Playing with Purpose: Using Serious Play to Enhance Participatory Development Communication in Research

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In this article, we argue that serious play and participatory development communication suggest complementary—even synergistic—methodological guidelines for enhancing communication in research. We begin by illustrating how four core functions of serious play closely correspond with key participatory development communication objectives. This synergy is then illustrated by examining the application of two distinct techniques that successfully merge these methodological positions: participatory theater and LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®. Before concluding, we draw attention to important caveats that accompany this integrated research approach. This study focuses on international development research and practice; however, themes discussed throughout have broader relevance to the fields of health, community development, and education.

Keywords: Participatory development communication, serious play, engagement, participatory theater, international development

Introduction

Play is like language: a system of communication and expression. (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 219)

As mobile and digital communication technologies become increasingly affordable and user friendly, their incorporation into development research and practice seems inevitable. This is no bad thing. Mobile phone technology has strong potential to improve communication about maternal health issues in low- and middle-income countries (Noordam, Kuepper, Stekelenburg, & Milen, 2011), while participatory video projects can empower communities through the validation of local knowledge and acquisition of new skills (Martin, Brookes, Cham, Sowe, Khan, et al., 2005). In these examples, mobile phone and video

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technology introduce not only new modes of communication but also new methods for conducting research and engaging participants in the research process. But innovative communication strategies— whether for disseminating information or conducting research—do not have to be high-tech. And although some new technologies have undoubtedly enhanced communication in some contexts, others are almost certainly reinforcing established patterns of domination.

In this paper, we argue that serious play offers an equally innovative, (often) low-tech approach to communication that is (perhaps surprisingly) suitable for research. Moreover, the core functions of serious play correspond neatly with key objectives of participatory development communication (PDC), a leading framework for good communication in international development research and practice. We begin with a critical discussion of PDC, why it matters, and what it seeks to achieve. We go on to introduce serious play, providing a brief review of the literature before distinguishing serious play from "just playing." Next, we discuss four core functions of serious play and examine how they pertain to PDC principles and objectives. Two examples of techniques that put serious play into practice provide concrete illustrations of instances where serious play and PDC have productively converged. Although both of these examples come courtesy of practitioners, they nevertheless offer instructional precursors for adapting this twin methodology to a research context. We conclude by describing some important caveats about the pitfalls that can accompany serious play processes.

(Mis)Communication in International Development

In recent years, poor uptake of development initiatives has been linked to overreliance on "expert" knowledge and inadequate appreciation of local development priorities (see, e.g., Dichter, 2003; Smucker, Campbell, Olson, & Wangui, 2007, p. 387; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 18). "Developing a plan is one thing," Quarry and Ramírez argue, "but getting people to implement the plan is something completely separate" (2009, p. 21). Organizations engaged in providing international development assistance have responded to this critique by prominently endorsing stakeholder participation and improved channels of communication in their project strategies (Boeren, 1992, p. 259; Cheru 2006, p. 356; OECD, 2010, pp. 18–19; UNDP, 2009, p. 10). A new research paradigm—participatory research for development (PR4D)—has also emerged, emphasizing the shortfalls of traditional research techniques. The importance of substantive participation is no longer in doubt; precisely what this entails and how to achieve it remain much more ambiguous.

Increased emphasis on local participation in development initiatives has generated new interest in how development researchers and practitioners can better engage the communities in which they work. PDC offers one approach to enhancing stakeholder engagement at all stages of the project cycle. Signaling a significant deviation from the status quo, advocates of PDC contend that sustainable development results not from hierarchical, top-down data extraction or transmission of knowledge but rather from horizontal processes of knowledge exchange (see, e.g., Figueroa, Kincaid, Rani, & Lewis, 2002; Hamelink, 2002; Mefalopulos, 2008; Quarry & Ramírez, 2009). In contrast to the dominant practice of basing development initiatives primarily on the assessments and analysis of "development experts," PDC processes begin by exploring the lived experiences of community members' and stakeholders' perceptions of their own needs (Bessette, 2004, p. 55).

The challenges of incorporating PDC into existing models of development research and practice are well documented. Tufte and Mefalopulos, for instance, are quick to point out that this model of engagement and bottom-up communication takes time to implement and runs counter to prevailing institutional systems governing the allocation of development assistance funding (2009, p. 18). More significant, perhaps, are the asymmetrical relationships of power, influence, and finance that not only characterize the international development industry but also frame international development as a worthy pursuit more generally. For over half a century, dominant paradigms of modernization and neoliberalism have portrayed people living in "underdeveloped" countries as passive recipients rather than active agents in their own right (Slater & Bell, 2002, p. 357; also see Sylvester, 1999). The "intertwining of power and knowledge" that perpetuates contemporary—some would argue, imperialistic—notions of "development," "progress," and "civilization" will not evaporate overnight (Slater, 2004, p. 223; also see During, 1998; Ramírez & Quarry, 2010).

PDC pointedly challenges mainstream epistemological and methodological conventions by critically interrogating notions of knowledge and expertise that underpin much (if not most) development research. In so doing, PDC raises critical questions about conventional tools and techniques that researchers commonly rely on to communicate with research participants. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups are not written off outright, but these standard tools can no longer be taken for granted (see, e.g., Stoecker, 2012). In short, PDC represents a new way of "doing" development built on principles of bottom-up communication, appreciation of local knowledge, and substantive engagement.

Participatory Development Communication: A Contested Concept

Participatory development communication (PDC) is a contested concept nestled among a litany of similar (and similarly contested) ideas, including development support communication, development communication, communication for human development, communication for social change, and facilitated participatory planning. Indeed, Quarry and Ramírez (2009, p. 6) liken communication to a chameleon that changes its color to blend in with shifting paradigms. From this disarray, however, it is possible to identify recurrent themes and assemble them into a coherent framework for PDC that is both robust and firmly grounded in the literature.

Active, Horizontal, and Multifaceted Participation

Even the most basic and informal definitions of both participation and communication allude to some form of interaction between two or more parties. A preliminary requirement for defining PDC, therefore, is specification of the type of interaction it entails and who takes part. First, PDC enables stakeholder interaction that is both active and horizontal. Participants freely choose to participate and actively contribute to the exchange of ideas, group decision making, and the application of solutions (Bessette, 2004; Boeren, 1992; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). The opt-in, substantive nature of active participation clearly distinguishes PDC from consultative, extractive, passive, and top-down models of communication (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 6) as well as processes in which participants are "participated" or co-opted into hollow activities that create little more than a façade of engagement (Bessette, 2004, p. 48).

If all participants are capable of meaningfully contributing to the discussion of development issues affecting their local community, it necessarily follows that every voice counts (Bessette, 2004, pp. 118–119; Dodge & Bennett, 2011, p. 34). This is what we mean when we describe PDC as horizontal. Horizontal interaction does not just happen, however—particularly in contexts of entrenched power hierarchies like those emblematic of international development (Boeren, 1992, p. 268). Rather, it requires the intentional creation of a space where all participants "feel comfortable enough to express their views, share their concerns, and provide their inputs" (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 25). While the community in which the research or development project is occurring should construct the primary "meanings and values of development" (Rahim, 1994, p. 118), the agendas, standards, and external constituencies that simultaneously empower and constrain both donor organizations and academic researchers also require serious acknowledgement.

Having established that PDC prioritizes active, horizontal communication between two or more parties, we can now identify who it involves. In the context of international development, we often presume that local communities are "homogenous . . . harmonious units where people share common lifestyles, interests, and visions of life" (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 19). In doing so, we gloss over—or choose to ignore—that all communities are multifaceted, a characteristic that equally applies to the international development community itself. PDC, from a research perspective, has the rare capacity to prompt constructive conversation between an inclusive range of development stakeholders, including representatives of donor organizations, development practitioners, local government officials, traditional authority figures, and community members. Remembering that communication between all parties should be active and horizontal, PDC also requires a facilitator or moderator who can remain neutral while encouraging critical thinking and respectful dialogue (Bessette, 2004, pp. 22–23; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 25). While a professional facilitator may be required in the context of development practice, it seems reasonable to assume that the investigator could fill this role when PDC is adopted for research.

Dialogic Communication

How does the facilitator go about moderating active, horizontal communication between such a diverse array of stakeholders? Top-down models of development, widely criticized for their overreliance on expert knowledge and weak impact, rely largely on one-way, monologic communication to inform or persuade people of a preordained, supposedly better way of doing things (Bessette, 2004, p. 9). Some (though not all) development research has taken a similarly prescriptive tone. However, de Zutter (2006) reminds us of a second meaning of communication: "to be in relation with or to have in common with" (p. 220). This less prominent, more complex meaning is akin to dialogue in that it involves both expressing oneself outwardly and taking in the expressions of others (Bessette, 2004, pp. 22–23).

Dialogue, Hamelink astutely observes, "requires the capacity to listen, to be silent, to suspend judgment, to critically investigate one's own assumptions, to ask reflexive questions and to be open to change" (2002, p. 8). By emphasizing dialogue, PDC recasts the purpose of development communication from telling to active listening. PDC's emphasis on dialogue also has considerable methodological implications for how we conduct research. It requires researchers to think beyond the parameters of a predefined agenda or fixed research questions. It also presupposes that the researcher will have the mental dexterity required to pursue unanticipated points of departure emphasized by participants in the

field. In other words, the content of the research conversation is codetermined in situ within flexible parameters rather than predetermined from the researcher's office (Bessette, 2004).

Learning, Awareness, and Reflection

Given these significant challenges to adopting PDC as a methodological approach to research, it is tempting to ask: why bother? When discussed incrementally through dialogue, big, complex development problems can become less complicated, and alternative points of view seem less threatening. Preconceptions, prejudices, and vested interests are intertwined with "final outcomes not intermediate steps" (Dodge & Bennett, 2011, p. 69). As participants explore their own beliefs or experiences during a dialogical research encounter, opportunities for conversational detours arise that stimulate reflection on past successes and failures (Bessette, 2004, p. 26; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 15). Dodge and Bennett (2011) call this process "experiential learning," while Heron and Reason (1997) similarly refer to "experiential knowing."

From a research perspective, PDC has the immediate outcome of facilitating awareness and reflection grounded in participants' lived reality (de Zutter, 2006, p. 222; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 46). It encourages research participants (practitioners and community members alike) to express their needs or objectives (Quarry & Ramírez, 2009, p. 20) and allows them to feel that their position has been recognized and validated, even if it is not directly acted upon. Put slightly differently, PDC has aspirations to simultaneously lead participants to a fuller awareness of the development scenario while stimulating identification of previously unidentified avenues for change (Quarry & Ramírez, 2009, p. 9). Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009, p. 15) attribute this to the open-ended nature of dialogue, while Rambaldi, Kyem, McCall, and Weiner (2006) similarly remark on the emphasis that participation lends to process as opposed to objective or outcome.

Action Oriented

A final dimension of PDC is that it is action oriented (Quarry & Ramírez, 2009, p. 9; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 11). This notion will sit more comfortably with some research traditions than others, and it is particularly suitable for action research, PR4D, local strategies research, and communication for social change projects. Briefly, PDC proposes that dialogue can lead to the identification of solutions that donors support, practitioners want to facilitate, and end users value enough to continue investing in. While this is much more than a single research project is likely to achieve on its own, the action orientation of PDC will likely influence both the framing and line of inquiry adopted.

PDC Defined

The review above can be distilled into the following definition that will guide the remainder of our discussion: PDC is a dialogic approach to communication that encourages critical reflection on one's own experiences and those of others before identifying expectations for how best to define and confront development challenges. Integrating PDC into research practice requires commitment by the researcher (and, ideally, research participants as well) to the following four points of process. First, as a mode of inquiry, communication between the researcher and research participants begins by identifying what people already know or believe about an issue or situation, although they may not yet be able to articulately express this knowledge. This means that the terms of reference cannot be taken for granted,

but rather should be negotiated as part of the research encounter. Second, commitment to horizontal communication requires acknowledgment of the often-unequal distribution of power both between the researcher and participants and between participants themselves. As much as possible, inequalities should be mitigated. Specific strategies for addressing inequality are necessarily context dependent, but some examples are offered in the two case studies below. Third, critical self-reflection of one's own position precedes interrogation of viewpoints expressed by others. Finally, all participants (researcher included) must be prepared to make mistakes, recognize incongruities, and entertain a range of alternative possibilities.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Facets of Play: A Brief Literature Review[2]</h2>

The discussion of PDC above identified several procedural guidelines that researchers adopting this approach should adhere to in their communication and general engagement with participants (i.e., active, horizontal participation; respectful dialogue; awareness and reflexivity; a focus on action or agency). The existing PDC literature is somewhat less clear on *how* one might go about creating conditions conducive to this type of engagement. In this article, we find inspiration in the notion of "serious play" found predominantly in the literature on organizational communication and strategic management. As we illustrate below, serious play is particularly good at enhancing critical reflection, encouraging knowledge exchange, and promoting innovative problem solving. The flexibility and creativity that characterize serious play both complement and enhance the procedural framework for PDC discussed in the previous section.

Before identifying core attributes of serious play and assessing how distinct serious play processes might enhance PDC, a short foray into the play literature is in order. "Play" is an ambiguous concept, defined in contradicting ways within disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, organizational communication, philosophy, and sociology (Statler, Roos, & Victor 2009; Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. vii). The brief review below identifies of some quintessential facets of play and carefully teases out their relevance to PDC.

<h3 style="text-align:center">*Play Requires Active, Voluntary Engagement*</h3>

Play is generally defined as an activity that participants engage in voluntarily and without coercion (Andersen, 2009, p. 77; Executive Discovery, LLC, 2002, p. 4; Huizinga, 1955, pp. 7–10). If participants are coerced or otherwise forced into an activity, it ceases to be playful. At the same time, to engage in play is to necessarily be active within the play activity. Active engagement distinguishes a participant from an observer and differentiates play from entertainment (Mann, 1996, p. 449). Moreover,

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[2] Our exploration of *serious play* rather than *participatory arts* is an intentional choice made for both semantic and theoretical reasons. Presented with the right conditions, anyone can be playful or actively engage in playful activity. Not everyone considers him- or herself artistic or will feel comfortable with the task of making art. From a semantic point of view, then, we contend that play is inherently inclusive and, consequently, represents an appropriate platform for engaging in PDC. Accordingly, we carefully chose examples of play rather than art for our case studies. From a theoretical perspective, the investigation of serious play processes could suggest new possibilities for interdisciplinary research and collaboration across the fields of international development, organizational communication, and strategic management.

play is not simply an attitude or experience; it is consciously "performed" in a deliberate and stylistic way (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 219). Gauntlett, for instance, highlights the participative function of tactile, creative play activities: "through making things, and sharing them with others, we feel a greater connection with the world, and more engaged with being more active in the environment rather than sitting back and watching" (2010, p. 73). The active participation characteristic of play correlates directly to the PDC principles of active, horizontal, and dialogical communication. It follows that participants should always have a choice of whether or not to engage in the research activity, and should likewise have some control over the nature of their own participation.

Play Requires Order and Flexibility

Play is an order-creating activity. It is structured by rules or agreements among players, which may or may not be different from those that guide social interaction in ordinary life (Andersen, 2009, p. 78; Huizinga, 1955, p. 10; also see Brown, 2009). That said, the rules of play are flexible and can shift and change during the course of play. Referring to Stephen Jay Gould's principles of evolutionary variability, Sutton-Smith (1997, p. 222) emphasizes the "quirky shifts" in play activities that accompany imagination, improvisation, and inversion of the status quo. Roos (2006, p. 37) similarly emphasizes how play helps people prepare for changing circumstances by nurturing spontaneity within set ethical bounds.

In a research context, this order-creating dimension of play could reasonably help define a space conducive to the type of active, horizontal participation envisioned by PDC. For instance, clearly defining the "rules of engagement" through a play activity might provide one practical strategy for effectively moderating inter-stakeholder dialogue. At the same time, some flexibility is necessary in order to explore unforeseen openings, draw out quieter voices, and get to the heart of sensitive issues. In this respect, the researcher is a co-learner who helps frame the conversation rather than a didactic instructor or moderator (Thomas, 1994, p. 51).

Play Encourages Representation and Narrative Building

Scholars have historically emphasized play's symbolic function as a representation of "real life" (see, e.g., Bateson, 1972, p. 181; Huizinga, 1955, p. 15; Piaget, 1962, p. 162). In essence, play allows participants to view or experience familiar problems in a new way and creates a safe space for experimenting with novel solutions. The contemporary play literature expands on this idea to contend that play activities also allow participants to examine their sense of identity, including cultural identity (see, e.g., Gauntlett, 2007; Linder, Roos, & Victor, 2001 Roos, 2006). Moreover, restrictive social rules may be temporarily relaxed within the space of play (March & Olsen, 1976, p. 77). During cultural festivals, for example, activities and types of behavior that are not normally condoned are sometimes permitted, even celebrated (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 108). The rules governing play can similarly upend standard power relations and social norms, highlighting the potential of play as a catalyst for personal and social change.

Play as re-presentation is a narrative-building activity (Rieber, Smith, & Noah, 1998; Statler & Roos, 2002). Play creates opportunities for constructing and, crucially, adapting stories that relate to participants' lived experiences and personal perspectives. It also creates spaces for sharing these narratives with others. In some sense, all research is a process of re-presentation and storytelling. But how often do we as researchers create opportunities for participants to tell their own stories rather than

crafting the research narrative ourselves? Emphasizing narrative building by participants is another aspect of play that lends clarity to how a researcher might go about integrating PDC into the research process. Allowing time for reflection and re-presentation gives participants a chance to develop more considered and articulate responses than they could proffer on the spot in response to direct questioning. Examining a range of potential scenarios in the context of a hypothetical narrative is likewise conducive to learning and reflexivity, objectives that can be hard to achieve when communication is confined to interrogation of immediate realities.

Serious Play Versus Just Playing

What distinguishes *serious play* from general play? A body of literature has recently emerged providing examples of distinctly serious play in education, strategic management, and international development. This literature defines serious play as goal oriented and concerned with outcomes as well as processes (Andersen, 2009; Rieber & Matzko, 2001; Roos, 2006). The play activity is not simply conducted for enjoyment or release, but relates to an identified purpose (Statler, Heracleous, & Jacobs, 2011, p. 236; also see Andersen, 2009; Linder, Roos, & Victor, 2001). This purpose might be learning a particular skill. Alternatively, it could involve thinking critically, reflexively, and creatively to analyze a situation or solve problems. Ordinarily, opportunities for reflection and critical analysis are limited; serious play activities are purposefully designed to provide a structured space within which this kind of analysis can take place. Likewise, as tools for serious play, objects, narratives, and even the physical body encourage experiential forms of expression and analysis that can help participants see and experience familiar situations in a new way (Gauntlet & Holzwarth, 2006, p. 90). In other words, sharing spaces of serious play creates opportunities to exchange knowledge that can be instrumental in developing awareness of complex themes, issues, or perspectives.

To the casual observer, serious play activities may look the same as general play activities; the distinction lies in how play is enacted and the purpose it serves. Whereas people can engage in general play activities for enjoyment alone, serious play activities always include an additional element—critical reflection—that affects both the form and function of play. Serious play activities that have been used in educational, strategic management, and development contexts include theater and role play, storytelling, model building, painting and drawing, making music, and educational games (both computer- and noncomputer-based, physical and nonphysical) (see, e.g., Chambers, 2002; Executive Discovery, LLC, 2002; Gauntlett, 2007; Holliday, Statler, & Flanders, 2007; Tan, 2010; Watson, 2011).

As a rule, critical reflection distinguishes serious play from general play. This corresponds to what Freire terms "conscientisation," an act of critical reflection through experiential learning and dialogue (Thomas, 1994, p. 51). Rather than simply engaging in an enjoyable, intrinsically motivated activity, serious play invokes conscious reflection on the activity itself in a way that directly connects the play space to real-life issues and concerns.

Coupling Serious Play and PDC: Identifying Methodological Synergies

From the discussion above, it is possible to identify at least four distinct functions of serious play as a methodological process that have direct relevance to the aims of PDC identified at the beginning of this article. First, serious play can create a safe space for practicing skills and experimenting with new

ideas or identities. Second, it can enhance imagination and creative thought. Third, serious play processes have repeatedly been shown to elicit tacit knowledge. Finally, serious play has the potential to enhance participation and interaction. We will briefly elaborate on these core functions before examining two particular cases that seamlessly integrate serious play and PDC.

We have already identified that serious play can provide a safe forum for experimentation. Watson (2011), for instance, describes how medical students are sometimes trained to think creatively, develop skills, and deal with ambiguity by participating in improvisational role-play of patient–doctor interactions. The students can try out different diagnostic approaches without the burden of pressure and responsibility that accompanies treating actual patients. In the context of PDC, this experimental function of serious play encourages participants to imagine alternative scenarios and develop new patterns of action and response (Holliday et al., 2007, p. 129; Mann, 1996, p. 462). By assuming new roles for interacting with others in a safe space, serious play activities can help participants identify the outer bounds of their own agency and compare potential futures with current realities.

Serious play also creates opportunities for exercising imagination and creative thought. Put slightly differently, play "is the primary place for the expression of anything that is humanly imaginable" (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 226). When engaging in serious play, participants have the chance to imagine and enact new frames for meaning making, expression, and interaction (Statler et al., 2009, p. 96). Collaborative creative processes facilitate communication between participants and allow shared meaning to develop. The imaginative function of serious play can enhance PDC processes by helping researchers and research participants alike to think outside the box and discover innovative solutions to complex development challenges.

Furthermore, the physical or tactile nature of serious play activities (e.g., model building, games, theater) can bring intuitive or tacit knowledge to the surface by drawing on aesthetic and perceptual dimensions of experience (Holliday et al., 2007, p. 132). Referring to the work of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006, p. 85) locate modes of perception, cognition, and intelligence within the body as distinct from the mind. Serious play processes offer participants alternative mediums to verbal language through which to communicate bodily knowledge (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006, p. 82). At the same time, using the physical body in the construction of knowledge can make it easier to express new ideas verbally (Statler et al., 2011, p. 237). Physical and tactile activities also readily lend themselves to the use of metaphor, opening up new avenues for participants to address sensitive or controversial issues without having to state them explicitly. The extended amount of time required for certain serious play activities also gives participants occasion to think about a problem and formulate a deeper, more nuanced response than would likely be generated by traditional question-and-answer exchanges (e.g., surveys, interviews; Gauntlett, 2007, p. 185). The capacity of serious play processes to elicit tacit knowledge suggests that they could provide a fruitful starting point for encouraging the type of dialogical communication espoused by PDC.

Finally, serious play provides opportunities for developing affective associations and social awareness through interaction with others (Mann, 1996, p. 466). Serious play activities can bring together participants who do not interact on a regular basis. It can likewise encourage participants to engage with each other in ways different from normal social interaction. In both cases, serious play activities can help

develop participant awareness of entrenched social relations and norms as they begin to see their actions in a new light. This participatory function of serious play can help create a community of change agents in accordance with PDC aims by fostering connections between individuals and encouraging mutual awareness—"participation is both the basis *for*, and milieu *of*, community" (Thomas, 1994, p. 58).

In short, serious play provides a practical strategy for *how* to achieve PDC objectives. Serious play has considerable potential to enhance PDC processes in at least four distinct ways. The emphasis that serious play places on narrative building and sharing stories could be harnessed to create the platforms of dialogic communication that PDC aspires to. Exposure to multiple, diverse perspectives fosters connections between stakeholders while encouraging learning, awareness, and critical reflection. By allowing experimentation within a safe space, serious play can help stakeholders explore options for change and enhance their adaptive capacities to cope with this change when it comes. Finally, active, voluntary participation in serious play activities deepens engagement with the issues at stake and encourages ongoing collaboration among a community of actors.

Moving Beyond Theory: Examining the Interplay of Serious Play and PDC

The remainder of this article briefly examines two specific examples where serious play and PDC seamlessly intermingle. We selected the short case studies that follow because of the possibilities they present for coupling serious play and PDC. These possibilities are just as relevant to how we conduct research as they are to policy making and community development practice.

We have written this article as a theoretical springboard for ongoing research, and the analysis that follows is based on secondary case material. It is worth highlighting, however, that our discussion of this material has been informed significantly by personal communication with the practitioners involved. Neither of these cases has been written up previously for academic publication. We are of the opinion that it is preferable for them to be written up secondhand than not to be written up at all. "Not only are participation and action on a path that is not paved," Stoecker observes in his discussion of participatory research methods, "but there is rarely a path there" (2012, p. 35). We think it worthwhile to follow the existing path before blazing new trails of our own.

Enacting PDC Through Serious Play: Mabin'a Moboko

Mabin'a Moboko is a theater troupe that uses performance to raise awareness, encourage dialogue, and enact social change around issues faced by deaf people in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).[3] It is the first theater group in the DRC in which both deaf and hearing people perform on the same stage (see the video clip in Figure 1). The audiences are also mixed, creating a rare opportunity for

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[3] Information for this case study has been obtained through personal correspondence with Freddy Mata Matundu, the director and founder of Mabin'a Maboko. Freddy was the 2011 winner of the Communication for Social Change Award for individual achievement in communication for social change presented by the Centre for Communication and Social Change at the University of Queensland. Additional information about Mabin'a Moboko can be found on its website at www.cpps-rdc.com. Further information about the Communication for Social Change Award can be found on the center's website at www.uq.edu.au/ccsc/csc-award.

dialogue between people who are normally segregated. In addition to combating discrimination and promoting social inclusion, Mabin'a Moboko provides deaf people with access to information on topical issues (e.g., civic education, sexual health, violence against women) that would otherwise be unavailable to them. In a society in which deaf people are often associated with sorcery, experience marginalization, and have few opportunities, Mabin'a Moboko uses participatory theater to break down barriers and create understanding between deaf people and mainstream society.

Through theatrical performance, Mabin'a Moboko engages audience members while provoking critical discussion and social dialogue. This type of participatory theater originated from Augusto Boal's "theatre of the oppressed." Influenced by Freire's work on dialogical communication, Boal envisaged theater in which audience members are converted from mere spectators into "transformers of the dramatic action" (1979, p. 122). In contrast to conventional theater, where professional actors put on a polished performance for the audience, contemporary participatory theater allows the actors (often community members themselves) and the audience to interact with each other and actively explore the issues presented (Sloman, 2011, p. 44). Through the portrayal of existing sociopolitical conditions and subsequent adaptive re-presentation, participatory theater "is ideally placed to provide a commentary upon reality and to offer alternatives to the perceived realities in which a given community lives" (Prentki, 1998, p. 419; also see Thyagarajan, 2002, p. 16; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 17). The performance allows actors and audience alike to experience challenging scenarios safe "in the knowledge that the consequences are never fatal; the dead character is restored as the live actor; the story can be tried out in another way" (Prentki, 1998, p. 420).

To illustrate, Mabin'a Moboko's actors may stop at a crucial moment in the narrative and seek intervention from members of the audience, who then offer solutions to the problem at hand. Alternatively, the group may employ the techniques of "invisible theater," performing a scene in a public place without letting the spectators know that they are watching a performance, then later revealing themselves as actors and encouraging discussion about the event and issues portrayed (Boal, 1979, p. 144). Mabin'a Moboko's use of theater constitutes a form of serious play because the show is performed with the intention of provoking critical reflection by the actors and audience about a particular social theme.[4] Moreover, the audience is aware, though perhaps not from the outset, that this is the aim. Simultaneously, Mabin'a Moboko's performances could be characterized as PDC because they promote critical self-reflection followed by dialogical communication within and among audience members about local development issues. Mabin'a Moboko also establishes clubs at institutions, such as schools and churches, so that the discussion can continue after the performance event has ended (see Figure 2).
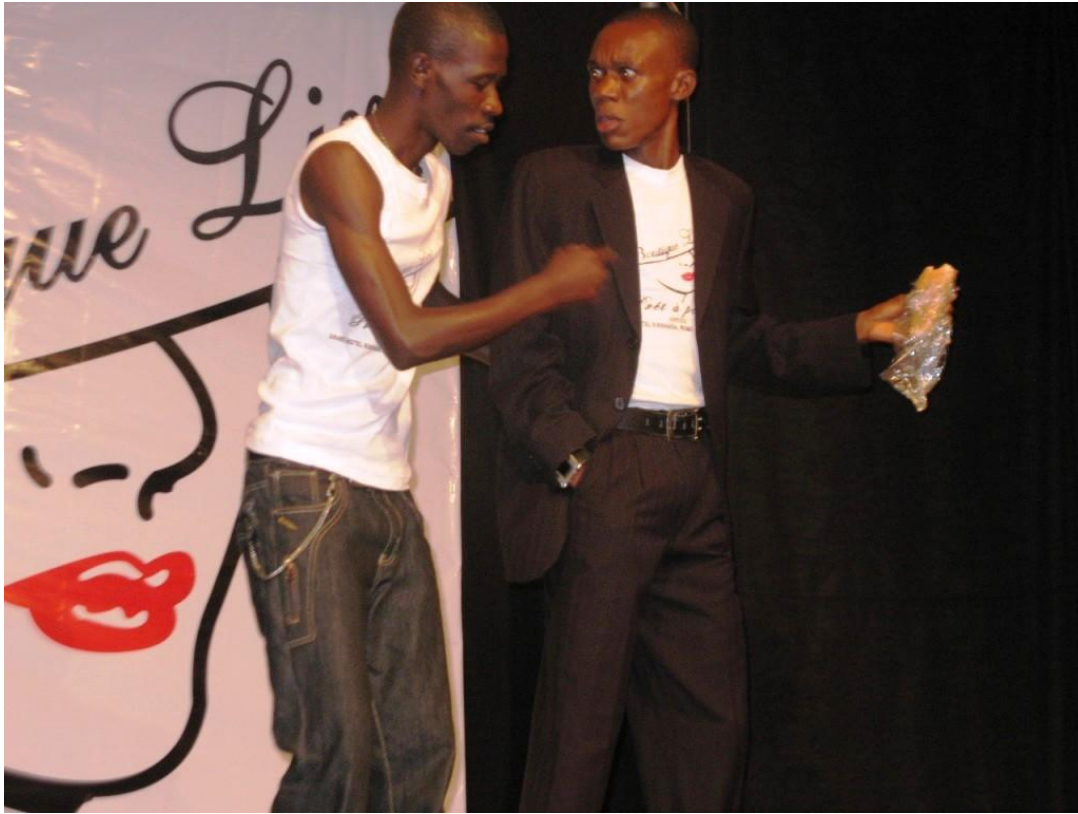
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[4] It is worth pointing out that not all theater is serious play. Christmas pantomime, for example, would rarely qualify.

Figure 1. Video clip of a Mabin'a Moboko performance.

Figure 2. Establishing a local club following a performance.

Figure 3. Mabin'a Moboko actors mid-performance.

Although the actors would not necessarily think about their work in this way, Mabin'a Moboko's performances clearly demonstrate the successful integration of serious play and PDC. Communication between the actors is transgressive as they intentionally try to confuse the audience about individual actors' abilities. Deaf and hearing actors perform, speak, sing, dance, and mime together in such a harmonious way that it is difficult to tell the deaf from the hearing. Expression in spoken language is returned in sign language and vice versa, creating an effective illusion (see Figure 3). All of the actors use body movements and facial expressions to convey narrative. In this manner the disability of deaf actors is transformed into ability, as nonverbal communication enables a wider range of people to comprehend the performance's core message. This is a particular strength in the DRC, where 400 languages are spoken.

Moreover, the use of inherently playful communication techniques (e.g., mime, song, physical expression) establishes a communicative space characterized by active, horizontal, and multifaceted participation. Mabin'a Moboko's performances emphasize the capabilities of deaf people, empowering them in the eyes of both their peers and the wider community while simultaneously allowing them to tell their stories. Translated from the Lingali language as "dancing hands," the very name Mabin'a Moboko

describes sign language as an inherently playful mode of communication, while highlighting the poetic, visual nature of theatrical expression.

As a communication tool, "theatre cannot solve problems, it can only illustrate and expose them" (Boeren, 1992, p. 261). However, the practice of participatory theater "creates a sort of uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action" (Boal, 1979, p. 142). In other words, exploring solutions to difficult problems in the safe, fictional space of theater can provoke ongoing reflection and discussion about issues underlying the performance (Slachmuijlder & Tshibanda, 2009, p. 46). From a research perspective, one of the most trying aspects of investigating development challenges is identifying where—and what—the needs really are. As a technique that productively merges the principles of PDC and serious play, theater has considerable potential in terms of both data collection and research dissemination (also see Katani & Yuval-Davis, 2008).

Building Participatory Communication Using LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®[5]

In November 2011, CAPRESE Consulting used LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®[6] in a workshop setting to encourage dialogue and collaboration on issues pertaining to climate change and Indonesia's energy efficiency standards.[7] CAPRESE had previously used the technique to support clients' strategy development and team-building efforts. In this case, the rationale for using LEGO SERIOUS PLAY was twofold. First, the consultants were confident that this process could help stakeholders accustomed to working independently of—and in competition with—each other to better understand the full range of climate change adaptation and energy efficiency initiatives in place. Second, the team anticipated that participation in LEGO SERIOUS PLAY could encourage a new, more collaborative working dynamic between formerly disparate stakeholders.

Developed by the Lego Group between 1998 and 2010, LEGO SERIOUS PLAY evolved from the idea that people can give shape to their imagination "by constructing and externalizing concepts—making them tangible and sharable" (Lego Group, 2010, p. 8). Originally designed to overcome stagnation within the Lego Group itself, LEGO SERIOUS PLAY consists of a progressive sequence of model building exercises that encourage participants to think abstractly about complex problems using the iconic plastic Lego bricks (Roos, Victor, & Statler, 2004). Participants then share their models with others sitting around the table, creating opportunities for both self-expression and shared learning. In other words, this distinctive approach to communication is purposefully designed to (a) allow time and space for individual reflection and (b) provide opportunities for all participants to express their thoughts on an equal footing.

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[5] Neither author is in any way affiliated with the Lego Group. One of the authors has completed training in the LEGO SERIOUS PLAY methodology provided by Trivium Consulting.

[6] All references to LEGO SERIOUS PLAY are in accordance with established trademark guidelines.

[7] The workshop was cosponsored by the Indonesian Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, GAZ/PAKLIM (an Indonesian-German cooperation program providing policy advice on the environment and climate change), and DANIDA/EINCOPS (a bilateral cooperation program between Indonesia and Denmark). Information included in this example was obtained through personal correspondence with Eli de Friend of CAPRESE and from a blog that he posted about this event at http://seriousplaypro.com/2012/03/14/indonesia/#more-809.

Over 30 participants from almost as many organizations took part in the Stakeholder Workshop on Energy Efficiency. In addition to the workshop cosponsors, participating stakeholders included international donors, academic and research institutions, organizations promoting energy management standards, and government ministries. The model building exercises designed by CAPRESE for the daylong event first familiarized participants with the process of creating and explaining metaphors using the bricks (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. A participant in the Stakeholder Workshop on Energy Efficiency chooses his bricks.

Once comfortable with basic building skills and concepts, participants were prompted to think about the future of Indonesian energy efficiency by building models indicative of the "ideal world of energy efficiency development in 2025." Having developed a common vision of a desirable future, subsequent building exercises challenged participants to think about and explicitly describe how their current activities contribute to this ideal. Using their models as points of reference, participants were able to explore synergies between programs and identify policy gaps.

One clear strength of the serious play process employed by CAPRESE is the space it created for participants to work through a complex problem via carefully crafted building challenges and facilitated group discussion (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006, p. 86). The reflective activity of building a model provides an opportunity for participants to actively engage with a question or problem that they may not be able to address in any depth immediately or in words alone. Defining a comprehensive energy efficiency strategy for Indonesia in the face of global climate change is a good example of a complex problem with no immediate solution. CAPRESE's approach of asking participants to agree on an ideal state before identifying how their current actions contribute to that ideal could be applied to any development challenge (e.g., maternal health, food security, good governance). Moreover, the potential of three-dimensional (3D) model building (using Lego bricks or an alternative medium) to encourage dialogue and collaboration across institutional, national, and professional divides applies at both the macro (e.g., national policy making) and micro (e.g., project) levels of international development (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Participants in the Stakeholder Workshop on Energy Efficiency develop a shared idea of Indonesia's energy future.

This brief account of the Stakeholder Workshop on Energy Efficiency in Indonesia suggests compelling synergies between this particular serious play technique and the type of action-oriented dialogue promoted by PDC. Specifically, in both LEGO SERIOUS PLAY and PDC, the process of discovery begins with what people already know about an issue or situation (e.g., their own energy efficiency initiatives). Both types of activity encourage active participation by promoting critical reflection and affording all participants an opportunity to speak. Furthermore, LEGO SERIOUS PLAY has traditionally been employed in a corporate context, where actionable outcomes—a defining component of PDC—are a key priority. By the end of the day, participants in the Stakeholder Workshop on Energy Efficiency had not only achieved mutual understanding, they had also identified concrete action points and established who would see them through.

Like participatory theater, LEGO SERIOUS PLAY has been shown to effectively stimulate critical reflection and dialogue. Participants in the structured serious play activity (i.e., 3D model building) engaged in independent reflection and constructive discussion about how to define the problem and possible solutions. Whereas participatory theater has potential for data collection and research dissemination, the scope for using 3D model building processes like the one described above for research may be somewhat more limited. The experiential learning prompted by a structured process of progressively complex model building challenges is conducive to identifying and exploring participants' tacit knowledge. If used for research, this particular approach to PDC and serious play is all about actively listening to what participants have to say and would be inappropriate for propagating a predetermined position or disseminating results.

Conclusion: Implications for Research

This article has explored multiple synergies between the methodological positions underpinning PDC and serious play. In many respects, these approaches are two sides to the same coin. PDC specifies a desirable standard for communication and stakeholder engagement. Serious play, meanwhile, suggests one way of how we might go about structuring participant engagement compatible with PDC standards. We have argued that four core functions of serious play are particularly conducive to achieving PDC outcomes. These areas of overlap were then briefly explored in the context of two case studies.

Envisioning precisely how these processes come together for research purposes—rather than development practice—takes some imagination. There are, no doubt, numerous methods capable of integrating PDC and serious play that could be adapted for a research purposes (see, e.g., Gauntlett, 2007; Stoecker, 2012). Action research, grounded theory, PR4D, and local strategies research spring to mind as contexts where this particular approach could prove fruitful. Adopting this twin approach, however, requires careful reconsideration of how we as researchers engage with the people who agree to take part in our work as well as how we document these interactions. Standard note-taking practices, for example, may prove insufficient for capturing the richness of detail offered by a theatrical performance or abstract model. But these are issues for another study.

Our enthusiasm for intertwining serious play and PDC should not be taken to mean that these two approaches are inseparable. Nor should it imply that this particular methodological configuration is without limitations. Serious play is not a silver bullet that will solve any problem, nor is it appropriate for every context. PDC objectives would undoubtedly be better served in some situations by community radio,

group media, participatory rural appraisal techniques, or even simple discussion and debate (Bessette, 2004, p. 118). Bessette highlights the importance of choosing communication tools to fit the problem rather than the other way around (2004, p. 31). This advice applies equally to research, where methods should be chosen for their ability to answer particular types of questions or for their coherence with adopted theoretical and methodological positions.

Serious play activities are time-consuming (Gauntlett, 2007; Rieber & Matzko, 2001). As with established PDC techniques, it is essential that sufficient time be allocated to serious play activities to build trust among participants, allow for critical reflection, and generate meaningful outcomes. Fully appreciating the time constraints that invariably accompany fieldwork, we emphasize that rushing serious play closes off opportunities for "deeper and more reflective engagement" and runs the risk of alienating disillusioned participants (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006, p. 89). On the flip side, serious play activities often require few material resources, and many can be conducted using locally available materials, making them affordable and cost-effective (Thyagarajan, 2002, p. 14).

In addition to time, many serious play and PDC techniques require a skilled facilitator, a role that can be filled by the researcher. The facilitator should try to ensure that participants are comfortable with the activity and are able to actively contribute to resulting dialogue. The researcher/facilitator also bears responsibility for keeping serious play flexibly focused to prevent the activity from degenerating into general play. There is also the very real possibility that certain participants might monopolize dialogue. Good facilitation can reduce this risk while ensuring that participants do not feel uncomfortable engaging in unfamiliar or seemingly childish activities (Bessette, 2004, p. 22). By its very nature, serious play emphasizes creativity and experimentation. So, too, must researchers who adopt this framework (Chambers, 2002, p. xiv; Holliday et al., 2007, p. 128). The best learning often comes from making mistakes. In any attempt to integrate PDC and serious play, we must be prepared to learn from what works well—and from what does not (Chambers, 2002, p. xiii; Watson, 2011, p. 1262).

Finally, we highlight the need to translate serious play processes into concrete goals and outcomes for the communities involved. While dialogue and reflection are essential to PDC, action is equally so. Communities expect that participation in development research and planning will lead to change (Botes & van Rensburg, 2000, p. 51). It is critical to develop a research program that enables participants to identify goals *and* plan for action. It is also important to carefully consider reporting and dissemination activities that will make research findings accessible to participants (Stoecker, 2012, pp. 17–18).

In addition to these caveats, the process of writing this article has raised several questions. Because their answers will almost certainly be context specific, we pose them here for your own consideration.

- How do resource constraints affect the effectiveness of serious play processes in achieving PDC objectives?

- When (if ever) is it better to bring your own tools and materials (e.g., Lego bricks, paints) rather than use locally sourced supplies?

- How do you safeguard the opt-in/opt-out principle of voluntary engagement central to both serious play and PDC? Are incentives (monetary or otherwise) coercive? Or enabling?

- In processes that depend on the active participation of all participants, how can you make sure that the quietest voices are heard?

- What processes of research documentation and data capture are most appropriate for reframing specific PDC and serious play activities as rigorous research methods?

While this article has clearly been written with international development research and practice in mind, the principles of PDC and the core functions of serious play discussed throughout have much wider applications across a range of disciplines, including health, community development, and education. How to promote better communication between researchers and their participants is a difficult question; participatory communication through serious play could provide part of the answer.

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