

# **Complete me**

Improvisation as performance in board game design

**Play and Ludic Interaction**

**Final Essay**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores playful interaction in the context of a social party game Complete me with the focus on appropriation and improvisation as performance. The essay also reflects upon different game and play theories such as the Magic Circle, it addresses the definition of play, playfulness and game. It discusses play-centered design process from concept to the creation of a low-fidelity prototype

## KEYWORDS

Interaction design, appropriation, improvisation, MDA

## INTRODUCTION

Complete me is a social board game that consists of 3-6 players. There are two kinds of players called 'artists' and 'critic' with different roles. The 'artists' create drawings and the 'critic' judges their work and selects a winner. They switch roles after each short rounds. The aim of the game is to encourage people to explore their surroundings, by creating surprising combinations of com-

mon everyday objects and drawings, while engage in play. Complete me intends to empower its players by allowing each of them to become an artist, and improvise a drawing as a performance.

## OBJECTIVES AND DESIGN QUESTION

By asking the question 'How might we create a playful interaction that encourages people to explore their surroundings through appropriation of common everyday objects?' as guidance, we started the design process. Our main objectives during the project were to add new meaning or feeling to ordinary objects and contexts and change the everyday expectations of an object or a context. Also to create relationships which challenge or play with reality, explore our surroundings and finally, add humor - it should be fun.

Our early brainstorming resulted in three main concepts, board game, art installation and appropriation of place. After detailed analysis we decided on the final concept of a social board game.

## INSPIRATION AND RELATED WORK

The concept of Complete me was inspired among others by art such as Bull's Head by Picasso as well as Sunday Sketching, the work of the illustrator Christoph Neimann.



Figure 1 Bull's Head by Picasso. Figure 2, 3 and 4 sketches by Christoph Neimann from Sunday Sketching series

For more inspiration we looked into similar board games which we analysed and studied during our design process. Among these are Cards Against Humanity, Charades, Creationary and Cranium. Some similar characteristics that we found between these games are e.g. Cards Against Humanity's simple rules and short game rounds. Charades is a party game that involves performing and requires expressivity and creativity similarly to what our game is aiming at. Creationary a party game that contains a deck of cards with images in different categories. It is about interpreting physical objects and uses them to create something. Cranium is also a party board game that involves four different kind of activities inclusive a so called 'Creative Cat' where players have to sketch and sculpt. Cranium has several similarities to Complete me as it's about drawing, figure forming, building,

creativity and humor.

## PLAY, PLAYFULNESS AND GAME

### Play

According to Sicart "play is a way of expression, a way of engaging with the world". (Sicart, 2014, p. 13) Complete me encourages people to engage with their environment and invites them to explore it by using everyday objects in an expressive way. Complete me is also about creativity and as Sicart explains "Play is creative, in that it affords players different degrees of expression inherent in the play activity itself." (Sicart, 2014, p.23) Players of Complete me are allowed and require a great level of creative expression while they create bizarre combinations of common objects and drawings while engaged in play.

## Playfulness

Although Sicart describes play and playfulness as two distinct terms, "play is an activity, while playfulness is an attitude" (Sicart, 2014, p.22) he explains that the two concepts are intertwining: "we can be playful even when playing." Complete me requires the artists to be playful in order to complete their drawings with an unrelated object that is otherwise meant for entirely different purposes. It requires a playful attitude to find a new and surprising angle of a common object such as a scissor and turn it into the body of a ballet dancer.

## Game

In their book *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals* Salen and Zimmerman define game as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome." (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p. 93.) which they apply it to all kinds of games. They explain the complex relationship of play and games as "Games are a subset of play: The category of play represents many kinds of playful activities." (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p. 96). Complete me consists of several playful activities such as blindfolding of the critic, searching for common objects with a unique purpose, perform improvised drawing as well as using everyday objects and combine it with sketches to recreate images. Based on the game rules the players' task is to match objects with drawings, which can be understood as a conflict that the players have to solve where the best solution wins as the outcome of the game.

## A different board game

Complete me is a competitive social party game consists of 3-6 players. It falls into the category of board games with its unique characteristics. It's a game that urges players for exploration of their surroundings and it changes with the environment. In contrary to other board games the game board of Complete me is broken into individual pieces. Players use their own boards to create their compositions. Their boards turn into scenes where a performance takes place. The final compositions are directly influenced by where the game is played, eg. in someone's home or outside in nature. Similarly to many other board games Complete me contains elements such as a spinner, a stack of cards and tokens. (Walker, 2014) The game is played on a flat surface and a single winner is selected after each round.

## DRAWING AS IMPROVISATION AND PERFORMANCE

Performance exists not only in theatre, music but also in fine art. The game Complete me borrows elements such as drawing from the arts. As Naute expresses it "Drawing is an profoundly performative act." (Naute, 2009). He further explains "The hand is physically mediated by the drawing tool and surface, but at the same time, the gesture can transmit more directly than anything else the raw emotions of the artist in the moment of creation." Improvisation is defined as "something that is improvised, in a particular piece of music, drama, etc. created spontaneously or without preparation." (Naute, 2009) In Complete me improvisation as performance takes place as art-

ists recreate an image by drawing spontaneously and completing or combing it with an unrelated common object. Through searching for objects players explore private and public spaces and through the performance of drawing they improvise. Improvisation requires thinking outside of the box. The critic, who is not able to follow the drawing process is caught by surprise has to reflect on the works spontaneously, without preparation. When the blindfold is finally removed the critic performs an extemporized action. Searching for the object can also be understood as performance by the 'artists'. Looking through others' items at someone else's place may feel like a slightly unusual activity. In jazz musicians improvise a melody on the spot. Similarly in Complete me players have to arrange unrelated elements such as common objects with a drawing to recreate a given image.

## APPROPRIATION

In his book *Play Matter* Miguel Sicart writes that "To be playful is to appropriate a context that is not created or intended for play. Playfulness is the playlike appropriation of what should not be play." As he further explains "Play is appropriative, in that it takes over the context in which it exists". (Sicart, 2014, p.32) Similarly in art appropriation is the "use of pre-existing objects or images with little or no transformation applied to them." (Chilvers and Graves-Smith, 2009)

When playing Complete me appropriation of objects takes place as the artists use common objects for play that were otherwise not intended to be used for play. All these objects, that are originally made for and used for different purposes are now used very differently and thus get a new meaning by the players. Common objects are brought into a new context during the game. The players view towards these objects changes. It requires a different mindset to see the body of a ballet dancer in a pair of scissors or a dress of a flamenco dancer in a bottle of tabasco sauce.

Appropriation is also manifested in the players' social relationships and their relation to their environment. Since the game can be played anywhere it changes with the environment. It also changes players' relationship to their environment. While playing it at home as a party game, the host's home turns into a field of resources as players search for objects they need to find for their compositions. Players get to familiarise themselves with the host's home as the rule of the game dictates them to explore. They are allowed to browse through book shelves, open drawers etc. Normally as guest in someone's home this type of behaviour would not be accepted. Similarly when played outside in a park the game changes based on the objects that can be found and the way players relate to that particular place. Complete me encourages to build a creative relationship with their environment while it involves people with play. Depending on the environment it is played in the available objects vary. They reflect that environment which in turn affects the outcome of the final compositions. The objects found in a musician's home might be very different from the one found at a gardening enthusiast.

## MAGIC CIRCLE

The idea of Magic Circle originates from Huizinga. According to him play happens in a time and space separate from the ordinary which are "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart". However Salen and Zimmerman's description emphasises the psychological experience and act of being involved in a game. They explain that "To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins." ( Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). In the case of Complete me players create their magic circle at the start of the game as they decide where they'll play. They have to determine which areas are allowed to explore in order to find their object. Salen and Zimmerman further explain that magic circle "might have a physical component, like the board of a board game", however there are several games without physical boundaries. ( Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Although Complete me consists of game boards it doesn't require physical boundaries because it can be played anywhere. On the other hand players get to decide their own boundaries, eg. they must agree how big areas will be allowed to explore. Or else when played at home, the host may decide the restricted areas where the artists may not search for objects.

## MDA: Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics

### Mechanics

According to the definitions of Hunicke the Mechanics are "particular components of the game, at the level of data representation and algorithms." (Hunicke, 2004, p. 2). In the case of Complete me it is as follows. Critic: spinning, selecting topic, analysing, judging, picking and rewarding a winner. Artists: exploring, planning, choosing, ideating, creating innovating, drawing,

Artists need to be explorative and choose their objects creatively. The game played in short rounds. After each round the critic selects a winner artist who receives a token as reward for their performance. There are tokens in different category eg. 'funniest', 'most original', 'most creative', etc. The mechanics of Complete me - such as generating specific topics by the spinner, limiting the usage of number of objects, keeping time limit (5 min), judging and giving feedback, appointing and rewarding a winner- enhance the experience of improvised performance such as finding objects, drawing on the spot and creating a composition.

### Dynamics

Dynamics are "the run-time behavior of the mechanics acting on player inputs and each others' outputs over time" (Hunicke, 2004, p. 2). In Complete me after playing several rounds the players may understand the personal preferences of different critics. Eg. a critic may like 'most original' drawing another may prefer 'most funny' drawings, etc. Artists may create their drawings accordingly, to become the 'favourite' of a certain critic, to win. Some game play mechanisms such as the time limit urges the 'artists' to be in a rush to find objects. It creates players behaviors like running around in the room or repeatedly looking at the clock or asking how much time they've left.

## Aesthetics

Aesthetics are "the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she interacts with the game system. (Hunicke, 2004, p. 2). For Complete me these responses are the following. Artists: challenge, competition, fantasy, expression, discovery, as well as imagination, exploration, stimulation, creativity, excitement. Critic: excitement, surprise, stimulation.

"From the designer's perspective, the mechanics give rise to dynamic system behavior, which in turn leads to particular aesthetic experiences."

When the artists need to find an object they have to be explorative. As they search for objects and as they draw it stimulates their creativity. Mechanics such as the time limit, the requirement to improvise

leads to excitement, imagination and stimulation. Mechanics such as blindfolding the critic creates excitement and a surprise effect for the critic which is a desired aesthetic game element. Trying to understand the bizarre combinations of common objects and sketchy drawings is challenging for the critic. It is also a stimulating experience to analyse and judge others' drawings.

## PLAY CENTRIC, ITERATIVE DESIGN PROCESS

Starting from the pitch that followed some desktop research on similar games, we started ideating. Our early brainstorming resulted in three main concepts, board game, art installation and appropriation of place. After detailed analysis of the three we decided on the final concept of a social board game.

### Objectives and design question

By asking the question 'How might we create a playful interaction that encourages people to explore their surroundings through appropriation of common everyday objects? as guidance, we started the design process. Our main objectives during the project were to add new meaning or feeling to ordinary objects and contexts, change the everyday expectations of an object or a context. Other objectives were to create relationships which challenge or play with reality, explore our surroundings, and finally add humor - it should be fun.

### Iterative design process

After creating player stories, following the framework of MDA by Hunicke, we created our first low-fi prototype and started play testing. (Hunicke, 2004). We carried out an iterative design process based on "Test, analyze, refine. And repeat" as Zimmerman defines it. (Fullerton, p.16). As he further explains the iterative design process means play testing, thus our design process consisted of several play testing sessions. With each session we set a specific goal, then analyzed the outcome and refined the prototype based on the players' feedback. Since "an iterative process design decisions are based on the experience of the prototype in progress" we slightly modified the prototype after each session thus shaping our concept. (Fullerton, 2014, p.16). Several final details such as using blindfold on the critic, use of a single

object, time limit, are the result of our iteration and based on the feedback of the players and the analysis of the video recordings. Our next steps in the process are creating a playable high-fidelity prototype and playtest it. We also need to refine the equipment of the game, such as the cards, the drawing boards, tokens, spinner and the package itself.

## CONCLUSION

With this project our goal was to create a playful interaction that urges people to explore their environment. Through a play centric iterative design process, through frequent iterations we designed a social board game. With Complete me we attempted to encourage people to explore their surroundings through playful interaction. The game invites players to appropriate everyday objects by using them to complete improvised drawings and create peculiar compositions. The game borrows elements from the arts such as improvisation which is performed in a playful context.

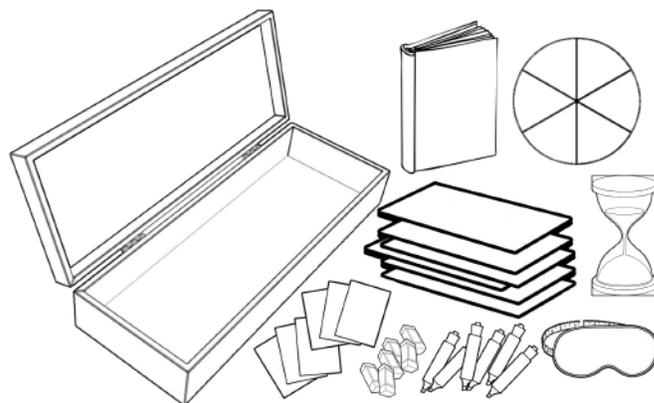


Figure 5 Sketch of board game prototype



Figures 6-14 Player stories, play-testings and outcomes

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