

Designing for Children 2019

Play and Learn

Culturally Inclined Games

A way to trigger quest for understanding ethnic identities

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Abstract: This paper examines how tangible games can be designed to trigger, educate, and create interest, broadly around the themes of heritage, oral traditions and cultural practices. The games were developed as a part of the Craft CoLaborative Fellowship (hosted by the Design Innovation and Craft Resource Center, CEPT University & Manthan Educational Programme Society), created in collaboration with the terracotta craft community in Gundiyali near Mandvi, Kutch using natural clay, wood, husk and micro fibre boards.

Key words: *Learning, Playing, Heritage Conservation, Traditional Practices, Ethnography, Cultural Games, Tangible Games, Design Innovation, Craft Innovation*

1. Introduction

Design is an intuitive process with conscious understanding of the user in context. Children as user personas have the commonalities where it is essential to understand the ethical responsibilities. Children are conducive to triggers, they react and think emotionally over rationally while their learning and grasping abilities are at peak. In today's constantly evolving, and volatile world, the idea of identity is one that millennials around the world have been pondering about. In the coming generations with even more alienation from traditional lifestyles, and further dependencies on digital and virtual interactions, a loss of touch and sense of identity can be perceived. Bringing empathy to this, there is a need to design games that help to learn by triggering a quest in dormant ideas.

2. The idea of identity, and the emergence of crisis

'Ethnicity' etymologically comes from the Greek word for people - 'ethnos'. Ethnicity is understood as a collective identity, shared as a sense of belonging through a common language, set of traditions, rituals or geographical territory. Awareness of one's own ethnicity is context - dependent (Westin, 2010).

The development of ethnic identities in the current scenario of the world of interconnected and volatile arrangements is constantly evolving. With the colonial regime and the industrial revolution in the past and globalization in the recent times, a lot of traditional practices, knowledge, and awareness of the roots has been lost, rendered obsolete, branded outdated or inferior. For instance, in textiles, the British placed Britain made clothing in India of a much lower quality that they introduced as one made in 'The Great Britain' and were to be worn by those who were Indian in skin and blood but had 'greater' tastes (Bauer, Imhalsy, Schmidt, Newman - 2002), while in the other areas too - from aesthetic treatments, use of colours - suddenly, housing was concrete and brick, and utility products were highly industrialized, and uniform. Slowly, the traditional practices started fading, as the masses framed trivialized perceptions of their roots. Today with migration and institutionalized perceptions, the awareness of ethnographic roots has lowered, with an increase in identity crisis among the millennials and corresponding generations.

Michael Foucault in his book, 'Discipline and Punish' interestingly points out how schooling systems, prison systems, and hospitals are similar in approach, and revolve around the idea of uniformity - with classrooms that look like cellular structures of the prison, instead of individual names - the use of roll numbers deeming the individual identity secondary, and the idea of punishment against disobedience. This shows the lack in educational systems for nurturing the identity of individuals, instead rewards for obeying (not questioning) and agreeing (not critically examining opinions) and punishes for questioning - the instructor functions like a strict disciplinarian (like a jailer) instead of a mentor. This adds to the identity crisis among those who then graduate from these educational systems, creating further alienation from the ethnic identities.

3. Re-introducing the idea of identity to children

Influences, mobilization and migration have established a sense of multiple ethnic roots - or rather, points of identification. The idea of identity now needs to be seen with a perspective that does not believe in freezing the conditions of the past in the sense of 'purity' of identity, but in understanding of the essence one identification point or a certain part of ethnicity brings and how it impacts their current comprehension of the world. There is a need to see identity as an evolving aspect of a collective. This however, also includes understanding where the roots of initial ideas are, and what is to be

preserved, and what needs to be rejected as individuals. Children operate from a sense of pure intuition, especially in the initial growing years. The idea of the collective identity along with creating an individual identity, and personal thought and opinion have to be inculcated in these years.

The understanding of what is home and what is 'identity' is a grey area in the current context -

- Has home always been like this? What kind of a home did my parents, grandparents, and their grandparents grow in?
- What does it define my roots and identity? What are the new influences that are now a part of my identity?
- Is the concrete brick and mortar more advanced over the mud homes in my supposed native place?
- Are the clothes I am wearing superior to what people wore earlier? What is the significance of certain elements that my grandparents carry on themselves?
- Where does the language I speak with my parents in, truly come from?
- Where in the world is it that I come from, truly? What can I call myself, if someone can place their identity through their community?
- What are these vessels and utensils preserved so well, do they come from an earlier time?
- What did my grandparents study at school? How was their schooling different from mine? Is mine superior, inferior or only evolved with time?
- What were some of the elements in the larger ecosystem of living? What animals were a part of the lifestyle and why?
- What is that pattern on my mother's clothing? Is it a part of a ritual or traditional practice? What is this practice like?
- Where did the idea for my video game emerge to the creator? What kind of games did people play in the earlier times?

These are examples of the kinds of questions that shall be triggered through culturally inclined games that show ethnic lifestyles and elements of the past. These shall depict the true essence - answering the what, why, and how instead of merely stating it as 'part of tradition'.

4. Gamification in cultural knowledge through traditional crafts

Traditional crafts are at the centre of cultural dynamic - whether it is about the lifestyles, relationships, and dependencies with a community, and further, social issues including economic welfare, gender roles, and sociological, religious and regional practices. Crafts are an indigenous identity. The material culture in craft practices evolves towards future relevance, and keeps narratives from the past alive. Post modernism lies in the co-existence of the past, the present and the future. From an educational point of view, children are usually limited to text and predominantly one sided information giving, rather than triggering an interactive need for information among the kids - cultivating a quest in why it is important for them to know - bringing the aspect of identity. The tangible essence of craft gives an insight into a culture through interaction for children, and simultaneously creating a new opportunity area for craft communities for positioning fresh outcomes for the contemporary times.

5. Gundiwali: The playground for prototyping culturally inclined games

i. About Gundiwali

Gundiwali is a town about 10 kilometres from Mandvi in Kutch, Gujarat, India. Mandvi is home to a 400 year old ship building industry. Gundiwali is home to one of the oldest terracotta pottery practicing community, the *Brar* Muslim community of potters. There are about 72 potter families in Gundiwali, out of which only 25 have sustained the craft practice, and continue till today. The community moulds local clay into various forms, mostly utilitarian and decorative earthenware, forms of which have been found similar to the ones in the Indus Valley and Harappa civilization remains.

ii. Ethnographic study within the craft community

Conducted as a part of the fellowship under the Craft CoLaborative fellowship programme hosted by the Design Innovation and Craft Resource Center, CEPT University, along with Manthan Educational Programme Society, Ahmedabad - the prototypes were developed rooting from the narratives of the craft community in Gundiwali.

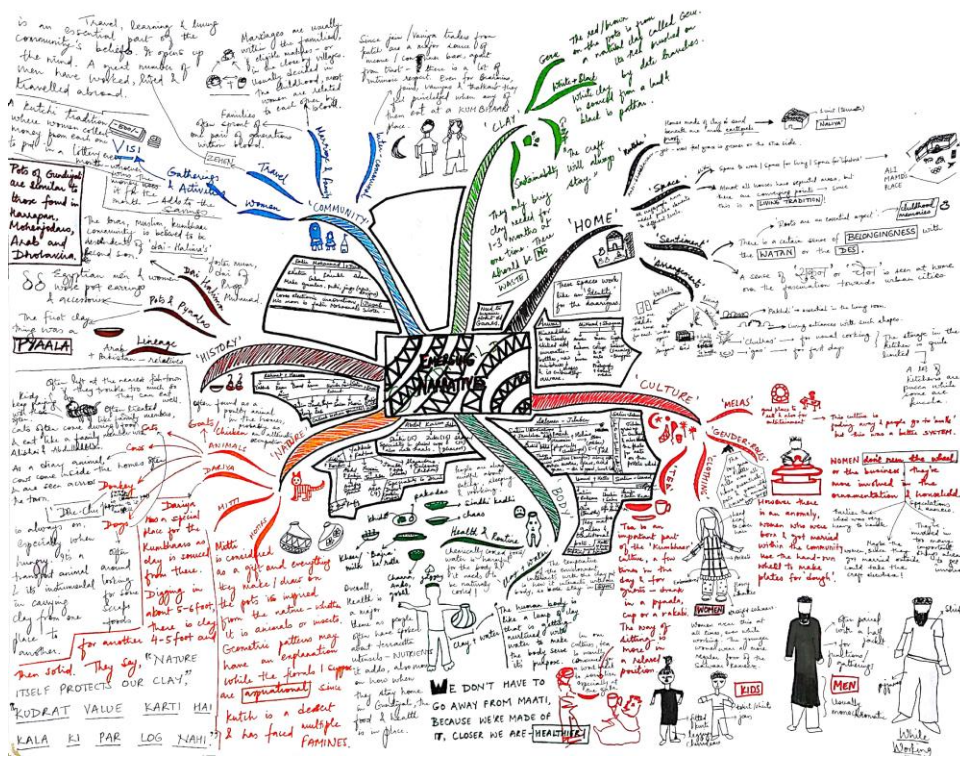


Figure.1 Mind mapping various narratives of Gundiayali from ethnographic study

Insights from the community narratives included various aspects including the dynamic between the various gender roles, intercommunal relationships, the identity of the ‘potter’ or the ‘kumbhaar’, and the religious identity. The interactions with nature, surroundings, animals, and the understanding of built environments and how it impacts human life. Stories about the material, its soul and essence above the monetary value was also evident. It is essentially the ‘maati’ that kept the community well bound.

The fact that everyone usually returns back ‘home’ and back to the ‘clay’ were strong sentiments that led to an enquiry into the essence of tradition. An imperative discussion was about how one lived, lives and hopes to live. Delving further into the nuances of the Muslim identity, the marriage as an institution would happen in the blood lines with first cousins, and preferably within the cluster. There is also a strong emotion associated with family.

The idea of community further emerged as what brought people together, the idea of the home - for which people who were working in larger cities returned back, the idea of ‘maati’ or the traditional livelihood and its association with the material, and the

moments of togetherness. There were also very evident collaboration links between the woodworking craft community, and those practicing textile crafts in the vicinity. This was interesting from a prototype development perspective.

iii. The idea of 'home'

As an observation, the concept of 'home' was strong among the elders in the community, however, most of the old systems of housing were getting lost in the village too. The craft practice is languishing slowly, since younger craftspeople are leaving the trade for they perceive industrial jobs to be of higher repute. There is a high rejection of ethnic roots in here as well, and a rather unaware alienation from roots in the urban scenario. Bridging this gap, the playhouse aims to bring a sense of pride and gravitas in the traditional practices around traditional lifestyles among the young craftspeople, while developing a playhouse for kids to learn about new cultures, and triggering a quest to delve deeper into their own roots, and comprehension of identity. The cultures they learn about through this may also reflect in nuances of what they see around themselves, facilitating a dialogue between children, grandparents or mentors. Traditional craft as mediums also help bringing back tangibility, human touch and physical tactility in practice in the highly digital, virtual world.

iv. Prototype Development, the game: 'Sukoon', the Kutchi Kumbhar's abode

'Sukoon', Potter's Abode, the house of a Kutchi Kumbhar, bringing out the sentiment behind 'home', talking about the historical traditions, the culture and also the lifestyle which shows a great integration of the craft practice as a livelihood, and how the family life exists around it. There are cultural nuances and specific reasons behind everything that's there in the house, whether it is the curved halved clay modules (or *desi nariyas*) for letting rainwater pass through smoothly, keep the house warm in cold days and vice versa with air passages, or the large earthenware pot, '*kuthi*' to store grains for a longer period. Interactive gamification for an educative experience with a tangible physical existence of material, a play house from the Indian origin of sorts. Prototype development revolved around a lot of ambiguity, since the playhouse needed to have some permanent parts to make the framework of the structure, and a few dynamic ones so there is interactivity and tangible outcomes of the activity.



Figure.2 Documenting and understanding the different aspects of 'home' and the craft practice

Starting with making small miniatures of different objects with the *Kuthi* (grain storage jar) and *Kulhad* (glass) as the references, there would be inputs from the entire neighbourhood around. For the playhouse initially, we were to use clay to make walls, and using grooves to connect them. But since clay is fragile, and also when it interacts with the close surroundings, it often expands and reduces, so there could be problems with the grooves. Donkey poop is a material often used to give strength to clay if a flat surface needs to be made. With magnets inserted inside the walls and joining them together, it could have a modular structure. With this the modules had to be very small, and post firing, often clay tilts to one side. This makes it difficult for the wall to look one when attached in parts. After exploring a few materials including wood, ply and micro-fiber board, we found the boards that are used for *chullas*, which are locally known as fiber

boards, available in Gundiyali itself. They were pressed, dried clay boards with a mix. One can drill holes in these, and create a structure.



Figure.3 Phases of prototype development

The house with a living room and a bedroom, is equipped with various regional and cultural nuances, with the '*Pachni*' (a raised platform on the wall against the door) where plates and utensils are arranged aesthetically, then '*Madhuni*', along with '*Khaats*', '*Petis*' as the bed, storage cabinet, and earthenware pots used for various occasions like the '*Ghadi*', which has a significant use in weddings. The workshop area is an open space with a roof overhead, where one could squat / sit and turn the wheel making artefacts, and keep them around to dry out. This space is full of products to be sold to customers or to distributors who come in. The organically emerging '*aangan*' space where living and working meet, with '*Khaats*' to sit around and socialize among neighbours, to play area for the kids, storage and to dry the artefacts, also to do the ornamentation part. This also worked as a display for trade.



sukoon

THE KUTCHI KUMBHAR'S ABODE



The idea of 'home'

A sense of belonging

Figure.4 Prototype informative booklet: Playhouse Instructible



Figure.5 Prototype informative booklet: Entire space of the playhouse

Living area | Ghar

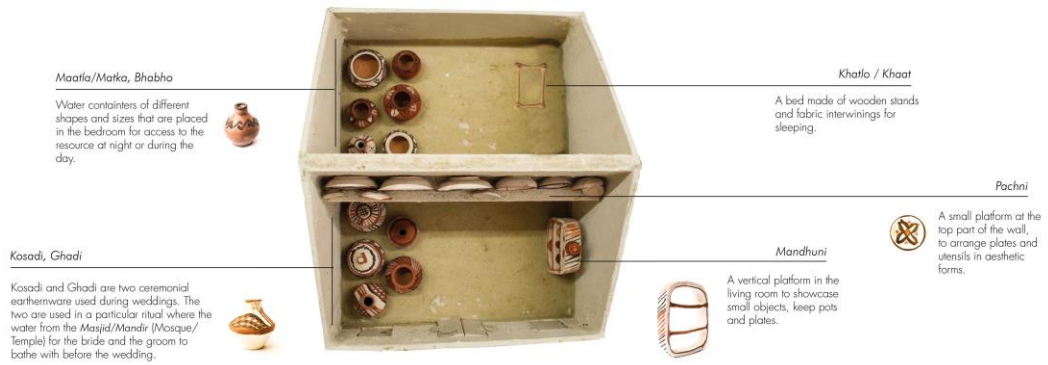


Figure.6 Prototype informative booklet: Living Space & its elements

Cooking area | Rasodo

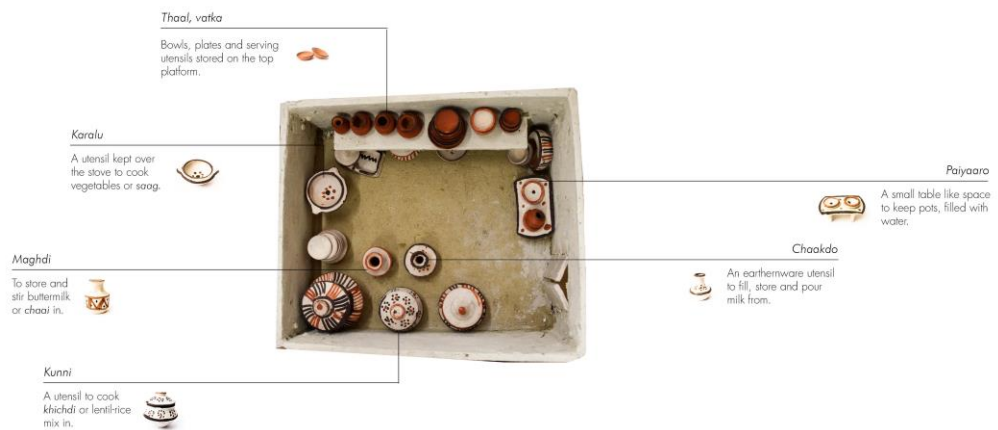


Figure.7 Prototype informative booklet: Cooking Space & its elements

Workshop area | Chhapro



Figure.7 Prototype informative booklet: Workshop Space & its elements

Open area | Aangan

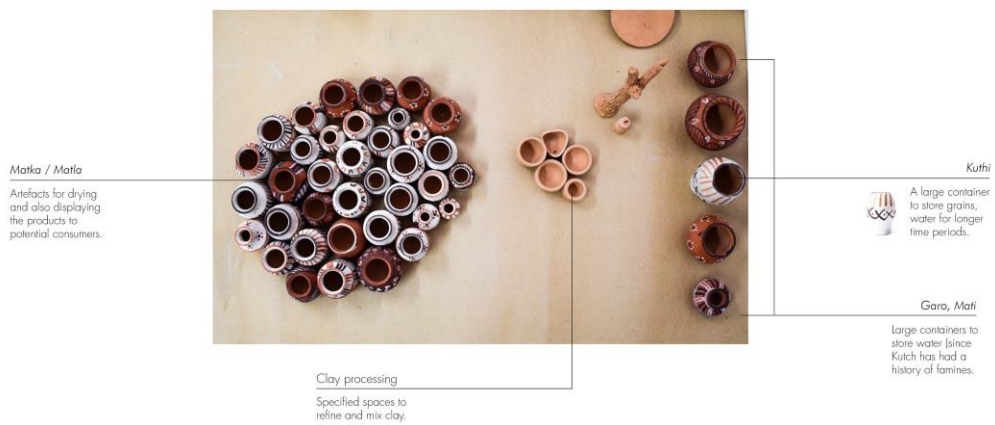
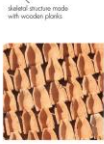


Figure.8 Prototype informative booklet: Aangan or Open Space & its elements

Roof / Nariya - Mubiya



The roof / Nariya - Mubiya

The roof is a skeletal structure made with wooden planks, on top of which Desi Nariyas or clay modules are placed as fitting halves.

Each clay module has to be shaved from the back to make it fitting, and it placed in such a way for keeping air passages, while clay interacts with the environment and keeps the house cooler during summers, and warmer during winters, the passages between the modules allow for ventilation and structures for preventing rain water to fall inside the house, providing a passage.

The Mubiyas are larger modules that are placed at the middle of the partition in the roof, to solidify the roof built.



Figure.9 Prototype informative booklet: Roofing systems & the house elements



Figure.10 Prototype: Living structure



Figure.11 Prototype: Roofing System



Figure.12 Prototype: The Entire Playhouse



Figure.12 Prototype in use in local context in Gundiyali, with maker Anwarbhai Kumbhar

The roofs have a specific architectural style, as semi round modules that are thinner in the start, and wider at the ends, called '*desi nariyas*' which fit into each other creating space for air ventilation and for rainwater to not enter the homes. These also kept the homes warm in winter and cooler in summer due to the properties of clay and the air current flow designed in the apt way. To be essentially played by kids between the ages of 8 years to 12 years, it is an interactive educational experience, with information about the community, the craft and earthenware, it also gives them an insight into ancient form.



Figure.13 Prototype on display at the Kanoria Arts Gallery, as a part of an exhibit, Ekatra, spinning the wheel together

6. Conclusion

Culturally inclined games are sources of intrigue and realization for children, triggering curiosity for pressing as well as dormant quests in the mind. It is essential to bring a sensorial experience to the children to make it an all-encompassing learning and playing activity, where the aspect of 'learn' is involuntary, and comes from within, and not imposed. The playhouse prototype developed in Gundiyali, Kutchch has been constantly in a testing phase in the exhibition - Ekatra, where it was on display for a live interaction, and after that has been tested further on a one-on-one with kids across the ages of 5 to 12. The prototype finds a place in many areas of primary education - whether it is for play at home, at school, in interactive museum spaces, libraries, public display areas, galleries, or even amusement parks.

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