

The Playful Olympics

Playday, August, 2012

Introduction

The following brief notes are a summary of the range of playful prompts developed for Playday 2012 (1st August). It is not intended to be a comprehensive account of everything that took place but gives an overview of some of the things that were set up.

The overall intention of the day was to develop a series of interventions across the galleries to provoke playful responses (i.e. using the space, materials, bodies in a different way, and by being 'different' to create momentary states of 'joy', pleasure etc.). In other words, playful moments that temporarily exceeded the limitations that being in a museum might impose on children and adults.

Given the time of year and the national interest generated by the Olympics, a guiding theme for the day was to create provocations that led to setting 'world records', or played with and adapted some of the conventional sports. This is a slight departure from previous work in that it implies a more directed approach rather than simply disturbing space to see what might happen. For many of the gallery staff, the intention of the day was only made apparent prior to the Museum opening when the theme was introduced to the group. This was a deliberate stance as it required creative and improvised responses to the challenge rather than well-thought out and (over) planned ideas. But to support this, there were a range of fairly random prompts made available to the group. Also a range of materials were brought in to support creative thinking.

Within a short space of time a number of ideas emerged – this might be called a 'rehearsal' stage in terms of planning for play (Lester, 2008) in which the properties of ideas, materials and space are playfully explored to see what might emerge. An important principle here is to see this as planning for 'openness', i.e. a range of prompts that will lead to creativity and novelty in using bodies, space and materials rather than planning for a specific form of action (what has been called elsewhere as 'blue peter play'). It is important not to get too caught up in this distinction as there is little cause-effect relationship between what adults intend and what children actually do in their play, but it is a useful approach for gallery staff to adopt when designing interventions and takes us back to the training sessions and the spirit of 'what might happen if' rather than planning for every eventuality.

At this stage, gallery staff started to develop their own ideas – including the lovely nonsense of making an 'Olympic torch' for children to carry around the museum and pass on to other children. I did see a child later in the day refusing to pass it on, in spite of requests from parents (I wonder if he took it home?). Other ideas emerged – an obstacle course, sword fighting using newspaper and tape with ball/spoon added to make it even harder! The interns had also brought along a list of possible prompts – a copy of which is added at the end of these notes.

The prompts and challenges

This section introduces a range of the interventions used throughout the day – it is not an exhaustive account of what evolved, but does cover some of the happenings on that day!

Marble run

This challenge used a cardboard tube to transfer marble across marked area – originally set up in discovery centre and later moved into main entrance and coin gallery – and with children and adults joining in to set a ‘record’ . this was really popular and set a good tone to the museum by being based in the reception area.

Block building

Using foam blocks to build biggest tower – in natural world’s gallery – this was an ‘impromptu’ use of materials which generated great involvement from children and adults. The materials were attractive and the museum interns helped here through their general playful infectiousness. Towers of crazy shapes and heights were created from the oddly-shaped foam blocks from computer packaging. These were played with extensively by whole family groups, and by children in pairs or alone. Absorption in the activity was such that it was centre stage but no one was looking around to check if they were in the way of anybody else – it was great to watch.

Sword making and fighting

In weapons gallery – using newspaper and tape to make a sword and then to challenge opponent. The sword fight took place with ball balanced on a spoon and the intention was to dislodge the opponent’s ball to ‘win’ – very popular with children, and many children seen walking through the museum brandishing their paper swords. Making the swords was a really popular activity and probably about 50 “sword fights” took place throughout the day. This seemed to work best when facilitated by an enthusiastic VSA who adapted the “rules” to suit the ages of the kids. Smaller children were observed as mostly doing the activity, and their fights were short. Slightly older kids played for longer, had more signs of enjoyment in the ridiculousness and fun of the activity. The “arena” would have been better if it were larger, or if spoons were bigger to keep hold of the tennis balls, but it was a really attractive activity for children, and one the VSAs seemed to enjoy facilitating.

Obstacle course

Set up in natural worlds by interns, using rope, hoops etc. – very popular and children also using stuff independently. 2 different courses made during the day. The Museum Interns were very playful and more hands off with the public p.m. which was brilliant as it gave a playful giggly feel to the space and prompted (permitted) other things to happen with the materials left in the space. E.g. foam block building above.

Football

Shooting ball into cardboard box, blindfolded – again another popular activity. This was led by 2 different VSAs in the space at the bottom of the steps in the fossils gallery. Mainly observed this happening with shooting a soft ball into a smallish cardboard box. Didn't observe any blindfolds being used in this activity, but this did happen during the day.

Plane/javelin making

In weapons gallery – the idea here was to make a paper aeroplane/javelin out of newspaper and see how far it could fly. The activity went on extensively all day. Boys 6-7+ were main participants, some wanting not just 3 shots (as per "rules") but wanting many more to prove to themselves they could do better. We had a record sheet up for the longest distances flown, and javelin records. This was purely children getting into this one – as it was easy to make on their own, they refined their own planes or javelins and get into it. Parents were mostly watching/encouraging, although a few did make one themselves, but mostly were spectators.

Hoops on the floor

There was lots of use by children, rolling, jumping etc. At one point this was developed into more formal prompt – how far can you get jumping through hoops with one breath – signalling this by continually saying 'dho, dho, dho...' This led to lots of children having a go, and trying to beat their records – frantic and breathless. When I did a bit of evaluation with families leaving the museum later in the afternoon, the children mostly said their favourite thing was the hoops (followed by turning the mat over challenge, ropes and building).

Numbers maze

This was set up initially in main entrance – and once rule explained people could just get on with it to work their way through (although notionally timed!). The idea was to move through the numbers on a grid in a logical way according to the instructions. It is deceptively difficult and attracted the attention of family groups rather than just children. Later this moved into Manchester Gallery where again was attractive – but it needs someone to be there to explain the 'rules' for the maze. When this had a helper to explain/time and encourage this worked really well otherwise it did attract curiosity and was attractive because of its position. Foreign student groups were really interested in it. It might work with a really clear instructions posted up if a helper wasn't around.

How many can stand on the card

This was set up in the money gallery – there was some response to set a record, although this probably needed more structure and prompting to get it going

Pad racing

This was in the natural world's gallery – teams racing to cross from one side of the gallery to the other using foam pads as stepping stones. Both adults and children were participating

A4 tower

The challenge here was to build the highest free-standing tower to be built from 10 sheets of paper and 10 pieces of sellotape. Set up in Egypt gallery initially, with a couple of families having a go – interestingly the adults seemed to take over and their ideas were not as creative as the children – returning later I noticed some very interesting shapes and attempts. Olga took some really good “artistic” photos of these and was very good at encouraging participation. She worked with a family from Denmark who were really positive and said that they were really impressed with everything, and that they didn't have anything like this in Denmark!

A4 paper strip

This challenge was set up in the ancient world's gallery with sign – ‘what is the longest continuous strip that can be made from a sheet of A4 paper’. The sign/materials were largely ignored, although a couple of children and one adult did attempt this. The adult got completely engrossed in the task – ignoring the children in her charge – and then realised they were not with her, somewhat panicked and set off to look for them only to find they were sitting behind her – but by the time she realised this the children has torn the strip of paper!

21 coins

This was set up in the money gallery, following simple rules, to take 1,2, or 3 coins in turn – the person who has to pick up the last coin is the loser. It did attract some attention, again from adults as much as children. Observed some interest from children with an adult with them, and involvement was prompted by the gallery VSA

Parachute over tables in Discovery Centre – not sure if any use was made of this?

Comment from playscheme organiser – who had brought a group of children to the museum, an annual feature of their summer playscheme, that the children had thought this the best visit to the

museum – indeed were reluctant to leave. PW thought it was a really good idea and great to see children being able to play in the museum

Comment from grandparent: who had followed the marble run prompt through the galleries so he and his granddaughter could have a go – really enjoyed doing something different and challenging, a good laugh!

Discussion points

- There was a good range of stuff happening, most of it around the ‘theme’, and largely structured in the sense that it required some adult set-up and explanation. I think there is some value in this as it allows gallery staff to get the feel of children playing, and starts to get them to think about the nature of their interactions with children. But I think it is important to balance this with ways of simply disturbing space to see what might happen e.g. the parachute, leaving hoops lying around etc – that work alongside the more directed interventions and allow children to develop their own ways of moving and playing in the space
- It is important to ‘sell’ the HM experiment – as visitors enter the museum, it is nice to see something playful happening, and this can give a signpost to other playful discoveries that might be found – creates a sense of anticipation. It is also ok for gallery staff to approach children/families to invite participation – it doesn’t matter if they say ‘no’! It was good to see branded posters up and felt it helped visitors know they could join in, maybe portable signage play “stops” would work in future
- It would be good to collect ideas and develop a resource bank that offers a repertoire of prompts and provocations and builds up a store of flexible materials. A set of instruction sheets to go with the materials and prompts would also be helpful – as things like the maze really needed showing before it could be led. It doesn’t matter if the rules get changed or adapted, would be useful to have something set down as a starting point. Sharing how it went and any adaptations would be helpful too.

The original ideas and prompts

These are some of the random thoughts and ideas that came up when planning for national Playday. We felt that given it was Olympic time might be an idea to try and set some 'world records':

- What is the longest strip that can be torn from a sheet of A4 paper?
- What is the furthest distance you can throw a balloon (one breath and then released)? Can be a group challenge
- How far can you walk with one breath?
- Some small group challenges – fastest time to cross area without touching the floor
- Pass the cards – for group of 5 children/adults – timed to pass cards
- Group juggle – 6 children/adults – 3 timed chances
- What is the furthest you can extend length of newspaper from table
- What is the tallest free standing tower that can be built from 10 sheets of a4 paper and 10 pieces of sellotape
- Balls in a tube carried over a marked distance
- How many different items can you collect in the bag within 2 minutes – strict time (could possibly then arrange items into collage/sculpture)
- Eggs and straws – stop an egg from breaking when dropped to the floor
- Group hum – 5/6 people timed to hum continuous note to set record
- Marble run – using whatever is at hand to construct something to keep marble off the floor for as long as possible
- Balancing cup of water over obstacle course
- Blindfold hoop walk
- How many can stand on a piece of card
- Sword fighting – make sword from newspaper (3 sheets) – challenge others with ball/spoon in 'arena'
- Paper plane record – over measured distance – 1 sheet of A4 paper (or more?)
- Balloon/ shot putt challenge – using water balloon over measured distance – throw and catch
- Foot to foot walking – for teams of three/four/five – over measured distance and timed to set record
- Fastest time to say given nursery rhyme – one word each in sequence – can be timed for 2/3/4+ children
- Crossing marked area in sequence saying words from theme – or words from nursery rhyme
- Volleyball beach ball – with hands tied together
- Keeping balloons aloft – one more balloon than people
- Swap the circle – for larger groups – timed to swap places – each must go through the hoop – must always be 2 people in the hoop, both feet – but must not touch each other
- Obstacle course – silent and all staying in touch with rope, but cannot touch each other at any time – timed over measured distance
- 4 person stand up according to given instructions

Other prompts

Getting past the sleeping attendant

Playing rock/paper/scissors to get past the gallery attendant

Walking the rope

Electrified floor in gallery – must go through without touching floor/ legs tied

Stepping stones across a river – carpet squares

Goblins gambling game – defeat the goblin/gallery attendant at favourite game of '21' coins

Hoops over swamp – fastest time/chased by gallery attendant

Sell, sell, sell – objects in a bag to be transformed into a brand new product/ a house for the future/

The giant conch shell – instructions and card/pens

Newspaper costumes /monsters/armour/weapons – for ball/spoon sword fighting

Kitchen roll – see what happens again

Hopscotch

Nought and crosses – human form

Group carry – according to given instructions/monster walk

Cardboard boxes left lying around – with some rope/tape

Getting through the maze following instructions

Crossing over an area without touching rope, hoops etc – possibly blindfold in pairs

Find the 'treasure'

Ball on a rope – swing in doorway – must get past without getting caught