Meina – He (Sisi) does a show of himself, because he wants to be the president of the republic, so he makes a song of himself

Khaled – There have been problems for the past year or so, because the country is not going on

Meriam – The Muslim Brotherhood, and the criminals and thieves

Khaled – They elect him so all those problems can be finished

On the other side of the city, Alex (7) sitting on his living room, from where you can see Tahrir square, played on the laptop the same song. Alex, although still young, had lived the revolution passing by through his window. His conservative Christian family had always supported the army as a pillar for stability. Alex didn't like talking about what happened in the country, when I asked, he would go back to playing the elections song while his sister Rita (6) would jump around with her princess dress and say "*Sisi is our president, Sisi is our president*".

On the day before the election, I was in the market filming with Naglá (13), her mom had removed all the vegetables and now they were only selling Sisi's flags and banners. I asked her "*who is Sisi?*", "*The new president*" she answered, then she asked the same question to other market dwellers.

Khaled (9) – To be honest I love who is going to pull Egypt up to the glory, whether Sisi or Morsi

Naglá – Why don't you like Morsi?

Khaled – Because he destroyed country

Ragab (21) – Sisi is our president here, because he controls the country after the thieves and the

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*you have been quiet for too long*

*What did Egypt gain from your silence  
Do not hide your voice  
Tomorrow, you will write it under your own conditions  
this is a good tiding*

*Go call out for the '9a3idi' (from upper Egypt) and your nephew from 'Port Said' and the youth from  
'Alexandria' for this is a gathering of men  
And I will come with those from 'Sohag' and 'Qina' and 'Sinai' and 'El-Mahalla' who are the best of the best,  
and the beautiful Nubians  
And together we are stronger  
And our hope is high"*

killers

An old man came and started singing

*“Sisi, how many years has it been that I wait for you here?”*

*You came to tell us let's go, the Muslim Brotherhood is finished’*

Arabi (9), Naglá’s brother, standing next to the crowd with the incense burning pot, blew smoke towards the people, and shouted, *“I am the rule, I am the law! I work with incense, come on we want to eat bread!”*. Mohamed was making a joke imitating the ruler, like Naglá, Alex, and Meina, he was picking a daily topic of ‘Sisi as a president’, and addressing it with a feature of his character. Some children really believed in Sisi and engaged in a character of supporters, others were just playing with words and images they had heard and seen repeatedly. However, all of them were reacting to the time that they were living through, by building a position for themselves within the game of politics.

Mini-Medina, by starting from the abstract of the city, often misses out on how children interpret and understand the real life functioning of the city. The initial discussions in the brainstorming often propose a fantasy view on society, however as they develop the game, they start revealing to themselves and others how they actually feel about things. Mohamed (14) started the day in Mini-Medina by drawing a big field with a house where he said he wanted to live. Later, as the facilitators were distributing fabric to make the costumes, he picked up a white cloth, put it around his head, made a cape, and shouted, *“I am the president of the republic”*. Karim, a facilitator, said *“but if you want to be the president you need to have people elect you”*. He turned to the children and started making election promises to them. Half hour later, he asked if he could join the engineers building the houses, and spent two hours making round windows and the roof of the house. Once he was finished, he went around the city with his friend Ali (14), they both were talking about the city, Mohamed said: *“We need to have a police and thieves”*, Ali replied, *“The most important thing is the thieves. The police are not so important”*. Moments after, Mohamed was at the door of the bank controlling all the money coming out, pretending to be a security guard. Three other younger children were claiming to work with him. Ali on his part, had become a thief, eventually he came pushing in the room with some more children playing as thieves. Mohamed and Khaled (14), also playing as policeman, started dispersing the situation. They got an empty spray bottle and pretended to spray the faces of all thieves while Mohamed shouted *“Allah Akbar”*. Mohamed has gained his knowledge about professions from his life experience. The facilitators have a normative agenda about the children's city, trying to promote democracy and critical

thinking. However, the children often have their own agenda, that although not defined by a spoken agreement, they identify, understand, and re-enact together.

The role of the facilitator in the game is to let the chaos develop and later analyse it. Play and education theorist Carlos Wernicke says: “I need to adapt the child to culture and I need to adapt culture to the child, we can read it the pedagogical left and right. It is that simple, and the truth is somewhere in the middle” (2012). The ‘formal’ child presents a culture supporting peace and democracy when the facilitator is supervising: “*there should be no violence*”, “*we must respect each other*”, “*the older children should take care of the little ones*”. However, when children are left alone, they establish their agreements outside of the facilitators’ framework, revealing their actual disposition to play and their perspective on the city's culture. The transformation from facilitator’s guided order, to children chaotic game enactment allows the facilitator’s and children’s cultures to interact. The learning outcome is dependent on the different cultural perspectives the child gains from a single experience. However, these reflections are not expressed verbally. The children would conclude, “*I learned about the hospital*”, “*I learned about the bank*”. Gert Grüneisl, founder of Mini-Muenchen said, “*I don't know what children learn, I am not in their heads they all learn something different*”. The biggest contribution of play-based education is that it allows the child to be creative while exploring the different sides of their personality. Through this creative process the child discovers the self and the social factors in dialogue with the self (Winnicott, 1971). Play is not merely based on imitations and mimicking of the adult world, rather on an “inherent motive to use their intellect, creative thinking and imagination in attempting to explain the world to themselves and exercise influence upon it” (Ariel, 2002:91). Ariel proposes, “children find the raw materials out of which they create their make-believe play in the physical and cultural environment in which they grow up” (2002:89). Although children can develop different fantasy worlds from a single object, the first contact that children have with the object relates to their cultural background. In a gamble of real-life possibilities, the player experiments and chooses which possibilities should integrate and determine real civic life. Play continues as the different players attempt to integrate their views on how reality should be.

Play has been studied in anthropology as imitation, in role studies (Rosenberg, 1972; Roberts, 1959; Groos, 1991; Malinowski, 1960:107; Lancy 1975:31); as game activity, in intra-cultural comparative studies (Culin, 1907:248, Tylor 1980:71); as a projection of anxieties and hostilities reflected from society in psychological studies (Alexander 1958; Buhler, 1930; Peller, 1971; Waelder, 1933; Winnicott, 1971); and as trivial pastime left aside the focus of ethnographic studies as in the Tiv report of Laura Bohannon which excludes all children’s testimonies recorded in

field notes (1965). However, play is not only a game, an imitation, or a reflection of children's anxieties, as Fortes had already pointed out in his ethnography of *Tale Children* (1970:54). With the stories of play/playing city I argue, in play the child learns to adapt to culture but also acquires tools to recreate and reinvent society.

### *Constructing time-space in the game world, and its filmic reconstruction*

Game world time refers to arrangements that have been made to create the game situation or scenarios, in the case of Mini-Muenchen all arrangements within the process model to have children reflect on specific themes and structures within the city (i.e. money as a symbol of exchange, requirement of studying to become a full citizen, discussions of inflation in the mini city's stock market, discussion of citizen equality in the mini city's town hall). These agreements can be verbal and non-verbal, and serve to render all players within a play scenario in which they interact. Play actions can have real life consequences, if in interaction with people with a differing disposition to play. However, real life consequences can be suspended through certain rules made by the players for the purpose of the game<sup>21</sup>. A suspension of real life consequences implies that the game has its own dynamics of time and space, that although in interaction with real world time, has a disposition of its own, a concept defined as the *telic* state in Apter's analysis of the structural phenomenology of play (1991).

Mini-Muenchen and Mini-Medina, although two simulated cities that might seem part of the same game, each has a different set of arrangements to code time and space. This is affected by many factors: space, staff, finances, and educational framework. The starting point of the game in Mini-Medina is the abstract of the city, while in Mini-Muenchen the starting point are specific processes. In Mini-Medina, children come into an empty space and they are guided to construct it from scratch, starting from the city map, to the buildings, to then give life to the city. In Mini-Muenchen, the children come to a readymade city. "*The most essential component is a space big*

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21 Turnbull's ethnography of Mbuti Pygmy concludes, "one day they (children) find that the games they have been playing are not games any longer, but the real thing for they have become adults" (1961:129). However, as facilitator of Mini-Muenchen Mathias Grüneisl explains, most children won't be able to follow their dreams as they grow old. It is often only through play that children can explore those dreams: "*we pretend an illusion, because for a third of these kids, there won't be such a situation when they are grownups. They won't earn enough money with 50 hours working a week, to have a life that they want to. So we are pretending a little illusion here that for a lot of kids won't be reality*". The proposed utopia of equal opportunities is one of the game assumptions that are not brought into question through the mini city's game dynamics. The mini city's educational framework argues children learn to understand and deal with complex themes, such as democracy, equality of opportunities, or social justice, through specific skill learning processes within each of the stations of the city, without the need of defining these through lecture based forms of knowledge exchange.

*enough to build up the entire environment you need for realistic play. So, you need the rooms, the place, the streets, you need for the imagination of a city”* Mathias said. The children come in, register in a job and start working through specific processes of the profession they have chosen. Mini-Muenchen is working with the raw imaginary of the city, constructing a realistic image of the city allowing children to develop their imaginary through the role they chose to take in the city. This relationship can be seen through the space arrangements of each Mini-City. In Germany the children’s city has streets and painted walls, the construction is already evocative of a certain order. There are fences signalling the formation of lines queuing for the bank, coloured areas on the floor signalling where people and taxis should pass, and billboards announcing the activities of each workstation. This creates a culture of organization given by the city’s structure. For instance, in the post office where there are no queuing fences, children still queue in a straight line rather than pushing each other. Also, children constantly ask each other about information and always go back to the billboards to get informed of all activities. In Cairo, the children’s city is not realistic; children come into a two room empty apartment and are given materials to build a city. The child does not have to discover and interact with the space, rather imagine and then transform it. Imagination often leads children to think big, wanting to build big houses, spaceships, and football courts. Then the child is confronted by the limitation of physical space. If their aim is to build a spaceship, this needs to be reduced to a structure made with carton boxes. The structures they build are distant from what they actually had in mind; however, it is the basic structure needed to enact the characters they want, the rest is filled by the imagination. The lack of space is often the cause leading to disorder in the city. As the children’s activity starts developing they start interacting across different professions, and they also interact as citizens using the services provided. Time becomes accelerated as children develop new characters and forms of interaction around the city, increasing the speed of interactions and developing fast processing mechanism to negotiate their position within the changing game dynamics<sup>22</sup>.

The space and time of a game influences the behaviour of the player by stimulating certain educational aspects. The educational framework determines the starting point of the game, the initial spatial dynamics, and the basic rules of the game. Although the game structure might confront with the children’s individual aims, the play of overcoming normative arrangements within the game can make the game much more exciting and challenging<sup>23</sup>. Following Geertz (1975),

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22 Film extra: ‘Contrasting time and space of the German and Egyptian Mini Cities’ *Link:*

<https://vimeo.com/128430800>

23 Mohamed 12, was one of the Egyptian children participating in Mini-Muenchen. On the first two days he struggled to integrate the game, working on imitation of what other children were doing while working in the newspaper and

“children's culture is not to be seen as a casual power but as a context within which their social relations can be described” (quoted in James, 1988:83). The dominant structure of the game is merely a context through which children negotiate their own relationships.

The fictive time developed for the simulated city directly confronts the child with their perception of adult culture in regards to city structure and life. Their reinterpretation of the city allows the observers to identify the self-regulated and semi-autonomous world of the child, which preoccupied Hardman's research, regarding children “as people to be studied under their own right, and not just as receptacles of adult teaching” (Hardman 1973:87). This concept was named by Margaret Mead (1978) as the 'configurative culture' whereby the child processes adult culture and redefines it to its current needs in retrospect to the social changes that have led the child to desire a different culture than the one their parents uphold (Wulff 1995:9). The film montage aims to unite childhood discourses of work, play, and dreams. The comparison of working children with children playing to work aims to contest simplistic generalizations such as children play and adults work, providing examples of cases where both children and adults negotiate play and work in their daily lives.

The collection of the material shot represents a fragmented partial truth of the reality of the children filmed. This partial reality is both subject to real and game world time; therefore, it should be understood as a subjective reality product of a play experience between the children, the camera, and the adults involved. Some parts of the film are deliberately staged while others are simply part of an unrecognised performance. The montage choice aimed to emphasize the ongoing creations and recreations of the world that children were experiencing, both while acknowledging themselves at play, but also when unconsciously playing, such as the instances when they staged out their future, which to them was a serious non-play act. The split screen montage is justified within the heuristic concept, pushing the viewer to realize the fragmented nature of the experience of social reality (Suhr and Willerslev 2013:11). The purposeful suspension of time and space, as situations are juxtaposed with settings that do not pertain to the situation's reality, aim to lead the viewer to

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the embassy. The third day he worked in the bank, at the end of the day as I interviewed him about his experience I noticed he had two citizen Ids. I asked him about it and he told me it was possible to have two Ids. I knew it is not allowed to have two Ids, and I wondered how he had managed to fake his second registration. I went to the bank and asked the children who told me they had helped Mohamed to get a second Id as he didn't have one before, feeling content they had guided a foreign city fellow. Mohamed had played the 'lost foreigner' card to play his own game. The second Id meant he could have two work stamps for the work he had done in the bank if he asked two different facilitators. He learned about the system for two days playing the 'formal' game. The third day he managed to play his own game within the game, exploring the limits and barriers imposed by the education framework at hand. Mohamed's sneakiness proves the game cannot be imposed, it can merely propose a situation for players to interact, and it is up to the players to use the situation to explore the limits of their interest within the time-space of the game.

reflect on the nature of time and space that evoke the particular situation. This can be viewed as the invisible of the film, questioning the real/unreal, serious/play, order/chaos dichotomies that are very present in both the Egyptian and Western adult mindsets, but were quite fluid in the experiences of the children.

As previously stated, the film structure was created in post-production by the researcher aiming to convey a concise message developed out of a combination of scattered conversations and events that I experienced with the children. The process of research collaboration, knowledge elicitation, and generation followed an experimental anthropological method guided by Tuner's notion of anti-structure<sup>24</sup>, whereby I organised situations that aimed to promote a transformative space where conventional structures were momentarily challenged (Tuner, 1969; Woocher, 1977), although this only came about in few moments of intimacy with some children who understood the situations I was trying to propose, and used them for their own transformative goals.

Following the work of Perkins and Meyer (2006), the liminal state has been defined as “the state of trouble, stuckness, letting go and changed subjectivity, without which the possibility of things being otherwise is unlikely to come into view” (quoted in Land, 2008:679). It is then, under such liminal state that I was able to recognize myself as a player, equal to the children in terms of will of discovery and uncertainty of the film outcome<sup>25</sup>. The fact that I was a foreigner, helped into entering that state, as my behaviour normally suspended the children's normal relation towards other adults. Having to translate for me and experimenting with similar struggles when communicating an idea, brought us to a kind of understanding in which looks and gestures became enough to understand what was to happen next. These were nonverbal agreements that gave continuity to our collective film game. On this note, Paul Stoller criticized the inability of the anthropologist to “be penetrated by the world of the other” arguing anthropologists often only allow their senses to penetrate the Other's world (1989:39). My personal fieldwork experience radically contradicts this view. Playing and filming with children has barely led me to understand the

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24 “Periods of time and modalities of relationship in which normal social structural patterns are suspended, altered, or transcended. Anti-structure finds primary expression in the phenomena of liminality and *communitas* (a relatively unstructured and undifferentiated communion of individuals)” (Woocher, 1977:503).

25 Play has a multiplicity of structures, thus focusing on single games would miss the wide scope of structures in which play can emerge. Ethnographic filmmaking, although originates from a structured investigative idea, finds its natural structure through understanding the life of characters being filmed. These are two factors that I only came to understand once in fieldwork, which made me drop most of the investigative and narrative aims I had in mind. From then on, most of my work was based on improvisation, based on the possibilities that the different children were opening up. The more I engaged with the children the more I suspended my position of filmmaker professional just simply because I stopped grasping what the film was going to become, or the message that I wanted to give. In anthropology this seems obvious, however in filmmaking it isn't as the object is to come up with a concrete and coherent narrative.

children's world, however, it has sharply changed the researcher and filmmaker characters I had built for myself. I came to understand myself as a player with dreams, much like the children were representing themselves. Also, communicating with the children through my broken Arabic led me to accept and adapt to the new ideas the children were developing out of their interpretations of what I was saying. These were often very distant from my initial ideas, but lost in translation allowed for the unstructured development of new forms of expressions that were outside of my initial intent<sup>26</sup>. I somehow trusted the direction that the children were guiding me towards. It is that trust, which although not always coherent or verbally defined, allowed me to be penetrated by children's images and ways of seeing the world. By trusting the children, they felt comfortable showing some parts of their world although I can't say I was successful at penetrating their worlds, as from what I saw of the diversity of their play and non-play characters, their world is not something static, but rather dynamic and ever changing, rendering a single definition of their world, impossible.

It is this notion of snapshot of understanding that led to the documentary montage in its current form, trying to convey a multiplicity of instances in children's lives that share similarities, while remaining unique to the temporal and social experience of specific situations<sup>27</sup>.

## Conclusion

In the field of anthropology there exist few accounts that permit a thorough comparison between the different dispositions towards play understood from children's perspectives (Garve, 1977; Smith, 1972). Further, there is a scarcity of studies that address and produce in depth knowledge about 'play as a disposition', especially in terms of studies addressing Islamic societies of the XXI century. This study has explored, from the perspective of the participant children, the situational and culturally specific spaces of Cairo in which a disposition towards play can be expressed or not, revealing different ways to confront the many types of play in relation to their spatial and temporal surroundings. Moreover, this study shows there is a wide scope of individual

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26 This always happened with Ibtesam, who through half my sentence had already given meaning to what I wanted to say, and without allowing me to finish would run to the other kids and convey the idea claiming she was only a translating. Half of the times she didn't give me time to even formulate my idea, she seemed to be interpreting and processing information three times faster than me, to a point that I frequently lost control of the situation and events around me. It is at these moments that the experimental nature of the research actively produced a transformative space where social roles were momentarily inverted or suspended. The children play was so strong that it often took me as a sea current pushing a little fish towards an unknown direction.

27 Stuart's McLean's approach to montage best describe what I intended to put into action with this research. *"Montage refers not to an audio-visual or (by extension) a textual method, but to a sensibility and mode of engagement with the world – one seeking to align itself not with explanatory recourse to an established order of significations (society, history, context) but with a generative instability that inheres in juxtaposed elements and the spatiotemporal intervals that both conjoin and differentiate them"* (McLean, 2013:59)

attitudes among the participant children concerning the nature and expressivity of play in private and public spaces. Children make sense of concepts and topics relevant to real life situations as they transform them for their own play needs (Mead, 1978; Lave, 1991:67; Becker, 1972). Play as a way of experiencing the world allows children to enact their lives differently from the social norm, due to the lack of real life consequences of the play state (Huizinga, 1938). The research findings suggest that, in play, the child learns to adapt to cultural norms and activities while acquiring tools to think through, and potentially, to recreate and reinvent society.

This research has used experimental, participative methods to engage with children and has allowed them to define their own terms of representation. The film activities and exercises, although they proposed a common problem of understanding play, were developed in collaboration with the children, serving to develop relationships and engagements with each other, and towards the research, producing a clash of games, cultural attitudes, bodies, and voices that served to revise the terms of realist representation of children in anthropology (Russell, 1999:6). The montage moves away from traditional observational aesthetics, while still representing the voices of a marginalised community of youth using new forms of subjectivity articulated through juxtaposed moving images that stand as evidence (Clifford, 1988:34).

This study identifies the necessity of children - influenced by the context as the social practice and activity structures undertaken by community members (Brown, 1989) - of differentiating play as an activity, and play as a disposition, and that such differentiation should become central in sociability and educational studies. The reductionism of academia has diminished the importance of play as a disposition and has subsequently relegated play to physical disconnected activities that exist in accordance to their social time. This research argues play should be proposed as something endogenous to the social human being that is in fact a constant through time, with its inevitable spatial characteristics. This continuity of play through time is projected in the disposition of the participant children when confronting their own interpretation of their own lives, accepting the rules they have previously decided upon individually in their playful character development, to then add new forms of interpretation in a voluntary manner as they grow into adulthood. The playful character development, although often discarded when the children acknowledge themselves as adults. It never leaves the individual, and keeps on determining 'serious' decisions of adult life. The annulations of these subjective interpretations in the scientific and social worlds, do not allow for either individual or collective evolution. They impair the emergence of new interpretations and dispositions, leading to the stagnation of social thought (Fukuyama, 1992).

Following the necessity of further investigation of play, as stated by Sandra Russ (2013), this study is the first participatory visual research of play analysis in Cairo, in which its novelty shows the importance of play. This study, including the film, is a product of learning, which had an impact on the researcher, and the children involved. The thesis concludes that to review the current system of Egyptian education, there is a necessity for further research on the nature of play, as well as experimentation with situations of play. The method proposed aims, in its utopian frame, is to overcome the binary positions of us and them, self and other, in the specific context of children perception of games (Russell, 2006:19). Many methods can be used, to access our world through play, from the perspective of children from different nationalities, and these can widely benefit the field of anthropology in terms of understanding the processes of enculturation (Wilson, 1993; Hendricks, 2001; Bourdieu, 1973). If we want to see a reverse effect in the current stagnation of thought, whether in Egypt or elsewhere in the world, the social impairment of collective creativity, by diminishing the role of play in social life and research, needs to come to an end.

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## **Appendix 1: Brief note on the current state of Egyptian NGOs**

Although growing, the impact of the projects I worked with to contact participants is still minimal in scope of the large population of Cairo. These projects are working with reduced number of children, little institutional support, limited resources, and are often left to the initiative of an educator's elite. They operate within the legal framework of NGOs, or social enterprises, and are increasingly marginalized by the over-centralising power of the army. These educators often have a progressive mindset in terms of education; they promote creativity-based learning, and often oppose the official school curriculum. The government formally consents to these NGOs. However the army, both before the revolution and now under president Abd el Fatah el Sisi, has further bureaucratized the NGO administrative sector, putting obstacles to all foreign funding, monitoring the organisation's activities, and persecuting those whose ideology seems to conflict with the government. One example is the recent close down of the NGO Alwan wa Awtar. Due to the close family relation of the NGO's founder to the Constitution party leader, Mohamed el Baradi (Dostour party, the opposition to the military rule), the government has been trying to close down the NGO through false legal accusations. Finally, the government closed down the NGO last June after a law was approved banning NGOs from occupying residential space. The law proposed NGO offices could no longer be rented; NGOs need to be based in private NGO property outside residential areas. The law applies to new and old NGOs and has served to close down Alwan wa Awtar as they were based in a residential area. Their program focuses on learning through arts, and has managed to create a network of active youth in the community in their 15 years of work. It supports small projects like Mini-Medina giving them space and resources to carry out social activities. The government's behaviour is creating a negative view of the NGO sector to the large public, and impairing the continuity of long term youth projects like that of Alwan wa Awtar.

Before the close down of Alwan wa Awtar, I did a two month film workshop with a group of five children from the NGO, part of the first part of this research, and the NGO hosted the later edition of Mini-Medina where I filmed the second part of this research.

## **Appendix 2:**

**Contesting social norms and creating acceptance of one's own virtues through fantasy play.**

**Exploring Nardeen's and Andrew's future dreams.**

There is a strong career bias in Egypt favoring professions such as engineering, medicine or

law as they represent high social status. Andrew and Nardeen, the two Christian children I was filming alongside Sarah in the Jesuit Cultural Centre (see table above), were certain they wanted to become a computer engineer and a mechanical engineer respectively. Initially it appeared as a family imposition; however both of them revealed that they had developed their own arguments:

Nardeen – I want to become a mechanical engineer because women can also be engineers.

Andrew – I want to become a computer engineer, I am going to make games. Right now I am working on the code of a little game I am making with my friends. (...) I love working and challenging my mind.

Researcher – And that's also play?

Andrew – Of course, that the talent that God has given me.

As she talked about her future identity, Nardeen seemed to have something clear; she wanted to challenge the male domination of the engineering profession. She didn't think it was normal to have women and men professions, and saw herself as a changing agent to address this situation. As I asked if there was any relationship in between work and play she said: "*Dreams are not play, dreams are what you want to be in life, your work*". On other hand, Andrew did not fantasize with contesting social dynamics as his sister. His rational was pragmatic and based on his beliefs. God has given him a specific talent and he builds his future around it. The self-discipline that the individual needs to develop his talent is determined by the pedagogical process by which the habitus develops (Mahmoud 2005:20). For example, Andrew talks about the process of self-discipline of studying mathematics as something that is developed by the school and his family standards, something that is common to many children of his social and cultural background, but does not become part of their life because of their individual choices (Bourdieu, 1973:80). He classifies the habit of studying as non play because it forms part of a schooling custom that is external to his input. He classifies studying as work because is socially imposed. However, when referring to his mental capacity to do mathematics, he describes as play because it is the talent that God has given him. The practical mimesis (bodily integration) of the habitus "tends to take place below the level of consciousness, expression and the reflexive distance that these presuppose, what is 'learned by the body' (...) is something that one is" (Bourdieu 1990:73). Andrew associates the capacity of mental play to a divine providence; a given characteristic that his body has learned but his mind did not consciously choose to have. The given factor is that Andrew is good at maths, and he justifies it with structural and spiritual arguments. The difference is that uncertainty brought by the play disposition in mental play gives him the possibility of experimenting with maths beyond what is socially expected from him, giving the possibility for the development of new forms of

knowledge actively transforming what the body is.

### **Appendix 3:**

#### **Ali Azmy, an Egyptian involved in different education projects, and collaborator of Mini-Medina, describes the scenario of play in Egypt**

*“There is a few types of how Egyptians would play, there is the play that they associate with the word, and there is play that they don’t associate with the word. So usually, the play, when we say let’s have fun, or let’s play a game, it resonates with the already formulated games, whether it’s sports games, street games, or old games that we all grew up with. That’s one part of play, and a lot of it is competitive, can include violence, and it’s aggressive, the fun part of play. There are other types of play, that are not associated with play, it happens in a classroom when a child makes a joke, when children are talking rather than saying let’s play a game, or when they are trying to escape school, or when they communicate and interact with their families and friends. This is another type of game that they don’t realise. And how they define play, is how they define other words like work, like learning. So usually, when you ask a child, what is learning? The first thing that comes to their mind is the classroom, people sitting, taking information from one individual, no jokes, no smiles, just serious stares. That’s how they define learning, and work is the same thing, work comes with sweating, putting energy and effort into something, or creating something. From these three words, play, work, and learning, they create the different polar. If learning and work is obedient, you have to be obedient when you are learning and working, play is the exact opposite of being obedient. It has to be rebellious, it the time in which you are allowed not to do what you are told, and do as you want to, without taking consideration of the consequences, as you do in school, or as you do in work. The three concepts of education, work, learn, and play; I see it as distorted whether in the young children or the adults. This is how they formulate their lives, now it's work, now it's education we have to sit, and now we are learning so we have to listen to the teacher, and now it's fun, so let’s hit each other and push, and swear. This is how it started to formulate, but I think by time is changing and concepts are being fused into each other, there are a lot of community centres, there are a lot of project that have to do with learning*

*through play, and there is a lot of jobs that are not traditional that weren't present 10 year ago, that are more creative and more engaging. Everyone has their own perspectives, but this is what has been formed by the way we were raised, religion, culture, parents, schools, family, and the people around us".*  
(Munich, August 5<sup>th</sup> 2014).

#### **Appendix 4:**

#### **How facilitators deal and negotiate with chaos in the play setting; an experience from Mini-Medina**

In the Mini-Medina edition of May 2014, held for the Syrian refugees in Obour, one of Cairo satellite cities, there was a series of events that illustrate the learning through chaos concept. Some kids (Aisha, Mahmoud, Mohamed and Yehia) decided to build the police station. Karim, the group facilitator, sat the children down to plan what the police should do. They decided that the police station should be big, and it shouldn't have a jail. Their role would be to patrol the city, monitoring to make sure children were behaving properly. The punishment for any child misbehaving would be to take their citizenship points, and after three points have been taken, the police would take the misbehaving kid to the police station and hold him inside for twenty minutes before being allowed to interact in the city again. By the end of the morning they had built the entire police station and made police customs and tags. Their sole intervention happened when a kid came in and stormed into the police station raking the walls the 'police' children had made. The 'police' children arrested him in a peaceful manner and took away his citizenship points.

During lunch the children were left to eat on their own, and as soon as they finished, the police children decided to arrest another child who was misbehaving, however, this time the adults were not present. The children arrested the misbehaving child by pushing him to the wall, making him stand against the wall with the arms and legs spread. Once they did this, the police children started to hit the child against the wall until a facilitator came into the lunchroom and stopped the whole event. Karim and I asked the children to make a circle, and asked them the same question as in the morning "*what does the police do?*" Mohamed (14, Syrian) said "*the police needs to torture people, arrest them, hit them*", Amira (5, Syrian) said "*the police bombs houses*". These descriptions reflect how they actually see the police as they understand from their life experiences. In the morning discussion, the children were imagining an ideal police experience. The afternoon discussion, after they had their first conflict, had brought them to explore their views on real life police. Following a silence, Karim asked '*but how do we want the police of the children city to be*

*like?*' Ahmed (11, Syrian) said: *"it should not be violent"*, Aisha (11, Egyptian) *"the police should be there to help the people, and protect the people"*. Mohamed (12, Syrian) *"there should be no weapons"*. The children wrote these articles down, and decided to continue the play. Later, two children started cleaning the floor and more children started joining. Aisha, one of the girls from the police said: *"the police should be helping people in whatever activity they are doing"*, and went to help the other children clean. The other children in the police said they were not helping because they were boys. After a time watching the other children having fun with the water and the soap, they decided that it didn't matter that they were boys. The police were there to help the citizens of the city, and they also had the right to have fun with the soap.