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# **RULES** **FOR A** **PLAYFUL** **MUSEUM**

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**A RULEBOOK DEVELOPED FROM PLAYFUL  
ADVENTURES AT MANCHESTER MUSEUM**

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# RULES FOR A PLAYFUL MUSEUM

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## WHY A RULEBOOK ABOUT PLAY?

This rulebook is a collection of ideas and principles that have developed through experiments with play at Manchester Museum.

Play can be fleeting, unpredictable and sometimes nonsensical, so you may ask: *Why would we encourage play in a museum? What is the point of creating rules about play anyway?*

We think protecting children's right and freedom to play in shared social space is a serious matter. By presenting our ideas as a rulebook, we are challenging our tendency as adults to place controls upon children's play. In museums, concerns about the safety of exhibits and collections can add another level of constraint placed upon children. Our rules suggest ways of thinking differently which may help re-prioritise these concerns.

We are also inspired by the curious and fascinating set of ever-changing rules in children's play. Our rules aim to promote a greater appreciation of play in museums, together with support for all the creativity and enjoyment that this may bring.

We think there's a need for museums to question what they expect from children, and to think about how they can respond to children's desire to play. We hope that our book of rules will prompt you to think seriously about play, and will help you develop and enjoy your own playful museum.

**Charlotte Derry, Rulebook Project Lead**

In 2012, Manchester Museum gained funding from the Happy Museum to provide training for our visitor team to develop their awareness and understanding about play. We recognise that not everyone has access to this kind of training and so we are delighted to be able to share our learning with this rulebook.

Our work is driven by a belief in the fundamental right for children to play, as expressed in Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

Children's capacity for imagination and their desire to play in museum spaces enables well-being and enhances their potential for future creativity, play and inspiration. We hope that this book will inspire you too.

**Anna Bunney, Engagement Manager, Manchester Museum**

## WHY PLAY IS IMPORTANT

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*There are large square floor tiles in the main entrance to the museum. A young girl is carefully balancing along the grooves between the tiles in a seemingly random fashion. A short while later another girl joins in, setting her own pattern of movements. As they pass each other, the new arrival turns to the first child and says, "What happens if you fall off?"*

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Most people would say play is important and valued for supporting learning and healthy development, promoting various physical, social and emotional skills. In the casual moment of playing on the floor tiles, there may be something else happening that often gets lost in adult attempts to impose meanings and attribute learning.

This apparently ordinary encounter between bodies and the material world is just one of the ways children co-create moments of play from their immediate surroundings. It's a timely reminder that children will play anywhere and with anything when conditions allow.

Children rarely walk in straight lines but meander through their daily lives (balancing on walls, avoiding stepping on cracks, leaping over concrete bollards, with accompanying imaginative and creative narratives). Playful movements temporarily enliven the practicalities of everyday life, moments where life is a little more vibrant and there is greater satisfaction in being alive. These apparently mundane acts sustain an appetite or 'anticipatory readiness' to see what more could be done with the world; a playful disposition extending into other areas of children's daily lives.

Manchester Museum believes in the importance of paying attention to conditions which support the emergence of playful moments. These conditions sustain children's playful dispositions to continue exploring what more could be done with the world in lively, imaginative and creative ways.

***Stuart Lester, Professional Studies in Children's  
Play Team at The University of Gloucestershire***

# THE GROUNDRULES

Based on our experiments, these are the qualities we feel a playful museum could aspire to have.

## A PLAYFUL OUTLOOK

A playful museum has a 'playful disposition'. In other words, the museum and its staff have a playful temperament and outlook. This can be manifested through positive body language, eye contact, smiles, being relaxed, as well as being playful.

## IT WILL VALUE PLAY

A playful museum values and supports opportunities for play, for children and adults alike. It pays attention to the ways in which children's play may be constrained, and tries not to put further constraints upon play. Wherever possible, the museum actively seeks to remove these limits and promote positive opportunities for play.

## OFFER PLAYFUL HAPPENINGS

A playful museum permits playful behaviour and can respond to its public in playful ways. It may be able to develop the conditions where play and playfulness might further materialise through prompting or resourcing play. At Manchester we have 'playful surprises' or 'playful days' when this happens.

## RESPECT DIFFERENCES IN PLAY

A playful museum respects and values the different ways that people play whether it is creatively, imaginatively, with words or with movement. It recognises that sometimes play is energetic and sometimes silent and stealthy. Every member of staff also has their own unique and valuable understandings about play. In a playful museum these opinions are respected and help determine and grow a shared museum understanding about play.



## **PLAY WILL HIDE, PLAY WILL SEEK**

Sometimes play is visible and sometimes hidden. Children engage with the museum environment and with others through playing (it's the most enjoyable way for them). But we have learnt that children's play is unpredictable and might emerge when the conditions are right. A playful museum will recognise there is no guarantee that play will materialise and will take heart that mostly, children will find their own ways of playing in every situation, however constrained.

## **IT NEED NOT FAVOUR ONE ATMOSPHERE OVER ANOTHER**

The atmosphere of a playful museum constantly changes according to what is happening at any given moment. Sometimes a museum is loud and busy, other times quiet, but mostly the atmosphere is somewhere in between.

At any time the museum may be intriguing, inspiring, a place for learning, for play, conversations and contemplation. All atmospheres have value and museum staff work responsibly and sensitively to maintain a balance between these moods and the needs of all visitors.

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# THE RULES

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RULE  
N°1

## REFLECT ON YOUR RULES

What rules do you work by? Has anyone ever told you or written down what conventional behaviour is expected? Where did these understandings begin and why?

Use these questions to start a discussion around the expectations about playing. When you identify constraints, ask: *Why are we doing this? How did that come about? Is it valid?*

This reflection can help understand which practices possibly support or constrain opportunities for playing and can help you to be more in tune to notice when they occur.

RULE  
N°2

## TAKE NOTICE

Observation is key. Noticing what happens where, when and with whom, and tracking and mapping patterns of movement and atmosphere is great for understanding how children interact and use space.

Through watching we become more appreciative and if we are appreciating play, we value it more and are less likely to stop moments of play developing.



RULE  
N°3

## IT'S OK TO PLAY

Adults and children come with their own values and ideas about how they should behave in public space and they sometimes need encouragement that 'it's ok to play.' For some staff it could be about giving reassurances, for others it's about clear and positive communication of permission.

Staff need not be afraid of being playful either. We feel that playfulness can sit alongside the responsibilities of management, safety and security. Carried out at the right time and place, staff who play with colleagues have a greater enjoyment of work and better well-being. Their happiness helps the visitor experience too.

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*"We found that playing games amongst the staff (without affecting our main duties) helped the mood be buoyant and relaxed. It was infectious."*

*Babak Bassirian, Visitor Team*

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RULE  
N° 4

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## CREATE A RELAXED FEEL

When staff appear relaxed and happy, visitors relax and feel at ease too. We would describe this mode as 'relaxed control'. We know this approach helps to create the right conditions for playfulness to emerge in our visitors and is a fundamental part of our visitor welcome.

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RULE  
N° 5

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## WHAT IF...?

To tune into the play potential of your environment, look at your galleries in a new way. How would it look through different filters? What if you were a mouse, child, tiger or giant?

Ask yourselves 'What is it that children usually play with here?' Is it the reflective cases, the shadows, the patterned floor, or a painting or stuffed animal to mimic? Start to think 'What if we were to try this?' or 'What would happen if...we put this here, did this, said this...'

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*"Once we'd raised our awareness of our space we could begin to recognise the play potential. We came up with lists of playful ideas to try out."*

*Ailsa Strachan, Visitor Team Manager, 2012*

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WHAT IF WE  
MAKE UP  
SOME RULES?

YEAH,  
WHAT IF WE SAID  
"SHHH PLEASE  
DON'T WAKE  
OUR ELEPHANT UP..."

STAFF  
TEAROOM



WHAT IF WE SAID  
YOU HAVE TO  
GET ACROSS THE GALLERY  
USING ONLY ONE LEG!?

RULE  
N°6

## PLAN AHEAD

To implement any playful ideas you'll need to do some additional planning to create the right atmosphere or conditions.

Talk about the detail. Consider using resources or designing prompts. Use the objects, space, displays and most importantly, the enthusiasm and knowledge of your staff to help your ideas. Get the support you need to set up your experiment and give it a go.

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*"We use observation and a risk benefit approach to help us adapt our plans and experiments. Ensuring safety doesn't have to mean inhibiting play. There are some useful sources on our webpage, see page 30 for details."*

Rowena McGrath, Visitor Team Manager

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## START SMALL

Start your playful experiments small. From the possibilities that emerge, repeat or grow them into something similar, bigger, smaller. Try things out within the staff team or in a small area of the museum. This helps contain the possible risks and allows you to watch what happens.

Experiment again and again and review, building up a 'repertoire' of approaches. There will be great successes and some failures. Every outcome is good. Welcome failures as a sign that you are probably correcting something that may have been imbalanced or privileged for a long time. Celebrate it, experiment again and move on.



RULE  
Nº 8

## PICK THE TIME AND PLACE FOR ACTION

Assessing the mood of the space (whether in a gallery or the whole museum) is vital before initiating any playful experiments or prompts.

Sometimes galleries are just too busy, sometimes too quiet or the timing with staff changeovers just won't work for what you want to do. Discuss and agree what conditions are right and then everyone can be confident the ideas are good to go and that reasonable checks are in place.

RULE  
Nº 9

## KEEP EXPERIMENTING

Don't be afraid to keep trying a playful idea. Be prepared to adapt things all the time. Always remember that the chances are, someone will have a good time playing, even if not everyone takes up what might be on offer that day.

By sharing how you feel with colleagues you'll build trust, get support and find solutions. Try to reflect upon conditions that felt right and what the ingredients were that made it happen. Share when things went well (and not so well) to build up everyone's knowledge, ideas and confidence.



RULE  
N° 10

## MAKE NO ASSUMPTIONS

If you work with the public, you will know that visitors and family groups are unique and come with their own ideas or intentions. They may or may not be in the mood to talk or to play.

The skill we have developed is to be able to make quick judgments about whether visitors wish to engage or not. We call this 'response-ability' – the ability to be responsive to what is happening. With practice (making approaches), reflection (observing, thinking) and collaboration (sharing), this skill can be developed and improved upon by everyone.

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RULE  
N° 11

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## SO, WHY IS PLAY IMPORTANT?

Being able to explain why there is a playful disposition or playful happenings in the museum, and being able to articulate this to visitors and colleagues is important.

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*"We discussed our individual interpretations about the importance of play then looked at some of the facts about the benefits. We developed our own play statements and this helped everyone become more confident and be part of the shared vision to sustain a more playful museum. We have included some links to the sources about play that we used on our webpage."*

*Anna Bunney, Engagement Manager*

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RULE  
N° 12

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## KEEP GOING

It's not easy to take everyone's needs into account and to become a more playful place. You should not be crestfallen if your venue doesn't become more playful overnight. You will always face new challenges and notice constraints upon play.

A playful museum is a journey, one that will emerge, change and surprise. It is important to be on the journey in the first place, to enjoy it and to have fun along the way. When things feel tough, we try to remember the benefit and value to children that our work and actions will have, and this maintains our determination to keep going.

I THINK SOME PARENTS STILL  
WORRY ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN  
MOVING FREELY HERE AND  
JUST BEING CHILDREN



YEAH, I KNOW.  
TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY...  
WHAT IF WE TRIED...

## STORIES ABOUT PLAY

### THE STORY OF THE DINOSAUR EGG

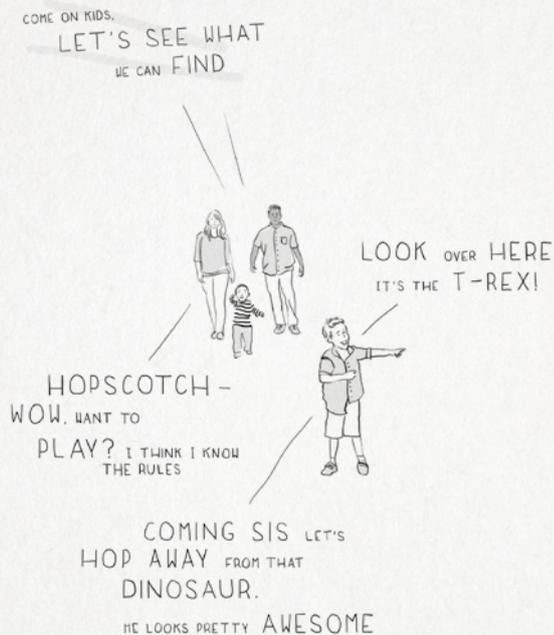
The children take the egg and carry it carefully away, whispering and giggling amongst themselves. A visitor team assistant approaches a small group of children and presents them with a precious and fragile dinosaur egg (a blown goose egg)...



...later they find an assistant and hand over the egg. The assistant starts the game again and passes the egg to another child. Through this playful prompt, many vibrant moments were created where children began to think there might be more opportunities for play to be found.

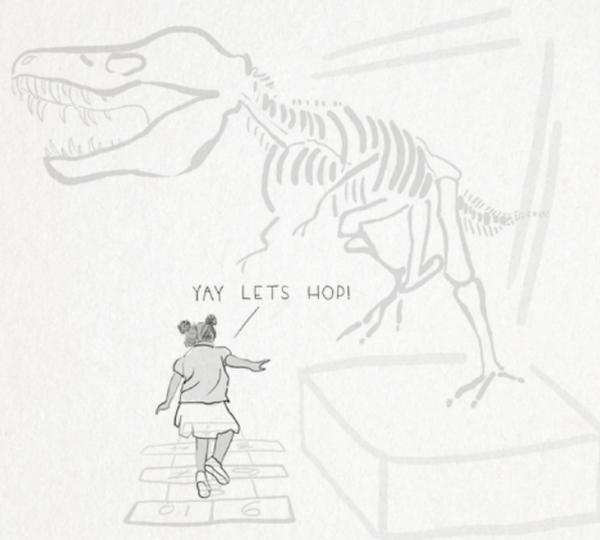
## A STORY OF HOW WE CREATED RICHER EXPERIENCES IN THE MUSEUM

A simple hopscotch grid was taped onto the gallery floor...



That day there were greater possibilities for the family to think, move and experience the gallery around them, as well as each other:

The hopscotch prompt developed and sustained their playful dispositions – to see what more they could do, in lively, curious, creative and imaginative ways.



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*"In these moments, perception, actions, emotions, bodies and imaginations all differently combined, before they returned to normal."*

*From Lester, S., Strachan, A., Derry, C. (2014) A More Playful Museum. International Journal of Play.*

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been written by Charlotte Derry and was developed in collaboration with members of Manchester Museum's Visitor Team Assistants; Nikki Armstrong, Babak Bassirian, Dan Bylo, Judith Fabian, Bryony Rigby and Michelle Scott.

Valued input has been provided by Stuart Lester from the Professional Studies in Children's Play Team at The University of Gloucestershire, and by Anna Bunney, Muminah Butt, Rowena McGrath, Ailsa Davey, Andrew Wilsdon and the Visitor Team at Manchester Museum.

We are grateful for the help of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, The British Museum, Woodhorn Museum, Bilston Craft Centre, Derby Museums and The National History Museum for their help proofing and piloting the book in their settings.

Design by Jason Finn Design Ltd

Illustration by Rachel Miller

Illustration consultancy by Eleanor Mulhearn

Thank you to both The Happy Museum and to Situations for their inspiration and support.

Riso printing by Footprint Workers co-operative using soya based inks. Recycled Paper supplied by Paperback.

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MANCHESTER  
1824

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Manchester Museum

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The project has been funded and made possible  
through the support of The Happy Museum