**Parkour as play and learning**

* **A phenomenological analysis of movement culture and self-organization**

Two young men leap from one wall to another, turn a somersault, land on their feet and continue their run. They jump on benches and trashcans, balance on rails and does continues down the street and disappear around the corner. Around the corner they’re met by the sign: *“No play and ballgames in the street”*. The sign is a relic of 1867, when play and ballgames were forbidden in the streets of Copenhagen (Schytte 2004:14). Earlier on thestreet corners wereassociated with disorder and potential troubles while sports often wereassociated with positive development, health and cultural, democratic and social values.

Today play is acknowledged as an important and fundamental aspect in child-culture. Nevertheless, children do not play as often and as actively and as they did just 20 years ago. Children spend more and more time in front of the TV and the computer. It is especially around the age of 13 that we see a drastic fall in the time spend in active play. In Denmark we spend a lot of time and money trying to get more physical activity into the institutions. We do this because of the positive relationship between physical activity and children’s development and learning, which has its foundation in the basic relation between children’s play, development and learning (Leontjews, 1977, Vygotskij, 1982). The main part of the play induced in formal institutions as kindergartens and schools, or special play-institutions like “Gerlev Legepark” (Gerlev Playpark) or by special play-projects as “Legepatruljen” (The Play Patrol) are played out with an instructor or pedagogue telling the kids what to play, how and when: “Now we do this and this and you should…” The play is managed by theinstructor or pedagogue. This structure is well-known from the Danish tradition of gymnastic were the instructor plays a central role in defining and controllingthe particular exercises. The interesting question is what role the self-determination has for play. Is the institutional focus not a contradictionto the free play and some of the learning that free play enables?

However there appears to be a growing recognition of the non-institutionalized free play and non-sport activities such as the growing focus on public playground development and design and grantsto projects dealing with development of street activities. Last year “Gam3” opened “StreetMekka, a 2200 sqm indoor facility for street activities in Copenhagen with Fund resources from Copenhagen municipality“Lokale- og Anlægsfonden”. “Gam3” is a non-profit urban sports organization in Copenhagen that is promoting a sport-for-all principle. The aim is to offer facilities to the practitioners of the street where they can train *as* they like it and *when* they like it.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Danish Gymnastic and Sports Association (DGI) have developed at project called “Underground”. The aim is to develop a tighter relation between the street activities and the organization.[[2]](#footnote-2) Despite these good intentionsthe problem is that they are still organized to a certain point or refer children to a certain and limited facility for their play. In “StreetMekka” you have to be a paying member and it closes at 21 pm each night.[[3]](#footnote-3) Is the self-organized practice fundamentally a contradiction to institutionalization and organized practice or is it because we are afraid of the uncontrolled and unknown?

We need to do more research on the cultures and configurations of free play and non-institutionalized and non-sporting activities and what possible values that the practice createto those bodily involved. Is self-determination possible when play has to be related to - an always promote - learning? A critical point to the relation of play and learning is adults play. Adults engage in much play although they call it by other names: entertainment, leisure, activation of their kids or party. The play loses its relevance when only related to children’s learning and the psychologist of development thesis about progress. The adult play is an understudied field, but has the possibility to bring more multi-faceted knowledge to the theory of play and the relation between play and learning. By focusing on free play and the potential positive values and learning aspects that characterizes parkour, it may be possible to create better opportunities for these activities to spread joy and laughter in the future.

**Parkour as case**

However some kids do not stop playing and opposes the above mentioned tendency. A still growing number of young people reclaim the streets with jumps and leaps. As described in the beginning they use benches, stairs and rails for expressive physical activity and name it parkour. Parkour does not fit into existing categories but is described as an interdisciplinary mixture of gymnastics, art, dance or simply movement of freedom (Gilchrist and Wheaton: 112). The practices contain an idea about non-sportification although there have been attempts to develop formal championships as for example “Red bull art of motion”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Parkour has its origins in the French suburbs where it in the 1990s evolved as a subculture (Atkinson: 172) but has the last 5 years evolved internationally especially because of the use of the social media site www.youtube.com.[[5]](#footnote-5) Parkour is often articulated by practitioners as the learning of moving efficiently and quickly through the city and in boarder views as the ability to confront and overcome obstacles[[6]](#footnote-6). As Gilchrist and Wheaton describe, parkour shares some characteristics with other lifestyle “sports” like skateboarding, such as dissociation from formal competition, an emphasis on self-expression an managing an experimental attitude to risk (Gilchrist and Wheaton: 112) Another similarity with many lifestyle “sports” and street activities is the formation of self-organized groups. Despite this principle of self-organized practice and group formation, there are many parkour teams and formal health and child institutions that offer formal and regular classes. Because of the popularity of parkour in Denmark we are interested in using this as an activating activity in the institutions, both formal such as schools and leisure clubs as well as in the voluntary associations of sport and leisure. The study of parkour as case is interesting because it is an example of a self-organized activity that are being organized and institutionalized. What does this organization and institutionalizations do to the activity? Do the practitioners not learn something in the self organized practice around the city that could legitimize more free time and free spaces of free play and bodily exploration? Another interesting point is, that parkour might be understood as play in a youth phase, where play normally is regarded as a part of a children's phase. Young people are normally explicitly or implicitly regarded as non-playing. In this context, parkour research has a critical point.

**Problem statement**

The main objectives are to create a deeper understanding of the self-organized practice of parkour and the potential body-cultural learning it brings to those bodily engage and further investigate what effect the institutionalization and organization of this has. A broader objective is to do critical research on the relation between play and learning.

The overall research questions are:

* **What qualities does the self organized practice of parkour by the young people promote? In other words: what is it all about?**
* **What kind of body-cultural learning does the practice promote?**

* **What influence does the organization have on the body-cultural learning that the activity of parkour seems to promote?**

The project will be a phenomenological analysis emanating starting from these research questions. The project is carried out as a phenomenological case study of parkour as a topic of current interest and a popular activity that attracts children, young people and even adults. The case study offers the opportunity of forming a phenomenological basis where the practice by the practitioners becomes the point of departure, and additionally to create a understanding of the subjective dimension of the multiple and complex meanings and aspects of learning (Launsø og Rieper 2005:94).

The relation between play and learning is by now given such a natural validity, that it is difficult to differentiate between the two. I want to apply a critical approach to the positive relationship between play and learning. The concept of play is referring to the total playing interaction that takes place and the experience as a whole. Instead of investigating which pre-defined social, physical or psychical competencies the activity seems to promote I want to do a phenomenological study about the experienced body-cultural learning in the present and bodily practice. The meaning is to open up for a more multi-faceted knowledge about the relation between play and learning that does not exclusively combine with child-culture.

In order to research the influence that the organization and institutionalization have on the activity and the potential body-cultural learning, the research will include a comparative analysis of two different configurations of the activity. I will follow four young people (18-23 years old) in their organized practice at a course in parkour at “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole” and four young people (18-23 years old) in their self-organized practice around the streets by using participant observation and informal interviews.

Denmark does have a high share of active citizens in both voluntary institutions and commercial institutes, but the score covers that only few are engaged in self-organized activities and play (Kulturministeriet 2009). The goal is to create a fundamental knowledge, which can develop good circumstances for self-organized play henceforth, in streets as well as inside the institutions.

**The scientific field of play**

Play is valued and wanted, but what *is* play? The psychologists of developmenthave tried to explain the meaning of play from a developmental or rational perspective. In Piagets cognitive theory play is the way children construct their cognitive structures. Vygotskij looked at play as the place where children construct what he defines as the ”nearest development zone”.In Leontjews corporate psychology the play is the child’s dominating activity, where social adaption, feeling of collectivity and the role of adults is being practiced (Leontjew, 1977). Focus on play as central to children’s development has had the consequence that we hardly ever hear about play without any relation to learning.

Brian Sutton-Smith has done critical work on the relation between play and learning with his “*dysfunctionalle”* theory of play. With this concept he described that it is not possible to create an understanding of play’s own value and meaning by only looking at its progressive function and by analyzing the positive advantage of development from play (Sutton-Smith, 1984, 1978, 1971, 1967). Sutton-Smith’s question is: What should adults or elderly learn by playing? Maybe the cultural analysis of play should be differentiated from child-culture and be assigned its own independence, importance and meaning. The culture of play does interact with child-culture. Play is the dominant form of expression for children and the repression of play is an important indicator for the young and adult identities. The claim is that in spite of the interaction between play culture and child-culture there is a risk that we will miss the independent meaning of play if we treat it as simply the same as child-culture (Sutton-Smith 1997:48). Sutton-Smith has prior worked with a “trickle-down” theory of play´s occasional but not regular extrinsic adaptive value but stress that it is highly dependent on individual difference in creative capacity and flexibility. Although we still does not have evidence that seems to support very clear causal relationship between play-development and age-related development (Sutton-Smith 1997:46). In this PhD project I want to explore the body-cultural learning that is the precondition for and related to the practice of playing. The question is: Is this learning an important and interesting aspect if it does not have any extrinsic adaptive value? As Sutton-Smith notes it is probable that successful play experience increases the potential for continued happy playing and that these successful play experience are depended on social adaption into the very difficult social arena of the play situation (Sutton-Smith 1997:44).

The PhD project shall include a study of the criticism proposed by Sutton-Smith of the one-sided thesis of play as general progress. Play is more than child-culture and can contain dimensions that are directly opposed to development or health. For example some children find great pleasure in torturing animals in there play and some engage in dangerous activities such as train surfing. What do they learn from that? Obviously not anything particular favorable, but this aspect does not make the plays or their meaning less relevant.Brian Sutton-Smith has used the concept ”frivolity”about the informal play that pragmatic can be described as nonsense (Sutton-Smith 1997). The plays of nonsense must be treated with great seriousness because of their existence and because they must be contained with meanings important for the children, young people or adults that are engaged in these plays.

To create a deeper and more multi-faceted understanding of plays own values and plays relation to learning the requirement is an analytic framework that offers a starting point from where the phenomenological value of play in its current appearance can be studied.

**The play and learning perspectives**

The aim of this project is to make a critical stand to learning as the legitimizing factor for play in spite of learning always being a condition of and an inseparable part of playing. The bodily concept of learning understands learning as a human phenomenon in a fundamental existential combination.

Jørn Møller carried on the work of the phenomenological anthropology of play from Viktor von Weizsäcker, Helmuth Plessner, F. J. J. Buytendijk, Johan Huizinga og Eugen Fink (Møller 2001:141).According to the phenomenologist’s the human being is not anything that an individual possess once and for all, but it arise in a continually interaction between the subject and the world. It is the mutual way in which we enter the world and the world enters us (Zahavi 2003:11).With his theory of bodily phenomenology Merleau-Ponty describes the human being as bodily (Merleu-Ponty 1994:96). As a bodily being the human sense, act and enter the cultural world and in this way create meaning. Being is not primarily a question about ideas, but about practice as the bodily interaction with the world.

The starting point for this analysis of play will be a continuing of the research carried out by Jørn Møller in the intentional relation between the players and the world that their movements manifest in. In this way the concept of learning in this project is differentiated from the pedagogic and functional concepts of learning that focus on social, physical and psychological competences that dominate the field. Play is here being understood as a form of immediate capture of body and the cultures of parkour and not as developing competences in relation to prejudiced categories and boxes.

**Method**

With the activity of parkour it is possible to investigate an activity that is both self-organized and organized in institutional framings. The aim is to choose two contexts that represent the free and self-organized context and the organized, produced and controlled context respectively. Eight young people will be studied in there bodily engagement with use of ethnographic field observations and informal qualitative interviews. The observations and the informal interviews will form the starting point for the phenomenological analysis.

**The choice of parkour as case**

Parkour differ from sport by stressing freedom of movement and anti-standardization. Furthermore there exist no previously spatial or temporal delimitation that separate the activity from everyday life. In my former research into parkour in connection with my Master thesis, parkour appeared as a play of movement where the practitioners are primarily focusing on gaining important bodily experience. The playing approach that does contain a particular focus on bodily learning and development to the urban space and were bodily experience are chased on benches and rails makes parkour a relevant study of self-organized free play that engage children, young people and even adults with enthusiasm. Parkour is a very popular activity in Denmark which is reflected in many municipalities’ interest and initiatives to create parkour-oriented spaces for movement and the voluntary sports associations’ interest in getting parkour on their schedule.

The evaluation of the ”Plug N Play” area in Ørestad shows that the parkour park is the most visited place with a random sample of 702 users in 7 days from the 19th of August to the 12th of September 2010 (Bjørn, N. Stavnsager S, Carlberg N. 2011:11-12). In Denmark, Parkour started as a self-organized activity, but is being institutionalized into the voluntary sport associations and into the Danish “højskoler”.[[7]](#footnote-7) At “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole” they offer “Streetmovement” as a course with special focus on parkour. The two different practice forms enable studies of the effect that the organization of the activity has for the play and the body-cultural learning that it requires and enables.

Parkour does attract especially children and young people, but also adults. Both “Streetmovement” and “Team JiYo”, two professional Danish parkour teams offer classes for adults. The activity is as other street activities male dominated, but the organized classes’ results in an increasing number of girls engaging in the activity. Therefore the case study of parkour also gives the opportunity to including gender as a dimension in the study of the relation between play and learning.

To sum up, the case study of parkour opens up for a deeper and more multi-faceted knowledge about a self-organized activity that attracts and brings enthusiasm today across age and gender. The objective is not statistical generalized knowledge about play in singular. Play is never one thing, but manifest and contains different dimensions at different times under different circumstances. To select one play or particular dimensions as representative for al play is problematic, because by doing this we miss the uniqueness, particularity and spontaneity of the play. The objective is instead to contribute with particular enlightened knowledge. Parkour cannot be treated as a homogenously activity, but is characterized by many different manifests. The different names: “parkour”, “le parkour”, “Freerunning”, “Freedom of movement” or “Art de displacement” are altogether indications of the activity not only as a culture in singular but of an existence of several fundamental ideas of moving fluidly, creative and efficient over or through urban obstacles that has diffused into different national movement cultures. Some practitioners see freerunning as a distinctive activity because of the valuation of somersaults and twist while others see it as a highly advanced parkour. **[[8]](#footnote-8)**

**The choosing of context and responders**

In the choosing of the two contexts and responders the aim is not to give a statistical generalized picture of the activity, but to find some contexts and practitioners that provides me with an understanding of their bodily practice, the meanings it creates and the effect that the institutionalization and organization of the self-organized practice has.

For the study of the self-organized practice I will select four young people in the age of 18-23 which I will follow in their daily practice around the streets. The responders are going to be chosen based on their engagement and dedication to the activity. To create the possibility for a deeper and more multi-faceted understanding of the activity and practice the premise is responders that frequently practice the activity and have created an understanding themselves about their practice. Because parkour does not contain the same standardization as sport the practitioners cannot be chosen based on their level. As informative for an organized, produced and controlled context “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole” and the course “Streetmovement” is chosen. “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole” is among the first who has tried to develop parkour as a course at a ”højskole” under the name of ”Streetmovement”. This gives the possibility to study the unique and high institutionalized form of parkour, opposed to the more spontaneous and self-organized parkour around the streets of Denmark. I will choose four responders, two boys and two girls. “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole” is also chosen because it is the most institutionalized context for parkour in Denmark. Further, “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole” is an representative for the institution of ”højskoler”, that is a traditional and cultural part of the Danish culture of general education. The focus on the national context is useful for further studies of variation in the contemporary significance of parkour at an international level. The choice of ”Streetmovement” at ”Gerlev Idrætshøjskole” and the practice around the streets of Denmark are two extremes for the organization of parkour, which gives the opportunity to locate the effects of this organization.

**Specifying the project and its delimitations**

The primary focus of the project is the relation between the play’s configuration and the potential aspects of learning in the two different contexts. The aim is not an evaluation of the two contexts, but rather an exploration: What is going on when parkour is practiced as spontaneous and self-organized versus organized and controlled respectively. The objective is to create a multi-faceted understanding of the play that is being played today and to illuminate the difference in body-cultural learning that the different contexts give rise to. That makes both contexts relevant in the project. The comparative analysis of the relation between play and learning will be driven by epistemological relevance and not systematic. Different age groups and levels of organization would be interesting to include but the project has to be feasible in two years.

**Target group**

The interesting target group is young people that have stopped playing. The latest research has showed that it is especially in the age from 13-15 years to 16-19 years old that the engagement in sport and the general physical activity reduces (Ibsen & Nielsen 2008:7). It is foremost girls from the bigger cities (Kulturministeriet 2009: 17). The tendency is often a combination of a reduction in active transport, more time in front of the computer and TV and a reduction in play that demand physical activity (Ibsen & Nielsen 2008). In the rapport it is described how this group of young people from 13-19 years old has a need for more flexible offers and offers that make it possible to make use of existing social networks (Kulturministeriet 2009:51). Although there is made an effort with ”sport” kindergarten and ”Legepatruljer”[[9]](#footnote-9) they do not affect the group of young people because they have crossed these institutions age limit.

Parkour does as a self-organized activity has the possibility to unfold in a flexible manner and make use of existing social networks. Parkour is being practiced by young people that have not stopped playing and still keeps moving physically in their free time. Many of the young people describe that it is not just a dedication to at sport but it is a playing attitude towards life.

**Participant observation and informal qualitative interviews**

The field observations will be conducted with varying levels of participation. Through participant observation it is possible to gain insight into the bodily and verbal acts that constitute the activity and the meanings that they create. Participant observation will be used in an unstructured manner were the starting point will be the conditions that the play creates (Kristiansen & Krogstrup 1999:47).

In the participant observation I have to keep an explicit focus on my own bodily and emotional experience and keep a reflexive and critical attitude to these. The experience must continuously be subjugated to critical reviews to clarify if it brings new understandings consistent with the experiences of the practitioners and the meaning that they ascribe to them. In order to accomplish this I will analyze the practitioners’ emotional expressions and the informal interviews collected while engaging in the practice In this project I will work with an understanding of participation and observation as a “both and” and not as two dichotomous positions (Kristiansen og Krogstrup 1999:101). However, the levels of participation will be selected with care so that it does not limit or interfere with the “normal” configuration of the play. In the study of the self-organized practice it is a great advantage that the group of practice often is constituted by varying practitioners. At the classes at “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole” I will have the opportunity to participate as an ordinary student. The empirical studies at “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole” are going to be planed from the schedules of teaching.

The empirical studies of the self-organized practice is dependent of the practitioners spontaneously practice. Prior observations are therefore necessary in order to create contact and get an insight into their unique practice. The aim is 10 observations of the practice of playing in each context.

**Phenomenological method and configurations analysis**

A method thatenables research in the phenomenological relation between the playing practitioners and the world that their movements are manifested in is the *configurations analysis* (Eichberg 2001 and 2006). The configurations analysis try to capture the essence of the play by dividing activities into multiple distinctive dimensions that together constitute the plays unique *configuration*. The configuration consists of two general levels and seven different dimensions; *Space and place*, *time*, *energy*, *interpersonal relations* and the *objectifications* constitute the basic, while *body-cultural ideas, values and discourses* and *body-cultural institutions and organizations* constitute the superstructures. The configurations analysis points out some of the important dimensions that constitute activities of movement and assign meaning to them. The seven dimensions must be understood as themes for both the ethnographic participant observations and the following phenomenological analysis of the empirical data, which is illustrated in the figure below:



Figure 1: An example of configurations analysis

Because of the focus on the relation between play and learning I will primary focus on the meanings that seem to create a form of experience of body-cultural learning for the practitioners. In relation to the analysis of the space and place the questions the questions that arise are: do the practitioners’ special use of space and place contribute with any meanings of learning? How are you supposed to use the space and place and how is the practice learned? What do the practitioners learn from their unique movements in space and place and do they keep on learn something?

The objective of the analysis are phenomenological descriptions that can contribute to a more multi-faceted understanding of the body-cultural acts that are particular for parkour, and the learning aspects that these acts requires and initiate in those involved. By this it is possible to include the bodily aspect of play and learning and hence a framing that connects with the practitioners' own perceptions of the world rather than to overall discursive or institutional structures.

The starting point is the concrete and particular playing situations that later will be combined with play- and learning theory. The meaning that the practitioners attribute to their practice will therefore be crucial in the search for existing theories that can contribute with a deeper understanding of the self-organized practice and the potential learning.

**The research program**

The project consist of two studies

**The first research study**

The first study will be based on ethnographic field studies of parkour in the self-organized context. The first study should answer the first two research questions: *1)*Which qualities do the self-organized practice of parkour by the young people promote? In other words: what is it all about? *2)* What kind of learning does the practice promote?

The overall objective in the first study is: what is going on and how does it make sense? I do have current knowledge of the activity which originates from my own practice the last two years and from my Master thesis, in which I did a configuration analysis of parkour as practiced by three Danish boys. In the first study I will be able to draw upon this knowledge, but will have to keep a critical attitude and test this knowledge in relation to the current practice.

The knowledge about the configuration of the activity, the bodily and cultural meanings that it are assigned by the practitioners and how these can be understood in relation to different theories of learning will form the basis for the second study of the project.

**The second research study**

The objective in this study is to explore what effect the organization and institutionalization have on the meanings and body-cultural learning that were fund in the first study of the self-organized practice. An analytic comparison of two types of organization requires a prior analysis of the practice of the activity in the institutionalized frame. The first question is: How does the practice of parkour express itself at “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole”? With this newly gained knowledge it is possible to do an analytic comparison of the effect of the organization on the learning that was created through the self-organized practice. The second question is the third research question: What influence does the organization have on the learning that the activity of parkour seems to promote? It is important to stress that the comparison will not be undertaken as a statistical comparative analysis, but as a comparative analysis driven by epistemological relevance.

In the institutional frame the practice is governed by the authority of the teacher. Time and space, of which, in the self-organized practice, develops spontaneously, is here fixed by schedules. What effect this has in the practice of the activity and the learning is very interesting. Whereas parkour is often practiced in small teams out in the streets, the teaching at “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole” is done in classes. This makes different demands for solidarity and community and it requires another form of self-promotion and acknowledgement. Beyond the participation in the classes do make specific demands of engagement and particular movements at specific times. For the comparative analysis I will make use of the configuration analysis as a form of search engine that are capable of exploring the concrete manifestation of the practice of the activity and compare this to the self-organized practice.

The teachers’ intentional dimensions of learning will also be included in the research. Is the parkour at “Gerlev Idrætshøjskole´” subjected to any specific aspects of learning? Does the intentional learning diverge from the learning that the practitioners experience in their practice? Does the intentional governance have a crucial effect on the practice of the activity? To be able to answer these questions the teacher’s perspectives on parkour and learning should be studied.

The two studies of this research project make it possible to generate knowledge on the differences and the similarities between the two contexts of the practice of parkour and the effect this has for the potential learning.

**Complex issues to be considered**

I need to qualify my perspective on body-cultural learning.

* Maybe it is more interesting to focus on the process of learning? How do the structures of experience in the two different bodily practice-contexts enable learning? (It may also be more phenomenological than looking at the outcome?)
* How do I move from the level of bodily experience to the level of understanding, development, realization or knowledge? What do I understand as the concept of body-cultural learning? Is it possible (necessary) to define this in advance when I am doing a phenomenological study?

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1. <http://streetmekka.dk/om-streetmekka> Lokaliseret den 26. juli 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.dgi.dk/omdgi/projekter/nyheder/dgi_underground__%5Ba15856%5D.aspx> Lokaliseret den 26. juli 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://streetmekka.dk/om-streetmekka/aabningstider> Lokaliseret den 26. juli 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Contest concept devolped by the energy drink company “Red Bull”. See: <http://www.redbull.com/cs/Satellite/en_INT/Event/red-bull-art-of-motion--021242958236842> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A search on “parkour” and “freerunning” gives combined 642.000 hits. Located the 18th July at www.youtube.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://cphparkour.dk/hvad-er-parkour-0> Lokaliseret den 1/8 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The traditional “Folkehøjskole” was originally an institution of adults’ education. The focus was development of good citizens. In our time the focus has change to personal development and the schools are often specialized. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In the following I will make use of the concept ”parkour” as I experience it as the most used name across the Danish cultures of the activity. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Can be translated to ”Play Patrols”. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)