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PLAY, SPACE, AND THE MAGIC CIRCLE: REINVENTING THE GAME

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Abstract

In 2020, *Dolanan*, a collaborative practice exploring the architectural possibilities of play embedded in Indonesian traditional games, launched its pilot project titled *Makan Kerupuk*, which experimented on the spatial aspect of the crackers eating game often played during the Independence Day of Indonesia. Driven both by Johan Huizinga's conceptualisation of the *magic circle* and the global pandemic, which prevented people from gathering in public space, this project probed into the limit of conventional play-arena by distributing the sites of play into multiple domesticities. Utilising both real and virtual means, *Dolanan* enacted a version of the game in which participants could engage with the physical experience of playing by employing a dispersal strategy, without dismissing the sense of publicness that marked the national holiday. Images produced by the participants are further analysed in this paper to reflect on the state of the magic circle as conveyed and experienced through this project.

Keywords: magic circle, Dolanan, makan kerupuk, play, domesticities

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"The whole city is an exciting playground."
-Excerpt from the Indonesian soundtrack of Crayon Shin-chan

Introduction

A short piece by a member of Situationist International (Potlatch, 1954) came to our attention while we were discussing the relationship between play and urban space. This article, titled *Ariadne Unemployed*, tells an ironic situation in which Ariadne, the princess in Greek mythology who creatively deconstructed the Cretan labyrinth by using a ball of thread,¹ was prevented from playing:

At one sole glance, one can discern both the Cartesian layout of the so-called labyrinth at the Botanical Gardens and the following warning sign:

NO PLAYING IN THE LABYRINTH

There could be no more succinct summary of the spirit of this entire civilization. The very one whose collapse we will, in the end, bring about.

This metaphorical characterisation of the modern world, which depicted how contemporary built environment is often accompanied by restrictive rules and orders, speaks a similar truth about cities in Indonesia. City grids have enabled the movement of people, cars, information, and electricity, among other things, but often at the expense of open spaces, including playgrounds. Accordingly, the fate of spaces to play has fallen into two general phenomena: its privatisation—as Charles Moore (1965) once famously said, "you have to pay for the public life" (p. 65)—and its virtualisation facilitated by digital screens (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). As a result, our ways of playing have become more about privilege and solitary acts than about social interactions.

This shift has led us to rethink what Johan Huizinga (1949) has defined as the *magic circle*, a term that refers to the spatial construction in which a play takes place. According to his proposition, the magic circle operates by delineating the play's imaginary system from ordinary life. But, Huizinga conceptualised this notion in the period when play was mainly conducted in real-time and dedicated physical space. Considering the challenges and potentials embedded in our contemporary world, we ask: What is the status of the magic circle as the space of play has now increasingly turned into private and virtual domains? And followingly, what sorts of architectural exploration can we pursue to rediscover the space of play?

¹ In *Architectureproduction*, Beatriz Colomina (1988) has argued that Ariadne, by providing a ball of thread to Theseus to find his way out of the Cretan labyrinth, performed the very first critical act of architecture, not by constructing the maze but by interpreting it.

Intrigued by the potentials in rethinking and redefining the magic circle, *Dolanan*² as a collaborative practice was established to explore the architectural possibilities of play, using Indonesian traditional games as pathways of testing ideas and thoughts. In this paper, the authors, who are members of Dolanan, examine the relationship between space and play and recollect our first experimentation with the space of play. The *Makan Kerupuk* project was held during Indonesian Independence Day in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented people from gathering in public space. Taking this limitation as a design question and driven by the aforementioned theoretical pursuit, we tested a version of the game that incorporated an asynchronous and multi-sited approach into the popular crackers eating game commonly played during the national holiday. By redistributing the play-arena into multiple domesticities, we found ways to present the physical experience of playing while still producing a sense of publicness among the participants through virtual means.

Play, space, and the magic circle

Many scholars have discussed the importance of play in society. In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Huizinga (1949) has proposed that play is not merely an important interlude to our everyday life, but further a function of culture in which many parts of our society, including law and order, commerce and profit, and craft and art, are rooted. The act of playing, according to Huizinga, is as central for human beings as the act of reasoning, hence his "playful" use of *Homo Ludens*, borrowing from the more well-known *Homo Sapiens*. More recently, Sicart (2014) has further posited that play to humankind is existential—play is a manifestation of humanity, a mode of being human, and to play is to "being in this world" (p. 18). His analysis takes the term play beyond the realm of games, highlighting, for instance, playfulness, as our capacity to use play as an attitude outside the context of play.

While both arguments have highlighted the significance of play, Sicart has distanced his understanding of play from the tradition of Huizingan play. Huizinga postulates that proper boundaries of time and space are crucial to playing. Whether they are a tennis court, a screen, a card table, or a magic circle, the entity in which every play takes place is marked off beforehand, whether materially or ideally, to sustain the world

² *Dolanan*, which means "play" in Javanese, came up as an initiative, a collaboration between a practising architect (FFFAAARRR), an architecture historian (Robin Hartanto Honggare), and a graphic designer (gemasemesta.co), to test and explore possibilities about the current state of play culture through Indonesian traditional games. The name was chosen due to its strong association with the nostalgic nature of traditional games. The work investigates the ideas, rules, instruments, space, and time that make up a single game. Dolanan is specifically interested in rethinking and reinventing the elements that construct the play arena, the magic circle. It aims to find both relevance and irrelevance between the games from the past as well as the contemporary world.

of each particular play, just like a consecrated spot in a religious ritual. The term magic circle, initially posted by Huizinga as an example of play-arenas, has then gained traction, utilised in the present days by many game studies scholars to indicate any play environment in general while referring to his idea of the marked space being central to the maintenance of rules and order within a certain play (Zimmerman, 2012). Sicart, however, contended that play should not be understood only through games. According to Sicart, play is not separate from reality or our daily life, and games are just one manifestation of play, albeit being the strongest form of play.

An important factor in these contradictory views is the notion of space. For Huizinga, play is spatially separated or secluded. Walz (2010) has also examined the relationship between space and play, expanding the notion of play-grounds into various analyses of abstract and material spaces related to play—such as utopia, board, square, labyrinth, stadium, casino—but his examination still relies on Huizinga's understanding of the play environment being a closed entity, whether it is formed materially or ideally. Meanwhile, Sicart, in expanding the term play, has conceived that any space can be a "play space" as long as the act of play enables appropriation of the space. For instance, skateboarders can turn various urban spaces into playgrounds despite those spaces being designed without any intent to accommodate play. Sicart's definition provides a more explorative approach to addressing the relationship between play and space since "the openness to appropriation" can be applied widely beyond spaces that are purposefully designed for playing games.

In reflection on the *Makan Kerupuk* project, we see that the ideal and material boundaries of play, which formed the magic circle, and the appropriation of other spaces into play spaces not as an opposition. The spatial characteristics of the magic circle determine the pleasure and challenge in playing certain games, but the boundaries between the magic circle and non-play spaces, especially in traditional games, are oftentimes blurry. Many existing aspects of certain spaces often contribute to the magic circle of traditional games: the softness or roughness of a floor surface when playing marbles, the width of a street to play *gobak sodor*, or objects to hide for a hide-and-seek game. Thus, it is the interaction between the magic circle and existing spaces that can produce multiple dynamics.

This potential interaction, however, was constrained by our restricted movement during the pandemic, since many open spaces are closed for gatherings. Meanwhile, the move toward virtual means often tends to subdue this sort of interaction. This problem led us to think about practices of dispersal. In this regard, we see the contestation of fixed boundaries through modes of dispersal as a useful framework. In their study of urban kampung in Jakarta, Paramita and Schneider (2018) define *patch*—a place to conduct activities but is not necessarily constructed by a bounded spatial unit—and *corridor*—a space that connects patches—as possible strategies of dispersal as they allow interrelations across a more extensive territory. Another

work concerning the European Kunsthalle (Hirsch et al., 2009) utilised decentralised temporary formats for their exhibitions; a total of twenty-two venues—call shops, banks, fitness studios, gas stations, office buildings, and hotels—were included to form an unstable and fragmented institution building. What if we then utilise these strategies by distributing the magic circle into multiple sites, thus appropriating domestic spaces across the city to play the same game?

The rules: Reinventing the game

In Dolanan's first exploration, *Tujuhbelasan*, or the Independence Day of Indonesia, was the departure point. This national holiday remains one of the extant moments in which play stays absurdly relevant: play has no relation whatsoever to the struggle towards independence, but it has been celebrated ever since as an indispensable part of its commemoration. Every *Tujuhbelasan*, traditional games, such as *tarik tambang* (tug of war), *balap karung* (sack race), *panjat pinang* (pole climbing), and *makan kerupuk* (crackers eating), mark the celebration of independence, their role being as important as the flag-raising ceremony. Despite the relation between these games and Indonesian colonial history (Kambali, 2015), we see many valuable aspects embedded in them. During this holiday, people from the neighbourhoods gather together in open fields or streets to watch or to participate in the games, transforming sterile, urban spaces into carnivalesque atmospheres albeit temporarily. Another important thing about playing these games during *Tujuhbelasan*—often collectively called *Lomba Tujuhbelasan* (*Tujuhbelasan* competition)—is the spirit of healthy competition and winning.



Figure 1. A group of children competing in a makan kerupuk game with a large neighbourhood crowd watching (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Makan kerupuk was chosen to portray a classic Indonesian game regularly played during the celebration. It is a game that stood the test of time and is essentially very familiar to the eating habits of Indonesian people: the need for crunchy crackers for every meal. The idea of the game is to compete to finish the cracker that is placed hanging on the string, around our eye

level. The most important rule is that the players are prohibited from holding the cracker. The players have to keep their hands behind their backs the whole time. The winner is the one who gets to finish the cracker first, despite the challenges of having to not hold the crackers with our hands. Nowadays, the game has grown to minor modifications, such as the use of sweet soy sauce on the crackers to add a layer of complexity.

Another departure point of this project is the current global pandemic. The pandemic challenged us to figure out ways to distribute a very public act of play to multiple domesticities. Reinventing the rules that were once played all together in one space, we aimed to facilitate the smallest solitary unit inside of their domestic spaces. When thinking about the crackers eating game, two things stood out: The white rounded curly crackers and the string used to hang the crackers. These two main elements became the anchor of the design, with ease of assembly in mind. We decided to choose a smaller cracker size to ease the packing logistics and reversed the hanging string into a pole to avoid complicated assemblage. The string was translated into a curved thin metal pole, intended to be placed on a flat surface, ideally a table. The thickness of the pole was designed to fit proportionally as the track for the cracker, allowing it to move seamlessly along the pole.

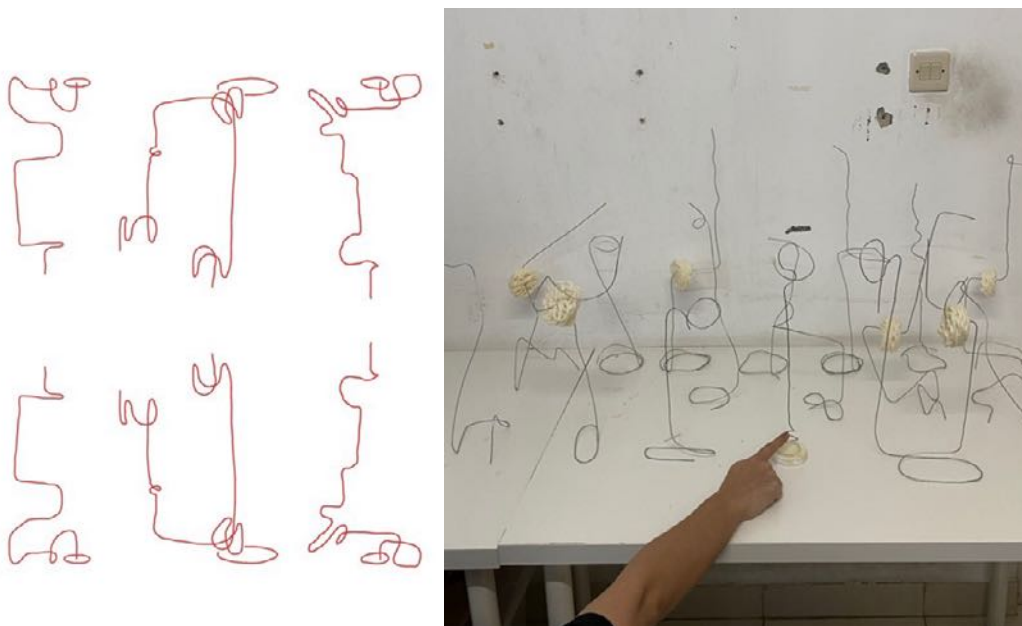


Figure 2. (Left) Form making thinking process: The hanging string translated into the standing pole (Source: gemasemesta.co); (Right) Multiple iterations of the form study model (Source: FFFAAARRR)

As we acknowledged different household sizes, we looked at various possibilities of play and how this game could engage all effectively. Through multiple iterations, three types of forms were made, each of which responded to the needs of each category. The first one was for a single person game, the second was the couples category, and the most complex form was designed to cater to bigger families playing together for the relay category. We arranged three sets of rules to adjust to the different nature of each category.

Below is a sample of rules applied to the single category, written on the instruction book of the game kit:

1. *Makan kerupuk* competition single category is played by one person only. The game kit consists of one pole, one bag of crackers, and four packs of sanitising pads;
2. Put the pole on a table, then wipe clean with the sanitising pads;
3. Insert one piece of cracker from the top of the pole and push down until it reaches the end of the pole;
4. The game starts. Using your mouth, without the help of your hands, the player must push the cracker up following the shape of the pole, until it is out from the top;
5. The player may stand, sit, or pose as needed. Moving or rotating the pole is also allowed as long as the pole is still placed on the table; and
6. After the cracker comes out from the top of the pole, the player must eat the cracker to finish up the game. You may hold the cracker with your hands once it is out from the pole.

Playing the game

In the end, we need to incorporate the modified rule into the new set of instruments we designed and to eventually, play the game. The instruments and rules, written on an instruction manual, were put together as a packaged kit and sent out to all the players with different addresses. By the time the players receive their boxes, we imagined reenacting the experience of a child unboxing her new toy. A total of 30 game kits were distributed to our friends and social media followers who answered our open call. The packaged kits consist of the game instruments: the metal pole and white curly crackers, along with an instruction booklet and sanitising wipes.



Figure 3. (Left) The package just arrived at a home in Yogyakarta, Central Java (Photograph by Gana Ganesha); (Right) The items inside the game kit, captured by one of the players (Photograph by Karisya Rucitra)



Figure 4. (Left) A player competing in the singles category (A screenshot from a video by Syifa Binaditia); (Middle) Two players working together in the couples category (A screenshot from a video by Dhanie Syawaliah); (Right) One of the teams competing in the relay category (A screenshot from a video by Agie Aditama)

As we are based in Jakarta, Indonesia, most of our packages were sent out within the city but several also went to other cities in Java. To test out the different ways of play, we gave the two choices for the players whether they want the game to stay inside their domestic spaces or if they want to extend their magic circle through joining the public competition. For the players willing to be included in the public competition, we asked them to record themselves while they played the game, and to send the recording to the Dolanan team. Only two players chose to not join the competition and we received 52 submissions of games that were played asynchronously in 24 hours on August 17 from their respectable homes. Below are a couple of captured images from the videos submitted to us.

The Dolanan team then spent the next week running over 52 recordings we received and we manually timed the duration of each submission, from the start of the game until they finished the crackers. Manual methods of data collection and processing were done to represent the actual scene of the in-person game and its nuances: scoreboards written with whiteboard markers and prizes stacked on top of a table wrapped in old newspapers. We closed the game with an official scoreboard and a formal issued letter from the "committee" stating the list of winners, released through our social media @d_o_l_a_n_a_n. Prizes for six winners were mailed afterwards. After the last prize was sent, the game was done. It was a very public game, spread into multiple domesticities, involving real crackers and a handful of people, watched by the public crowd through Dolanan's Instagram posts, just like the original game.

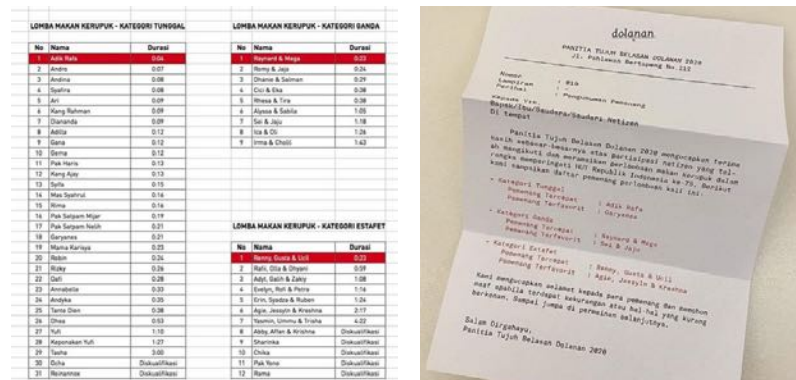


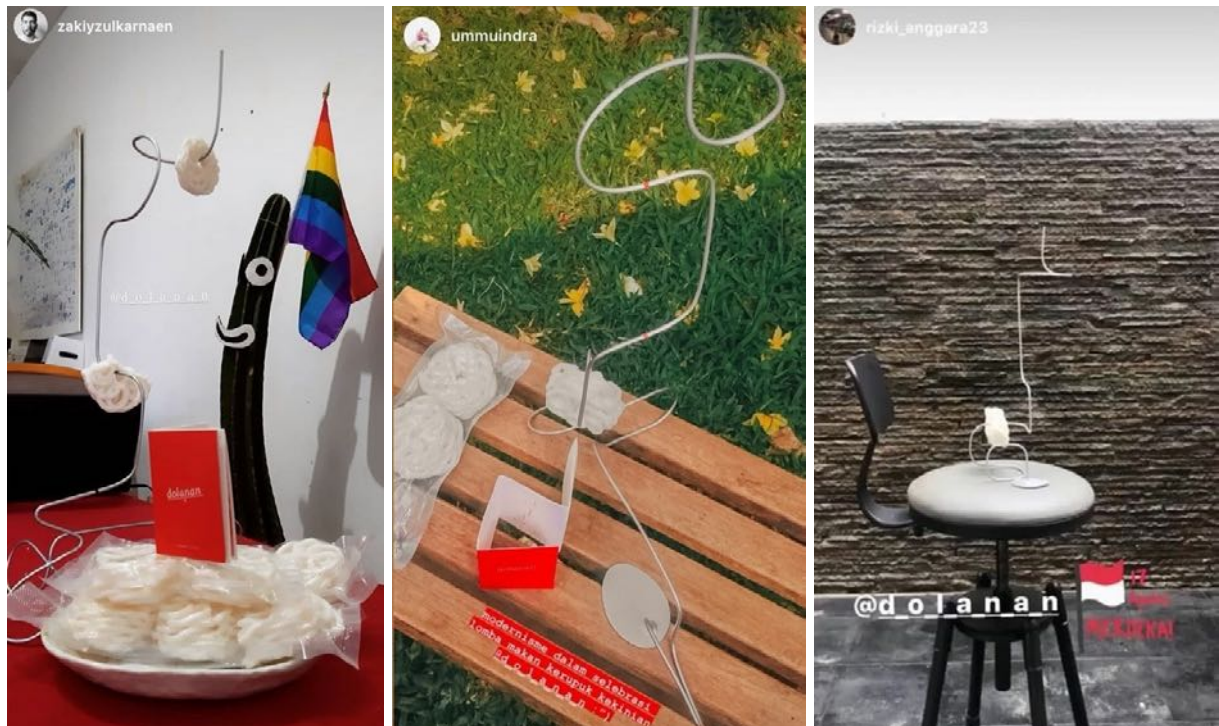
Figure 5. Scoreboard (left) and official announcement letter (right) published on Dolanan's Instagram account (Source: FFFAAARRR and gemasemesta.co)

Thoughts on the magic circle

"Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is 'over,'" said Huizinga (1949, p. 9) when positing that play is "played out" within certain limits of time and place. This spatial temporality, as we have pointed out in the introduction, is what shapes play as an exciting architectural exploration. Through the Makan Kerupuk project, we set to probe into this limit, rethinking when and where play begins and is over as a way to address various issues that we encountered.

Previously, we established that play has become increasingly moved into the private and virtual domains. Instead of experimenting against this tendency, we pondered on the possibilities of spreading the sites of play into multiple domesticities without sacrificing both the physical experience of playing and the sense of publicness that marked *Tujuhbelasan*. The play space then is distributed into various sites, enabled by the packaged kits that we sent to various addresses in the city. The project shows that the magic circle, previously defined by Huizinga as spatially confined, can be physically dispersed and yet interconnected, thus forming a network of "patches" connected by virtual "corridors" (Paramita & Schneider, 2018). Furthermore, the portability of the play instruments has allowed participants to assemble the play arenas in various contexts and to reenact the experience of *makan kerupuk* conveniently without going into the trouble of hanging threads. Accordingly, participants could join the game from their bedroom, living room, office, terrace, backyard, or wherever they found convenient, and some of them took the extra effort to decorate the arena with real or virtual flags, thus creating dialogues between the play instruments and the play contexts.

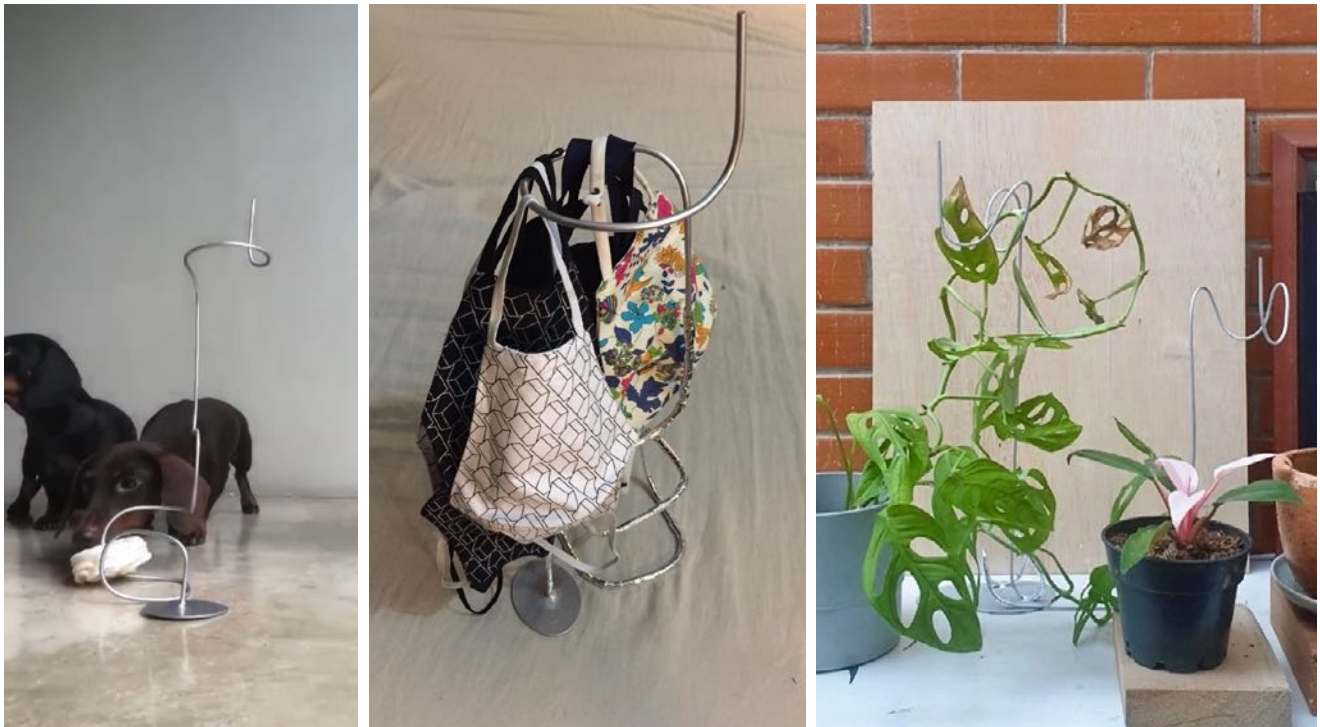
Figure 6. Images of the play instruments placed in different settings, stood on different furniture, embellished with different decoration (Photographs by Zakiy Zulkarnaen (left), Ummu Indra Pertiwi (middle), and Rizki Anggara (right))



This multi-sited approach also introduced a different temporal aspect to the game, as the play can now be conducted asynchronously. We asked participants to upload their play on their social networks, and followingly, we recorded the duration they took to complete the mission. While the participants were required to post during *Tujuhbelasan* to be qualified for the competition, they were not restricted to play the game in the same minutes, thus loosening the temporal boundaries within the play. We further sent more crackers so that participants can compete with both themselves and the citywide participants. One participant, for instance, invited *satpam* (neighbourhood security guard) to join the game. This aspect of the game helped preserve the sense of public that we often experience when participating in the celebration of *Tujuhbelasan*.

But how is the multi-sited aspect of this project different from the virtual games that are commonplace nowadays? Among other things, what makes our traditional games valuable is that they provide us with an opportunity to engage with our senses. *Makan kerupuk*, for instance, involves body movement and gustatory system, which are currently still limited in virtual games. By using these games as our departure point, we see these values as elements that could be explored architecturally. And yet, by also involving both the physical and virtual modes within the play, the various contexts of the play arena are not merely physical spaces that are being negated by the virtual spaces; they were appropriated elements that enriched the game. The heights and shapes of the tables on which the instruments stood would influence the movement of the participants. In one instance, a participant put the instrument on the floor and played the game while laying down, which then attracted her dogs to join the game, or, more accurately, to eat the cracker.

Figure 7. (Left) A participant was playing the game when two dogs, attracted by the crackers, came to join her (Photograph by Talenna Fedrian); The play instruments are being reused for hanging masks (middle) and plants (right) (Photographs by Avianti Armand and Arsheila Kinan)



Another interesting aspect of this project is somewhat unexpected. The play instruments were turned into daily objects that could be used for other purposes beyond playing. Some participants used the poles for decoration, meanwhile, others used them as tools for hanging things, such as masks and plants. This afterlife is something that we are excited about. The participants reinterpreted the instruments into objects that are deviating from their original purpose, just like Ariadne disentangling the Cartesian labyrinth by using a ball of thread. The instruments, originally tools for turning domestic spaces into play spaces, are now reappropriated into other functional entities.

All in all, the project has challenged us to rethink the definition of the magic circle in a way that was not conceived by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*. While there are of course limits to what can be said through this project, we further see many possibilities that can be tested in Dolanan. There are many other Indonesian traditional games with unique spatial characteristics involving multiple senses as part of their rules. In this project, we focused on investigating domesticities and strategies of dispersal, but we see the opportunities in exploring other games as well the dynamic relations between play and other spaces, such as streets, commercial areas, or waste zones.

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