The Default: The Paradox of Play and Productivity

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The Default.

The Paradox of Play and Productivity

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An odd start to the acknowledgements, but I will begin with a remark about the Coronavirus pandemic that dragged on throughout the development of the thesis. The experience has been strange at best, and I would therefore like to give a big cheer to the MFA class of 2021 for our success through these odd times.

It goes without saying, but I would like to express my gratitude to our MFA Department for all the support. Thank you, Rab McClure, for your endless enthusiasm about my work. Special thanks to Giovanni Innella for helping build the foundation of this thesis. Additionally, I would like to thank VCU faculty and staff who provided support and care throughout the process.

I would like to give a special shout-out to my committee members – Marco Bruno, Michael Hersrud, and Michael Wirtz. Thank you for helping make sense of the absurdity.

Huge thanks to the loves of my life – my family. Thank you for the days and nights I “tortured your brains,” forcing you to think with me.

I would like to finish off by saying that this thesis is indebted to all the adults I have come across. It is dedicated to you.
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Society takes a dim view of idleness, regarding downtime as wasted time, but what if society’s view is wrong? This thesis champions daydreaming; it advocates for quirky, playful experiences that improve quality-of-life by avoiding burnout and mitigating tedium. Borrowing language from the Theatre of the Absurd, The Default challenges society’s attitudes toward productivity, striking a new relationship between a cubicle worker and a set of seemingly-familiar but surprising objects. Reflecting on the absurdity of contemporary work-life imbalance, the objects and narratives depicted in The Default invite playful interactions, when objects that appear to be normal behave unexpectedly. The Default is presented as a narrative video, mapped and projected onto real versions of the space and objects depicted in the video, playing with the boundaries between what is real and what is imaginary, triggering reflection on how we spend our time, and how we interact with the objects in our lives.
INTRODUCTION.

What does a day look like for an average adult? Often, it involves a to-do list for a productive day. Modern society is obsessed with work, or rather producing work at high levels of productivity. Oddly, this obsession reflects more than ever in the challenging times of COVID-19.
The virus has relocated many of us to work from home, which has blurred the boundary between work and home. While time commuting has been removed, this time has been replaced and comparatively extended to longer working hours. The blurred boundaries, paired with the inherently embedded importance of productivity, suffocate people who continuously try and be more productive throughout the day. Even amidst COVID-19, we are urged to hustle more. As a result, people have recognized the need for new guidelines in these circumstances. This recognition has stimulated the conversation on better work-life balance. Concurrently, discussions on the 4-day work week are resurfacing, following the successful implementation of the structure in a business in New Zealand.

The period of COVID-19 has and will continue to be a series of experiments. Nonetheless, this novel experience shows us the possibility for a recalibrated lifestyle through a changed idea of workspace. In the research conducted by McKinsey & Company, it was reported that 80% enjoyed working from home and 41% said they were more productive, while 28% said they were equally productive. The efficiency of working from home shows us that organizations can function with fewer locational constraints in the future, along with reduced real-estate costs. The virus has jump-started several experiments on how to go forward with work and productivity. If we truly want to partake in the conversation of work-life balance and value more control over lifestyle, this is a conversation to be having now. We need to rethink how we value productivity.
Contrary to the perception that millennials are lazy and distracted by social media, statistics have shown that net productivity has risen by 69.6% over the last 40 years, while hourly pay has stagnated at an increase of 11.6%.\footnote{7,8}

We are preoccupied by “doing more, striving for more, offering more and doing it all faster.”\footnote{9} This thought process naturally leads to feeling guilty if we spend time for ourselves or for pure pleasure. This is possibly because of this painful explanation: “we live in a political and social climate where our sense of self-worth is often reduced to our productivity.”\footnote{10} In this moment though, the pandemic has made apparent to us that we must rethink how we value ourselves, and further, “re-examine our metric for measuring the worth of human lives.”\footnote{11}

Re-examining our perception of productivity in this fast-paced living environment is important because it has led to the phenomenon called the “millennial burnout,” coined by culture writer Anne Helen Peterson, and otherwise described as the “burnout society” by philosopher Byung Chul Han. In different forms of writing, both authors discuss the fast-paced society that leads people to experience burnout. Millennial burnout reflects our warped experience of fulfillment where, “everything that’s good is bad, everything that’s bad is good.”\footnote{12,13} It describes the modern experience of how things that should feel good, like leisure and not working, feel bad because we are guilty of not working. In contrast, things that should feel bad like working all day, start to feel good because of the perceived importance of being productive. Han points out how we must return to a contemplative life, amidst this hyperactive life, in order to return meaning to the productive lives we live. He emphasizes the act of lingering as essential to overcome this temporal crisis.\footnote{14}
In line with this philosophical thought, my work explores the lack of play time and idleness in adults. Though play is proven to be beneficial for our cognitive skills, adults often fall into the mistake of overvaluing productivity over play. Paradoxically, this contributes to the lack of idleness in the life of adults. My intention through this project, *The Default*, is to explore this paradox between the need to play and the urgency to work.

This thesis rethinks the perception of idleness, in a way that does not stigmatize the time spent not working. The intent of the project is to raise awareness on the impact of play on our quality of life. The outcome of this play aims to get the audience to pause and rethink our relationship between time and productivity. Specifically, play should be seen as something that should be naturally embedded in our lives – just like sleeping, eating, and working. Borrowing languages from the *Theatre of the Absurd*, my work ultimately questions our society’s dogmas and stigmas, while stirring a new relationship between the user and the strangely familiar objects. In dealing with the absurdities of our work-life cycles, I design a narrative of objects that put a twist on everyday objects so as to provoke thought through unexpected play.
My thesis is an attempt to re-explore human relationship with time. This is a timely discussion, as the current circumstances of this absurd coronavirus pandemic show a shift in productivity. Momentum of production is changing to consider the degrowth movement: “working less, buying less, and making less.” Consumers increased interest in conscious purchasing paired with the economic decline results in consumers that are interested in buying less, but of better quality. This movement expands into thoughts about implementing shorter work hours, and ultimately, to reconsider productivity.

Although the issues caused by the coronavirus pandemic will eventually fade, the way we deal with productivity and leisure still needs to be addressed. As employees and employers are beginning to realize, more jobs will likely be replaced by artificial intelligence (AI). It is therefore becoming increasingly true that the most valuable human input will be ingenuity and inventive thought. This acknowledgement of free time is increasingly important as many anticipate that people will have more free time with the development of AI, which will result in more leisure and less labor. Some even anticipate that people just wouldn’t know what to do with the free time that we have.
From a multitude of future anticipations and as a reflection on the present, it is important that we distance ourselves from our addiction to productivity, in order to contemplate a new future. Although this thesis research draws from the fields of neurology, philosophy, and sociology – it is an exploration in design and not intended to inform those fields specifically.
In alignment with the high levels of productivity expected by adults at work, there is also a rising “kidult” industry. It’s valued at $450 million a year and constitutes 11% of toy purchases. These numbers show the shift in the toy paradigm to see adults as toy consumers. But we are faced with a paradox where adult interest in toys has risen, while the association of toys continues to be limited to children. Even the term coined for the phenomenon, the “kidult,” is defined as “an adult who likes doing or buying things that are usually thought more suitable for children.” The kidult is burdened by the stigma that exists around adults at play or adults playing with toys. This is relevant in that many societies expect play to be left behind as one grows up. In contrast, the kind of play that is often accepted for adults are goal-oriented activities, like sports. Adults are constrained most from activities without a specified goal. This expectation may be the embodiment of theories like that of Max Weber’s analysis of the ‘protestant ethic,’ which criticizes enjoyment as a waste and work as the Summum Bonum. As a result, friction exists where adults desire play in a world that values work.
In the context of play, we must reexamine the work conditions of the modern world and the obsession over productivity. The literature on humans at work suggests a reevaluation of productivity for the quality of human life. British philosopher, Bertrand Russell delineates the emphasis on the “virtuousness of work” as harmful and conceives opportunity in the organized diminution of work. Russell describes the importance in balance and describes our current cycle of work to think “too much of production and too little of consumption.” Philosophers and social critics strongly condemn modern society’s fleeting quality due to our emphasis on productivity. Günter Anders describes this emphasis on performance as a means to “mechanize human existence,” where Hannah Arendt says it degrades human beings to “animal laborans.” Byung-Chul Han proposes a solution to this temporal crisis through the revitalization of contemplation and the art of lingering. The fleeting and instantaneous reality does not allow humans to feel fulfilled. Russell furthers this comment to talk about how pleasures of modern society have become passive. Instead of taking an active part of the things that bring joy, our energies are driven out by the time of work.

If someone is asked what the best part of their life is, they are not likely to say: “I enjoy manual work because it makes me feel that I am fulfilling man’s noblest task...” Literature on leisure often describes people finding happiness through forms of play and times of leisure, and this in itself is a valuable argument to prove its importance. However, most discussions on play also recognize the secondary importance society puts on play and often turn to use evidence from science. Science has shown that play is not only an important component of human life, but is a developmental factor in many different animals. Research in non-human play behavior has shown that play has motor benefits, social benefits, and provides training for the unexpected. Even within the animal kingdom, play-deficient rats were found to develop deficiencies in their pre-frontal cortex, which diminished their problem solving abilities. Multiple studies in primates have linked play to influence behavior and decision making. In one, a positive association was found between the amount of play and the size of the cortico-cerebellar system. The cortico cerebellar system is a neural system known to influence cognition and behavior, and therefore this finding supports that play functions to aid the development of cognitive and behavioral abilities. Another found that nonsocial play associated with a greater frequency of tool use and social play associated with a higher frequency of tactical deception. The experiment found that play influences the adaptive ability in behavioral development. In humans, play promotes pre-frontal cortex development and stimulates neural growth in the amygdala of humans. These parts of the brain influence decision making and cognition, as well as emotional maturity.
Lynn Barnett, a Professor of Recreation, explains that playful adults feel the same stress but will experience and react differently in ways to make stress more manageable. To put play into perspective, Dr. Gordon Neufeld, a developmental psychologist, describes play as “the only form of activated rest that’s available to us.” Multiple literatures on play also mention that physical anthropologists characterize humans with the term neoteny, which is defined as the retention of play and juvenile traits in adults. This trait is what makes humans not only the most intrinsically playful creatures, but also the most adaptable creatures. Playful attitudes also come off as more friendly, so playful people are felt as safe to be around. This trait is exactly what has also proven to increase productivity. Play has the ability to stimulate creativity, openness to change, and, therefore, our ability to learn. This creates a paradox between play and productivity, as in contrast to common belief, if one really did value productivity, one would need to play in order to increase the ability to be productive.

Play is generally understood as an experience that especially relates to children, where time is spent doing an activity that is enjoyable and/or entertaining. It refers to activity, but also the absence of serious or harmful intent. Literature on adults at play remove the child as part of their definition and further explains that there are multiple types of play, including but not limited to, locomotor play, object play, and social play. Psychiatrist Stuart Brown says, compared to children, it is harder to spot play in adults because play is often as unique to an adult as their fingerprint. Most literature on the subject reaches a general consensus that the main function of play is the act of doing it and is, therefore, more important than the outcome of it. Researcher Dr. Peter Gray emphasizes that play is defined as “self-controlled and self-directed.” Play is desirable because play offers engagement that provides a pleasurable experience, intended to take you out of time and space. Pure play is something that is intrinsically motivated. The act of doing it, is more important than its outcome and therefore need not, or should not, have intention or purpose.
Further, our brains need a balance of purpose and lack of purpose. MD Srini Pillay explains that our brains are wired for focus and “unfocus” to work together. When one enters the “unfocus” state of mind, the Default-mode Network (DMN) in the brain is activated. This state is triggered when we enter daydream mode and drift off into thought. In 1970, neuroscientists found that our “unfocus” mode of the brain is found to carry heavy amounts of mental neural activity, consuming 20% of the body’s energy while at rest. Though the “unfocus” mode is mostly eradicated by the saturated digital era, the mental neural activity explains why we get good ideas at unfocused, random moments in our lives - like in the shower. When you turn the focus brain off, the DMN will trigger the brain to retrieve memories and link ideas, which highly aids creativity. To borrow the words of former Vice President of Twitter Bruce Daisley, “productivity is focus, creativity is unfocus.”

It is valuable to recognize that literature directed to adults at play is limited. However, if anything, this lack of discussion makes the conversation ever the more important. Play reconsiders the quality of life that has been challenged by our productive world. Nevertheless, play functions as a mode to change our passive approach to the time that we have available. It is seen as essential a part of our well-being as sleeping and eating.
The theatre of the absurd is the fundamental precedent to this thesis. Partly as a response to the detriments of WWII, the theatre of the absurd was developed to explore the importance of contemplating meaning and purpose. Absurd as defined by Martin Esslin is something that is devoid of purpose, or goal, or objective.

This rationale also dictated the structure of the plays, where the plays removed most understood structures and logic of traditional theatre. The plays were not concerned with a conventional dramatic plot, but rather expressed frantic and busy characters that underscored the fact that nothing could dramatically change their existence. An essential theme of absurdist plays is their expression of a distrust in language. Language is seen as insufficient—where words are a superficial exchange that fail to express the “essence of human experience.” Reflecting the dislocated logic of the plot, language is broken down in ways that ridicule conventionalized speech.

The Bald Soprano, seen in figure 1, is an Absurdist play where the characters sit and talk. The characters continue to repeat obvious information until it sounds like nonsense as it deteriorates into babbling. This ridiculous and purposeless behavior gives it a comic quality with an underlying message for metaphysical distress. The play expresses what happens when existence lacks a sense of meaning and purpose.

Absurdist plays subvert logic because they present rationalist thought as superficially limited and the irrational as opening a glimpse to the infinite. They present the unexpected as an opening to freedom. The theatre of the absurd is a movement that broke conventions because it was most concerned with the human condition over anything else.
The Memphis Group was a collaboration between designers and artists that reacted against the conformist approach of the time that focused on minimalism. Objects of the time were designed to be functional and not decorative; the Memphis Group saw this as “devoid of personality and individualism.” The new language they developed was a mixture of bright colors and utilizing the absurd and irrational shapes to create everyday objects in an unusual manner. Overall, the objects played a role in introducing the “pleasure of play into the rational language of industrial production.” The group wanted to reintroduce an emotional bond between the object and its users.

Figure 2-3 are images of the first collection of products they designed. It is notable that the design of the group was ridiculed at the time because it went against the status quo. Ironically though, it produced heavy crowds outside the gallery that was showcasing the work. The group also gained much press attention all over the world. The apparent mass appeal of the group’s work indicated that people were craving forms that were playful. This movement showed that people enjoyed objects that expand from their function.
In discussing the Memphis group, it is important to mention Studio Alchimia – recognized as a predecessor of Memphis design. Studio Alchimia’s manifesto says that the act of drawing is a fundamental value, and by “drawing,” it means to counter planned design and allow free expression of visual thought. The movement was motivated to furnish people’s homes with sentimental presence. In the works of figure 4-5, we see two-dimensional expressions translated into various forms. Their work is based on philosophical influence, where they believed humans live in a turbulent and therefore empty and uncertain state – that could not be solved through rational transformation, but only through poetical expression.

This precedent has value in its methodology to see objects as extending from their basic function and have a sentimental value.
The Uncomfortable is a collection of deliberately inconvenient everyday objects by Athens-based architect Katerina Kamprani. The designs in this collection tweak and extrapolate their lack of function. For example, the rainboots (Figure 7) are designed to have a gaping hole at the tip, which essentially lets all the rain in, instead of keeping rain out.

This set of designs show the discomfort people experience with objects that trigger a strange familiarity. As we experience the world, we also gain definitive conceptions of objects and their functions. This also often leads us into the trap of forgetting the value of objects. These designs are interesting because they are ‘anti-function’ and this reflects onto anti-productivity. This idea of exploring productivity is an important concept in the realms of a production abundant society.
Installation

Precedent 4. Marni Playland by Marni

Marni’s Playland installation is filled with objects that reinterpret traditional play objects. The interactive installation consists of furniture and interactive play objects. The designs are inspired as abstractions of traditional playgrounds and outdoor games, including basketball hoops, swings, and ring toss toys. This traditional play equipment has been reimaged by embracing the beautiful craft of traditional weaving.

In using the craft of weaving, the experience of the traditional playground is transformed. The use of a time-consuming production method implies a level of preciousness of the objects, which further suggests a lasting relationship with these objects of play. Further, this beautiful interpretation of normally very generically represented playground almost simulates a new playground for adults. In addition, the variance of scale of objects commonly known to be a different size triggers a new relationship for the user. By implementing these colorful and playful approaches onto furniture, it repurposes play into our everyday lives. These objects are suggestive of a scenario where we could fill our homes full of playful objects.
When Objects Dream is an exhibition designed by the Design Students of ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne. The intention of this exhibition was to get people to rethink our fear of change. To do this, the exhibition uses virtual and augmented reality to question the perspective of familiar objects. The work immerses the audience in order to learn the personality of each object. As an example, in order to see the virtual reality show of the lamp's story, the installation suggests the audience put their head into the lamp. Hence, you are both physically and visually able to experience the insides of the lamp. This engages the viewer in a novel manner as compared to the habitual interaction we may have with everyday objects.

The exhibition breathes life into everyday objects to trigger a possibly unsettling experience. This exhibition is not only significant in its playful interactions with the objects, but also in its ability to immerse viewers in curious and thought-triggering play.
INVESTIGATION.

Methodology.

The investigation in this thesis is reflective of my practice as a designer that mixes pragmatism with absurdity. The inspiration for this design methodology is the theatre of the absurd, and this lens is used to build a strangely familiar relationship between the viewer and the design.

To understand the process of this investigation, it is important to mention that juxtaposition is highly manipulated as a strategic device as part of the methodology. Juxtaposition in this framework is used to create dualities that create an unexpected experience, ultimately provoking absurdism, and therefore, the state of play. The work plays on the juxtaposition of form and function to create an element of absurdity. As an overall effect, juxtaposition in this framework is used to highlight contrast. Juxtaposition is an important aspect of this thesis, as it is intrinsic to provoking play.
The exploration of play started with research. At first, I exploratively utilized the search bar with terms correlating to toys, play, and adults. In this search, I looked at both designed objects and written thoughts of other practicing designers, individuals, and writers. It was important to analyze the current market and get an idea of what toys existed and what did not. This analysis was fundamental to understand the best ways for my thesis to contribute in ways that can expand the present-day story of toys.

My approach to selecting information or research was pragmatic in breadth, and a bit more intuitive in depth. I chose to look at objects that were at first logically relevant and I narrowed these down to ones that were intuitively intriguing. This phase of research was selectively collected into a process exhibition seen in figure 12-13.

The research was organized into a grid format with the rows sectioned research and progress, as well as the columns sectioned material, toy, and play. To explain, I had an input and output system, where input was research and output was progress. Information under research was found and information under progress was my experimentation around the found research. Essentially, in this phase I explored research material and following design outcomes around the three elements of materiality, type of toys, and the idea of play.
Table 1 shows the most relevant findings or outcomes from each phase:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research (Input)</th>
<th>Progress (Output)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Materials</strong></td>
<td>Inspired by the fluid art look of the materials and the mark-making toys in the input phase, my explorations look at the feasibility of molding, sculpting, or giving a shape to experimental material, with the results in figure 14.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexpected materiality can make the audience question convention. As an example, this includes materials that are juxtaposed to look squishy, but are solid in tactility, and vice versa, detailed. (figure 13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From research of diverse toys, I ended up gaining an interest in drawing toys. I found that creative practices like drawing and scribbling can stimulate a poetic direction when embedded in the designed outcome. Using mark-making in play means it leaves traces of play in the world.</td>
<td>From research, I understood that children play with objects to understand the world. Consequently, I thought that to get adults to play, the objects need to break how we understand the world. Therefore, a selection of everyday objects is re-designed (figure 15-17), with a twist on materiality. Further, if you look at figure 18 it is a flat version of the box packaging shown in this grid section of figure 12. The idea is that these boxes act as the packaging of my thesis, then called pladult but now called the default.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Toys</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From research of diverse toys, I ended up gaining an interest in drawing toys. I found that creative practices like drawing and scribbling can stimulate a poetic direction when embedded in the designed outcome. Using mark-making in play means it leaves traces of play in the world.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a part of research of play behavior, I asked some adults to play with some given objects. This rendered that adults naturally would not automatically be triggered to play with the objects. However, I also observed that when any object would be displaced, like if the ball would roll off the table, they would organize it back to place.</td>
<td>As a result of research and observation, my final definition of play was found: Something that is intrinsically motivated where the act of doing it is more important than its outcome; and therefore need not, or should not have intention or purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Play</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a part of research of play behavior, I asked some adults to play with some given objects. This rendered that adults naturally would not automatically be triggered to play with the objects. However, I also observed that when any object would be displaced, like if the ball would roll off the table, they would organize it back to place.</td>
<td>Formally contrastive relationships were intriguing because it is reflective of the juxtaposition that the work was intending to make between play and productivity. In this first phase, it became clear that design objects could be made that would leave marks and/or stimulate unexpected interactions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Research Outcome Summary
Pladult is the working title at this point of the investigation

“we can overcome this temporal crisis only by revitalizing the vita contemplativa and relearn the art of lingering.”

Pladult.

thinking on pure play.

Pladult.

empty box of your fingerprint.

Pladult.

play and playability.

“Play in adults is unique to an individual as a fingerprint.”

“We’ve all been warned that in the future — when machine learning and artificial intelligence perform the profoundly, routine aspects of our work — our most valuable contribution will be ingenuity and inventive guile.”

Figure 18 Deducing relevant researched theories into designed packaging.
To evolve beyond my derivatives, I needed to brainstorm the design approach. I derived three directions from Phase 1. The first approach was to create objects that could trigger creativity in adults. The second was to break known beliefs on objects we knew. The third approach was to design a system that was detached to anything existing but could formulate play and mark-making.

In this phase I explored the designed outcomes of each direction. I soon learned that the first and third approach rendered results too similar to other commercial toys. In retrospect, it became clear that objects designed should have an underlying message, for my thesis to change and augment adult’s relationship with play. The intent of the thesis was to trigger contemplation on our relationship to play.

This pushed the direction of the thesis to the second direction, which was toward triggering contemplation about breaking known beliefs about objects we are familiar with. However, to proceed with the design of the objects, I had to answer one entry question: How do I evolve beyond the derivates of the research with a concrete rationale for the objects chosen?

It came down to something that may have been obvious. It was to select objects related to productivity. With more critical evaluation, it made most sense to utilize workspace objects that we are most familiar with, such as the pencils, pencil holder, monitor, mouse, keyboard, notebook, and the clock, in figure 21 – figure 22. Familiarity was key to creating unfamiliarity, so I selected a series of objects that were mundane.

Phase 2: Ideation of Designed Objects

After deciding the main framework, the design decisions were playful pulls and pushes between how familiar and unfamiliar the objects were. The decisions were primarily based on visualization, as seen in comparing the draft pencil designs in figure 19 to the selected pencil designs in figure 20. I went through designing varying levels of distortion of the objects to come up with one that made most sense. By making sense, it had to be an object that would clearly resemble the object we are familiar with, while simultaneously twisted in a way that would change the usability. Imposing this method, defined in my document as juxtaposition, onto familiar objects led to a series of strangely familiar objects.
Phase 3: Objects and Perception

I went through a process whereby I designed 3D models on the virtual surface and then developed into physically creating these objects. Therefore, each object has a 3D rendered version and its physical counterpart. In this grid, the images on the left are virtual products and on the right are the physical objects.

During this journey I found an interesting correlation to the overarching theme of absurdity. When I began to create these objects, I found people were confused of which one was the virtual image or the physical object when observing the work through the screen. This ambiguity was getting people to ponder what is real and what is not. It mimicked the effect of the trompe l’œil, which is a term in painting used to describe representations on 2D surfaces that has high verisimilitude “as to deceive the viewer concerning the material reality of the object.”

This intriguing observation provided a reflection on the message of my thesis between play and productivity. As a result, playing with perception and physicality becomes a key method in this thesis. It triggered the question; how can I use visuals to stimulate real spaces to play with people’s perceptions?

Phase 4: Relevance of Narration

During the natural process of trying to communicate novel and unfamiliar functions of objects, the exploration led to using small clips of 3D animation to explain each object (figure 33). The renderings (figure 34) were originally only intended to be a means to visualizing the objects (figure 35), to produce the physical model.
However, the objects proved to be more intriguing with a story behind them to narrate the way they function. Consequently, what started as a utilitarian inspired communication method ended up having greater relevance in the presentation of the project.
Nevertheless, it was still important to help people understand that these objects were real. As a first attempt, in this specific phase, I projected the fully constructed 3D animation (figure 36) onto a workstation space where all the physical objects exist (figure 37). While playing around with projection, I realized that there was a value to having users be able to interact with the space and the narration.
Reflecting upon this experience, I wanted a more precise method for projecting over objects. Compiling these observations, with discussions and research, the technique that seemed most suitable was projection mapping. Projection mapping is a technique used for spatial augmented reality, where light is calculated to be projected to overlay over irregular shapes instead of flat surfaces. Projection mapping allowed the actual objects to be present while having an animation projected over them. This technique was useful in helping viewers appreciate the spatial relevance of the physical objects, while experiencing the usage of objects in a simulated staged theatre atmosphere.

In this scenario, the representation of objects turns into a stage for the objects to be displayed, where the viewers sit and watch as they would a play. This cycles back to the theatre of the absurd, and instead of people, the objects act out a performance.
The outcome of The Default comprises a staged narrative and designed objects.
Regarding the narrative seen in these spreads, the main show of the exhibition is a staged theatre experience, where the audience enjoys the projected narrative. The script of the performance shows how the strangely familiar objects activate in the space. The narration starts off where the objects function in the conventional way, and as time passes on each object reveals their newly designed, quirky function.
Figure 42: Projection Mapping with Objects beginning to turn absurd.
This narrative is projected onto the still objects to illustrate movement. To be more explicit, movement of the mouse is projected onto the still mouse on the table, which creates warping when the movement happens between varying surfaces. This technique ensures that viewers can experience the objects as a part of the physical space. Through adding a sense of depth to the narrative, a connection can be formed between the viewer and the objects. This experience gives a sense of reality, while adding to a sense of absurdity, as the viewers experience various degrees of warping in the projection. This supports the theme of play, as the experience plays with the boundaries between the imagined and the real.
Figure 44 Highlighting each made object
Figure 45: Set Time for viewers to see the objects.
Each workstation object is designed to play with conventional knowledge of each object.

**Clock.** Reminiscent of the saying “time is fleeting,” the hands of the clock are transformed into a fan. In this version of a clock, the user initiates their own sense of time and embraces the way they use it.

**Monitor.** The monitor functions as a largely poetic object. The monitor is made of parts that can be pieced together in multiple ways. It can be pieced together to create a frame for play or otherwise be a balancing seesaw.
Keyboard. People have come to naturally expect that typing somewhere on the keyboard writes straight lines of text on the screen. This keyboard embraces the keyboard as it is physically. The keyboard in this design writes only exactly as the user initiates. It is a direct interaction, where the user lifts each key to print the desired word.

Mouse. Instead of being the mechanism to send a path to the computer monitor, the mouse takes control of its own path and leaves trails of marks where it moves.
**Pencil Holder.** The pencil holder is a trigger for play. When one finishes with their work and puts the pencils back into the pencil holder, depending on which hole the person puts the pencil back into, the person might experience a ball popping out of the pencil holder. This correlation triggers a sense of playful activity.

**Pencil.** There are three designed pencils, which are: a U Pencil, a Protractor Pencil, and a 45° pencil. Each of the pencils functions in different ways to subvert common methods of using the pencil. Usually pencils have two uses, where one side is an eraser and the other is the lead. In these pencils, it is all about embracing every mark made. The use of the pencils is thwarted in some way so to initiate a new way of writing with the pencil. For example, the U Pencil requires that either you write at the edge of the table or you bring the paper to the pencil.

**Sketchbook.** The sketchbook is a fully rotating design, which makes writing quite cumbersome. The lines of the paper also fall in squiggly directions near the end of the page in order to contrast with the whole purpose of making lines on a page.
Drawing the audience into a space that is familiar, but that functions in ways that are unfamiliar, causes a sense of discomfort. Absurdism triggers a sense of discomfort that then triggers the questioning of one’s deeply held beliefs. In utilizing the storytelling techniques of the theatre of the absurd, the projected narrative achieves cognitive dissonance – the “mental conflict that occurs when a person’s behaviors and beliefs do not align”. This cognitive dissonance provokes a sense of discomfort. This experience is important not only as a mechanism to break people’s misconceptions around play but is reflective of play as a dynamic and chaotic process itself. Play in many ways means to upset conformity. Therefore, by blurring function and form, the designed objects stimulate playful thinking and challenge our understandings of the world around us.
CONCLUSION.

Play is something that we, as human beings, are naturally drawn to, but also try to refrain from. Humans value productivity and believe play distracts from, and is disruptive to, productivity. However, play is an intrinsic characteristic of humans, which is not only fundamental to our health, and also, ironically, important to increase productivity.
In the process of designing for play, I continued to be questioned by others and by myself on the importance of the topic. As an individual, I had noticed the need to reconcile myself with time spent not working because of the guilt I feel when I am not at work. The primary and secondary research I conducted throughout this thesis, confirmed that this was a common dilemma, causing the phenomenon of burnout.

The fact that people question the relevance of play, is precisely why the topic of play is relevant. It is not commonplace that we talk about play, or more correctly the importance of play. We grow up learning about the importance of studying, of working, of exercising, but never of playing. Playing is something we naturally do, and therefore, we may not need to learn the act of playing, but today’s society does need to learn to accept play as good and productive. Play is good.
Although idleness is not necessarily seen as negative, in social systems it is not hard to recognize that people are rewarded more for productivity. I noticed that the pressure I put on myself has become less of a burden on the journey of this thesis as I learned to consciously accept rest, play, and idleness. Accordingly, it was evident that it was important to contemplate play and learn to stop labeling it as unproductive. The goal is to allow people to naturally accept and devote time to idleness and play, without feeling guilty for it.

The designed objects of this thesis aim to get people to interrogate play and productivity, by triggering unfamiliarity in the relationships we have with objects commonly used for productivity. In visual form, the thesis appears to be an absurd critique of our absurd workstation. The bigger picture is that the workstation functions as a metaphor for accepted patterns of behavior. In transforming the workstation to a strangely familiar one, it pokes at the absurdity of how we have come to accept the computer workstation as a normal work of life. Therefore, this thesis is also questioning the methods and systems in place for working and making money. In this thesis, the workstation is indexical to productivity and its accomplishments. The concept of productivity and its applications have shaped our lifestyle so heavily that we continue to pressure ourselves. This thesis aims to open a conversation for reflection on our current work-play cycle.
The thesis and all the conversations along the way led me to firmly believe that a conversation about the importance of play was desperately needed. Play should be as embraced and studied as other fundamental living habits like eating, sleeping, and working.

In reading this thesis I hope that the reader may consider their philosophy of life – is it one of a work-er or a play-er? Often when we think of lifestyle, we are referring to balancing our work-life, but why don’t we ponder instead our play-life?
This thesis opens itself up to multiple future directions.
The first is most closely a continuum of the current thesis, where each object could be developed further. One exploration I am curious about is pushing the play on materiality such as imagining the keyboard keys in wood but the main board in marble. I think it would be worthwhile to even study extreme variants of material to study how materiality influences our perception of objects. Further, I think it would be worthwhile to explore the question: how can these objects be more playful? Could it be that another sense like sound is added to the object? Or could it be that the projection is taken a step further and projected as holographs, and further trigger perception?

The second is to explore the ways each object could turn into a purchasable toy. How, if at all, can these objects suggest contemplation about play through play? This direction in part is quite ironic, as it embeds consumerism and commercialism into the equation, which ultimately signifies work.
Therefore, the third option is to create a system or course on play. The idea would be that people would be invited to make their own everyday objects into absurd ones, as a part of play. This going forward would not have to be attached to the workstation and may be applied to any other familiar object. So people would be participating in a workshop to re-invent their household objects in absurd and humorous ways.

Lastly and possibly most intriguingly, I think there is an interesting opportunity in turning play objects into work objects. Does that kill the fun in them, or can it trigger our perception of play on another level?
If in reading this document, nothing else really stuck, I hope that all readers remember this: Play should be as embraced and studied as other fundamental living habits like eating, sleeping, and working.

Play is *The Default*. So go on and play!
All figures are courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted.

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**Figure 2.** Memphis Milano. Bel Air Armchair. Peter Shire. 1981. https://miro.medium.com/max/2000/1*Cjr8T0aDbsBC4j9JlTedEw.jpeg

**Figure 3.** Memphis Milano. Ettore Sottsass. “Carlton” Room Divider. 1981. https://miro.medium.com/max/750/1*PFme2UqhCJ5654jVUPnVLw.jpeg

**Figure 4.** Studio Alchimia. Divano Kandissi. 1979. Image courtesy to Mendini. http://www.alchimiamilano.it/images/design/designSeconda/DesignSeconda_img/20.jpg

**Figure 5.** Studio Alchimia. Caffettiera. 1980. Image courtesy to Mendini. http://www.alchimiamilano.it/images/design/designSeconda/DesignSeconda_img/33.jpg

**Figure 6.** Marni. Marni Playground. Photo by 2017. https://www.marni.com/cloud/marniwp/gallery/playland-completo/playland_05.jpg?imwidth=2880


**Figure 10.** ECAL. When Objects Dream. Image by ECAL/Younès Klouche. 2016. https://www.ecal.ch/uploads/webmedia/298cd20f57886252176d1ada55e85e5f.jpg

**Figure 11.** ECAL. When Objects Dream. Image by ECAL/Younès Klouche. 2016. https://www.ecal.ch/uploads/webmedia/b7cfdbe2965324a676284826a8c300fde.jpg
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