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Let's Play! An Antidote to Solitary, Serious, Unsurprising Fieldwork

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We are still developing and optimizing this protocol

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Abstract

A component of ethnographic fieldwork consists in noticing empirical phenomena through a range of documentary and sensorial modalities. What gets noticed, and the manner of its documentation, is the result not only of what is available to the fieldworker occupying a particular positionality in the field, but of choices made about what counts as notice-worthy and what documentary forms best translate empirical phenomena into evidence. As a primarily individual enterprise, ethnographic fieldworkers forgo the benefits of collaboration that is a feature of work at other levels of disciplinary engagement. For example, anthropologists are very likely to discuss the results of their analysis in journals or at conferences, but far less likely to seek dialogue on the choices they are making while in the field itself. Enabling such dialogues allows ethnographers to reflexively attend to their practices of noticing, and helps to unsettle the field of notice-worthy phenomena at the time of research. As a set of instructions for collaborative fieldwork, where participants help shape each other's actions and engagements with/in the field, this protocol is structured as an iterative game capable of being played by fieldworkers spread out around the world. In being collaborative & playful, this game fosters intimate relations that operate during our otherwise often lonely & solitary fieldwork experiences. In the game, a set of specific and limited fieldwork instructions circulates amongst players. In the spaces for provocation and discussion which are opened up between fieldworkers as a result of these circulations, the protocol allows ethnographers to attend to the formation of their empirical habits in situ, to make explicit the means by which their habits of noticing give way to evidentiary data, and to nurture shared relations between ethnographers.



Materials

This is less a materials needed page and more a materials provided section. See below three appendices of research questions, instruction prompts, and interview questions that we used in our own iteration of the game, for you to draw on and play with in turn.

Appendix I – Sample instructions for the first round of play:

- If the fieldsite is full of activity, think of how you might convey the energy of this moment with a picture, a poem, a sketch, a sound recording, a video ... pick one and try this exercise of translation in situ. Do this without referring to your form of activity literally or by name. What remains?
- If a fieldsite is empty of activity, find a trace. What is it a trace of, what is the trace's materiality, ephemerality? What does the trace reference, why is the referent no longer in situ?
- What histories can you unpack in this site? Find something that might point to a past or future. Describe it. What gives this thing a temporality? What structures have shaped it, what can't you see?
- Turn south and tell us what you see; turn north and take a photo; Are you inspired by the directions which orient you in your space? Tell us more.
- When you leave the site, what does it feel like to go? Is the going clear?
- What does it feel like to be in the site? Are you uncomfortable, happy, lonely?
- Who is one subject in your field-site that you instinctively regard as irrelevant, unimportant, or out-of-place?

Appendix II - Tinkering with the Prompts

Instructions as they went from Nick to Jean, from Manitoba to Singapore;

- Play leaves traces. Perhaps a fragment of chalk or a repurposed stick, an abandoned ball, or the imprint of a foot in motion. Do you see any? Find something to take with you.
- When prioritized, previous instances of play can propagate an affective quality to play in the present moment. A rivalry, a championship, a bruised ego., a legacy of community solidarity. Are there histories carried forward through play in ways that are evident in your site? Tell/show us more.
- Turn south and tell us what you see; turn north and take a photo; Are you inspired by the directions which orient you in your playful space? Look up and look down?
- What textures of sky, earth, ceiling, or floor, ball, or uniform characterize your place of play, can you present these to us with a photograph, a rubbing, or a description?
- Is there a sense (hearing, touch etc.), or feeling (cold, speed, danger etc.) that matters most to your site of play?
- What physical or organizational infrastructures surround/facilitate your site of play? Or does play punch through organizational impositions? Can you sense this tension between rules and their breaking? Where is the limit of play and how is it identified (e.g. signage, yelling, whistles from referees)? Or is play limitless?
- When you leave the site, what does it feel like to go? Is going clear? What is it like to come down from play?

Instructions as they went from Jean to Kassandra, from Singapore to Cape Breton;

- Take an object with you, and bring it to a site to 'play'. Broadly construed as you see fit. A tobogan to a hill on a snowy day, a bike to a pike, a board game to a friend's house, a memory to a play site.

Or:



- **Recompose Play:** Take a camera, or a friend, or both on a walk. Take a series of 'playful' photos, however construed, recompose objects or scenes, and tell us why you compose the scenes the way you do.

Questions to Consider

- How is the site constituted? What are the different elements constituting the field site? Are there contestations between these elements?
- Are there unidentifiable elements, connections, or unacknowledged circumstances that hang over this place? Are there emotions, time limits, particular personalities, previous conversation or histories shaping the contours of the site and changing its dynamic?
- Is there a preferable time, event, or circumstance around which play is organized? Are there unspoken rules? At which point does play begin or end? Is there a point you recognize as being particularly playful? When spontaneity took over?
- Can you identify an outcome of play? Did the outcome meet the expectation you had before you began? What does 'playfulness' mean at your site?

Instructions as they went from Kassandra to Noha, from Cape Breton to Cairo;

- Collect a series of elements from your site, all of which have some common thread or means of relation, and transform the sum of its parts into something new. Recombine, bricolage, or constellate the elements into something else. Describe the act of collecting, what draws you to these elements, what relates them, what differentiates them? How do you order them? What possibilities can you create? What are the limitations to your creations?

OR

- From the collection of rules listed below, use elements from several and recombine them into a new rule to follow.

Rules:

1. Take an object with you and bring it to a site to 'play'. Broadly construed as you see fit. A tobogan to a hill on an a snowy day, a bike to a pike, a board game to a friend's house, a memory to a play site.
2. Turn south and tell us what you see; turn north and take a photo; Are you inspired by the directions which orient you in your playful space? tell us more.
3. Is play ongoing where you are now? How might you convey the energy of this playful moment with a picture, a poem, a sketch, a sound recording, a video ... pick one and try this exercise of translation in situ. Do this without referring to your form of play literally or by name. What remains?
4. Take a camera, or a friend, or both on a walk. Take a series of 'playful photos, however construed, recompose objects or scenes, and tell us why you compose the scenes the way you do.
5. Collect a series of elements from your site, all of which have some common thread or means of relation, and transform the sum of its parts into something new. Recombine, bricolage, or constellate the elements into something else. Describe the act of collecting, what draws you to these elements, what relates them, what differentiates them? How do you order them? What possibilities can you create? What are the limitations to your creations?

Appendix III - Player Interview Questions

Formal/Practical questions:

- What did you chose as your play site and why?
- What were the "instructions" you we given? Do you have any idea how/why your instructions were modified before being passed on to you?
- How did you modify your instructions?
- Was it helpful to be constrained by our "rules" of the game?



- If there's a round 2, how would you do this differently?
- As a current ethnographer and current/future teacher, what aspects of this experience and its mode of sharing/presentation would you take as teaching resources?
- Did you encounter any feelings of guilt, uncertainty, or loss during these exercises?

Related to chosen site/experience:

- Tell me about your chosen play site?
- Was the site a site of play or did play just happen there?
- Did you have an "ethnographic" moment planned or did it just happen and became something you took stock of after the fact?
- Could you take the theme of play & engage with it at other sites?
- What drew you to the objects you picked up and sent along?
- After this project, how would you go about defining play? Has it changed from when you started this project?
- Do you find play like ethnography? How so?

Before start

Our guiding principles to playful ethnography;

1. Playful ethnography understands play as a modality of action that responds to the contingency of the world (and fieldwork) through "a readiness to improvise in the face of an ever-changing world that admits of no transcendently ordered account" (**Malaby 2009:206**).
2. Playful ethnography facilitates collaboration across space and distance. A critical goal of our collaboration is to build a support system between researchers through which they can address ethical, practical, and methodological concerns in the field. This support system is also a means of engaging in deeper analysis while in the field, "as a concrete mode of action" (**Ballesterio and Winthereik 2021:1**).
3. Playful ethnography interrogates and/or supplements the basic assumptions or tenets of ethnography. For example, how/why are we always alone as ethnographers? How do we think through and share moments of embarrassment, failure, errantry, and uncertainty during fieldwork? What kinds of conversations, bonds, and networks with other researchers/ethnographers can we nurture during fieldwork? How can we sustain these bonds despite space & time differences?
4. Playful ethnography generates fieldnotes that are shared and built upon. This is a fundamental premise of our collaboration insofar as shared fieldnotes are critical to the generative nature of the next set of instructions and the next round of play. Our understanding of fieldnotes here include scribbles, failures, struck-throughs, and what we describe as 'shadow notes'. Here, we draw attention to the supplementary nature of 'shadow notes', where each iteration of shared fieldnotes becomes a 'living' document through scribbles at the margins in the form of memories, comments, added media, etc. What gets deleted or added to the shadow notes is integral to the delineation of our field 'site' - if our research outcomes, along with the data we generate and parse, is a consequence of uncredited 'shadow notes', our collaboration draws attention to the often unacknowledged mechanisms through which research sites and outcomes materialize.
5. Playful ethnography reflects on & sustains the shared social terrain through which our ideas for this project transpired. This project largely grew out of a desire to nurture meaningful connections with other researchers & like-minded individuals, especially after the isolation of COVID-19. These connections became one of the foundations of our protocols, which are largely nurtured through the playful nature of this collaboration. As such, we regard playfulness, collaboration, and the desire for connection as key to the design & implementation of this project.

Broken Telephone

- 1 Draft a “Call to fieldwork” & circulate it in your trusted circles of researchers & ethnographers (on Threads, Instagram, listservs)
- 2 Assemble your players; 3-5 researchers engaging in fieldwork.
- 3 Meet over whatever platform is most suitable, zoom, teams, discord, etc.
- 4 Unmute.
- 5 Open a shared document.
- 6 Brainstorm an initial set of instructions or use those supplied in Appendix I.
- 6.1 These instructions should help the players enter their field site and engage with it sensorially and critically. These are prompts at the observational level, and as such should be transferable across sites. Their purpose is to allow players to approach their fieldsite in new ways with intention and structure. They should also be fun, inviting, and capacious enough to fit your diverse themes and settings. They may disrupt the normal order of things in the site, but they should be sensitive about causing others to be bad guests.
- 7 Assign the order of play, who goes first and who is next?
- 8 The first player must then go into the field with the initial set of instructions and carry them out.
- 8.1 Each participant is free to choose/follow any of the shared instructions at any time, even if it is not their turn.
- 9 The first player, and each player thereafter, must take something with them from the fieldsite to send along to the next player. This can be anything that you think would inspire, invite, or push the next player to embark to the field in new ways. It might be a material object found in situ, it might be a sound clip, a video, a memory, a poem inspired by the site etc.



- 10 The player must then make field notes and summary thoughts/analysis as per the instructions after their outing, which they share on a collaborative platform. Unlike conventional and personal fieldnotes, these shared notes preferably involve photographs, audio clips, memories, challenges, and any “irreverent” feelings that might have arisen during fieldwork.
- 11 The player must then adapt/tinker with the instructions they used to make them new and send them along to the next player along with the object.
 - 11.1 The player must also include a description/rationale for including their object.
 - 11.2 Each player has a pre-determined amount of time to follow their instructions, adapt them and send them on, along with their object. See Appendix II for how we made and remade our instructions.
- 12 Once the first round is done, organize a general debriefing meeting to share thoughts, feelings, and plan for the round to follow.
 - 12.1 If possible, debrief over snacks, a meal, coffee, or dessert.
- 13 In pairs, schedule casual “interviews” to debrief and reflect more closely on each of your respective experiences. Record these interviews and share them among the rest of your group. See Appendix II for sample questions.
 - 13.1 These interviews are a chance to create deeper relationships with your collaborators/interlocutors, to reflect intimately on your fieldwork as a shared discourse, and to interrogate shared and individual fieldwork experiences.
- 14 Because fieldwork (and everything in life, really) always needs recess, reconvene after a few weeks/months for a round #2 of shared fieldwork. Develop a new/refined set of instructions, change the order of your participants, and follow the same plan as round #1.

Reading Groups - Creating Connections Between the Players

- 15 Working with your already assembled players, schedule another meeting to choose a common research interest that you are all keen to dig into collaboratively. These meetings will occur alongside your fieldwork endeavours. They are essential for fostering more intimate relations with your collaborators, and they also invite opportunities to collaboratively reflect on and analyze your area of study in surprising ways.
- 16 Meet over whatever platform is most suitable, zoom, teams, discord, etc.
- 17 Unmute.



- 18 During your first meeting, get to know each other; what is everyone studying, where are they in the world, what scares them about fieldwork, who have they met so far in the field, etc.
- 19 Open a shared document, brainstorm your common research interest.
- 19.1 This could be a field of study, like infrastructure, religion, labour, etc. or a method, like walking methods, mapping, multi-sited ethnography etc. or a concept, like porosities, trailing, recursion etc. but try to ensure that what you land on is broad enough to sustain and include all players interests.
- 19.2 Don't afraid to axe the subjects that don't light up your interest. This is an idea/object of investigation you will be thinking about for a while, make sure it's something everyone is excited to return to, month after month.
- 20 Now brainstorm a literature around your shared research interest.
- 20.1 These are readings you will read and discuss once a month. You will add to this literature throughout the game, but you must begin with at least two readings to assigned for your next meeting.
- 21 Decide a future meeting time, one that you can return to every month, Friday mornings, Monday afternoons, etc. a set time will make it easier to remember and carve out the time in your schedule.
- 22

Monthly Meetings

- 23 Meet over whatever platform is most suitable, zoom, teams, discord, etc.
- 24 Unmute.
- 25 Begin with a debrief, where every player checks in; how are they finding fieldwork, what's difficult, what's fun, what's frustrating?
- 25.1 This should take up a large chunk of the meeting, it's a time to vent.



- 26 1. Discuss the articles; what drew everyone in, what put them off, what is one aspect of the readings you can see relating to your fieldsite.
- 27 Choose the next meeting's articles.
- 28 Repeat.

Interluding Game - Never Have I Ever

- 29 Write three confessions, confessions related to fieldwork or simply to work in your chosen discipline (be it singular or many). Preface each of these confessions with the saying 'never have I ever' at once admitting to while also denying these actions, thereby creating a space where you can both confess without going on the record. See Appendix III for examples.
- 29.1 Someone must make the choice to send out this prompt, it cannot be planned, it is an opportunity for vulnerability and as such is unpredictable.
- 30 Circulate these confessions with the other players silently, don't let the other players know they've all been sent the same prompt.
- 31 Request each player either match a confession to one of yours, or create a new confession category, which they must then post on your shared field note board.
- 32 These confessions don't have to go anywhere, you never have to discuss them amongst yourselves again, but do ask that everyone reads everyone else's. The purpose is to come to know, through sharing, that we are all imperfect ethnographers, imperfect in different ways, and those moments of strife, guilt, and shame happen to us all. Share and move on.

Protocol references

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