

Thoughts on neurodiverse adult play

...and a request for help?

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Very little seems to be out there on neurodivergent adult play.

A few highlights from a *quick* search:

Mazurek, M. O., Engelhardt, C. R., & Clark, K. E. (2015). Video games from the perspective of adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 51, 122-130. <https://10.1016/j.chb.2015.04.062>

Largely says “autistic people like to play video games, are video games good or bad for them?” They like to play video games for the same reason as neurotypicals (e.g. they’re fun!), some don’t like overly violent games or worry about spending too much time on them (again, fairly typical?)

Spiel, K., & Gerling, K. (2021). The purpose of play: How HCI games research fails neurodivergent populations. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, 28(2), 1-40. <https://10.1145/3432245>

I’ll just leave this quote here... *“Our results show that existing projects predominantly adopt a serious gaming perspective, and relegate play almost exclusively to externally driven purposes. Thus, games are developed to either address specific characteristics or attempt to cure individuals from neurodivergent traits that are perceived and identified as undesirable, with the majority of systems designed to be played in educational or medical settings”*

van Tiel, B., Deliens, G., Geelhand, P., Murillo Oosterwijk, A., & Kissine, M. (2021). Strategic deception in adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 51(1), 255-266. <https://10.1007/s10803-020-04525-0>

Had people play a social game about deception. Basically says that autistic people thought it was bloody weird trying to deceive others, so were worse at neurotypicals to start off, but quickly got the hang of it.

The stuff on children seems to be largely about “fixing” them

Lots of the use of play to increase “acceptable” social interaction, or the use of other interventions to make young autistic children (the main group in these articles) play in neurotypically acceptable ways.

There was one more meaningful study I pulled out (Skaines et al, 2006) – it essentially said that Autistic children came out lower on playfulness scores related to responding to a neurotypical play leader(!), pretending, and some aspects (but not all) of the other measures. *“The play difficulties central to children with AD clearly relate to the three core deficits of AD, that is, sociability, communication and imagination.”*

Skaines, N. Rodger, S. and Bundy, A. (2006). Playfulness in Children with Autistic Disorder and their Typically Developing Peers. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 69(11), 505-512

But do they often come out lower on measures of playfulness, just because the measures are partly measuring if you’re neurotypical?

Playfulness scales seem to look at things that neurotypicals might score more highly on, no two tests / scales seem to use exactly the same things, but they include things like:

Spontaneity; Expressiveness; Fun; Creativity; Sillyness; informality; sociability; extraversion; agreeableness; emotional stability.

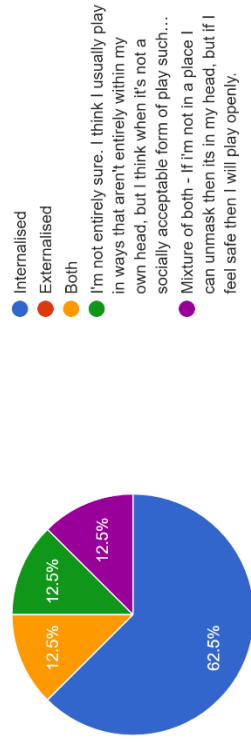
- So we might label (some?) neurodivergent people as not playful.
- There is very little research in adults and the research in children is dominated by “we need to fix them”.
- As a neurodivergent adult, I look at the Skaine et al article and see evidence of autistic children playing well, but not responding in a social way that neurotypicals might expect. So do neurodivergent people just play slightly differently? Do we just see things in a slightly different way and just play with a slightly different focus?

My personal experience? I often play in my own head, by myself, and can be reluctant to join in with social play (the autistic need to “know the unwritten rules” perhaps?)

I asked a small number of people about that sort of stuff...

Does your play tend to be internalised (playing within your own head) or externalised (obvious to others that you are playing)?

8 responses

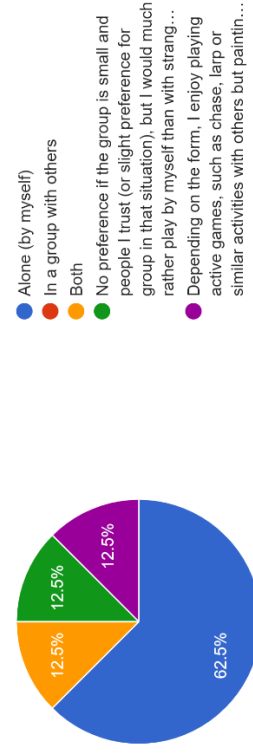


- Internalised
- Externalised
- Both

● I'm not entirely sure. I think I usually play in ways that aren't entirely within my own head, but I think when it's not a socially acceptable form of play such...
● Mixture of both - If I'm not in a place I can unmask then it's in my head, but if I feel safe then I will play openly.

Do you tend to prefer to play alone, or in a group with others?

8 responses



- Alone (by myself)
- In a group with others
- Both

● No preference if the group is small and people I trust (or slight preference for group in that situation), but I would much rather play by myself than with strang...
● Depending on the form, I enjoy playing active games, such as chase, larp or similar activities with others but paintin...

Do you feel like you play as an adult? Please describe in your own words in what ways you play and how they feel like play.

Yes, make things into a game, shared imaginary frenemy with autistic partner, spontaneous games with autistic offspring.

For sure. I play games with my friends and family, but also I like to still do the sort of playing I did when I was younger. If I could get away with still playing in playgrounds, I would. And honestly I consider my sewing etc play sometimes too.

I play a lot of videos games & actually spend a lot of time learning things as a form of play, it meets the criteria. video games are my number 1 play activity but reading, listening to books and podcasts and learning interesting things is play for me because it's fun, I don't have to do it, I can get lost doing it, and I do it every single day as much as I can. I get lost in the act of absorbing the stories or ideas and thinking and connecting the dots to other ideas, and it's purely for fun. it's just fun to think about things and read Wikipedia articles and books and watch videos about topics I want to learn about. I literally need to do it.

Not really. I do activities that are not required to function in society, like video games but that is more about switching off from things rather than playing.

Not really, I can't think of anything I regularly do that would be considered as play. Most of the things I do in my spare time (e.g. gardening) have a purpose to them - I don't think of that as play. I do word and number puzzles a lot (e.g. sudoku, the myriad variations on Wordle), but again I don't think that really meets your definition of play!

Although now that I'm thinking about it, the one thing I've done since I was a child and still do today is make up stories in my head. Sometimes based on things happening in my life (I often rehearse conversations I'd like to have with people and imagine how they could go), sometimes I extend the plots of books, films and TV that I'm interested in. I guess it's a bit like fanfic? I've never written any of it down though. That's probably the thing that feels, for me, closest to how you've described "play"

Yes, One of the main ways I play is via my art work, I just take out a sketchbook or paper and just but paint or pencil on the page with no reason other than to do this task. I enjoy LARP or D&D as a means of having fun and it feels like I'm a child again and connects with something quite deep within. I do still flip over railing or climb though things when I'm in an environment I feel I can be unmasked. As I like the playful quality of it. I also have a habit of gamifying tasks, I have a MPG display when driving and I try to get the highest score and keep the fuel usage above 45mpg or higher if possible, not to drive more efficiently although that does happen as a result but because I enjoy the game and challenge of it.

I mainly play video games. I also cycle through crafts like crochet, knitting and cross stitch. I also tried painting, colouring, jewellery making. It all fits in with the doing something with no purpose, just for fun so could count as playing I think.

Playfighting, gamify life, computer games, cycling and being silly with/in front of trusted people

The people who say they don't play are doing things they can find an element of flow in perhaps? To get absorbed in another world entirely (even if that's just sudoku?), so it's surely play even though they might think it doesn't count?

Alongside all this stuff is also how we think about neurodiversity. E.g. Autism is often classed as a social communication disorder – autistic people can't communicate or socialise well.

This is officially bollocks – see Davis and Crompton (2021) for a summary. Essentially:

Autistic person <- -> Autistic person
good communication

Autistic person <- -> Neurotypical person
shit communication

It isn't a *deficit* (unless you also class neurotypical people as having a deficit), it's a *difference*.

So that might also add in a complication of neurodiverse play having a preference for individual play, or play with other neurodivergent people over a mixed group? So it avoids those communication errors? I don't know...

Davis, R., & Crompton, C. J. (2021). What Do New Findings About Social Interaction in Autistic Adults Mean for Neurodevelopmental Research? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(3), 649–653.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620958010>

So... how should I dig into this further?

Bearing in mind that often:

- Neurodivergent (ND) people often like questions in advance (& preferably asynchronous!)
- ND people might not class the things they do as play because society has dismissed them as not “good players” before.
- Many ND people are not diagnosed and might be unwilling to declare it.
- ND covers loads of different things (and people may have several diagnoses), it’s not a “neat” thing to look at.

Discuss in groups – got some work for you now!

Can you come up with a research question around this that might be interesting enough (and manageable enough) to try an answer?

There will be another question to follow 😊

If anyone is interested in helping me make any of this happen, let me know at a.p.walsh@hud.ac.uk afterwards...