

Moving Museums Through Play

# Playful Experiences at the National Museum of Denmark's Sites 2025



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# Nationalmuseet

Moving Museums Through Play

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# Introduction

This report explores the potential of play as a central element in the museum experience for children, young people, and adults. Through an analysis of nine playful experiences across eight of the National Museum of Denmark's sites, we examine how museum audiences engage with and respond to play in a museum context. Our goal is to provide an empirically grounded picture of play in museums today.

The report serves as a crucial starting point for the ongoing research and development program Moving Museums Through Play (MMTP), through which we create and examine playful museum experiences. Our initial analysis provides a solid foundation for future work and contributes insights that will enrich the ongoing dialogue about cultural history museum experiences.

Studying playful experiences is important because play holds the unique potential to renew the museum experience and foster new forms of participation. Play sparks curiosity, co-creation, and experimental encounters among audiences, objects, and narratives, thereby strengthening the museum's role as an engaging and inclusive cultural space.



# About This Report

Play can be understood in many ways, and a central part of the MMTP program is to explore how play manifests itself in a museum setting. Is it a board game? A digital treasure hunt? A particular way of communicating history? To answer these questions, the first phase of the program has examined the playful activities already existing at the National Museum of Denmark and investigated how audiences experience them.

## Target group

This report is intended for anyone working with or interested in the role of play in shaping museum experiences. It can serve as inspiration and as a foundation for further work with play as part of museum practice.

## Eight sites

The eight sites included in the report are all part of the National Museum of Denmark and the MMTP program. They represent vastly different cultural history sites and a great diversity in terms of locations, collections, and historical periods. This variation makes it possible to investigate how play can

create meaning across very different contexts—from a Viking fortress to a shipyard. By exploring the potential of play in diverse settings, we can identify shared patterns that point toward more general conclusions about play in museums.

## Nine playful experiences

We have studied nine existing museum experiences to understand how audiences interact with them and understand what the outcomes are. These nine experiences were selected in dialogue with the eight sites, which identified them as examples of playful experiences.

The findings presented here will serve as an important foundation for the next phase of the MMTP program, where new playful museum experiences will be developed and tested.

# Moving Museums Through Play

At the National Museum of Denmark, we want to play more with history. We believe that play can augment discussions of history in new and surprising ways, bringing it to life for a broader audience—regardless of age. Through Moving Museums Through Play, we explore and experiment with this idea.

Since August 2024, in collaboration with the Kolding School of Design, we have been working to create playful experiences for museum audiences while generating insights into the potential of play in a museum context. The program is funded by the LEGO Foundation and will run until the end of 2027.

## A program in three tracks

The MMTP program is structured around three interconnected tracks. The aim is to investigate, explore, and develop concrete playful museum experiences that spark interest, curiosity, and reflection on cultural history among children, young people, and adults.

### **Track 1: Research on experiences and design processes**

This track involves research into how play is experienced at cultural history sites, and how we design

and evaluate these experiences. The goal is to establish a deeper understanding of the role of play in interpretation.

### **Track 2: Playful museum experiences for children, young people, and adults**

This track develops and tests new, concrete, and playful audience experiences. These are currently being developed at three of the National Museum's sites:

The National Museum in Copenhagen, the Ships in Holbæk, and Kongernes Jelling.

### **Track 3: Capacity building across the National Museum**

In this track we work experimentally to design playful museum experiences with the aim of generating knowledge and building competencies across six of the National Museum's sites:

The Open-Air Museum, the Frøslev Camp, the Danish War Museum, Kronborg Castle, the National Museum in Copenhagen, and the Viking Fortress Trelleborg.

# Research Approach

This report is a part of the research track in MMTP. The program builds on a research approach that combines knowledge from three fields: museum studies, design research, and experience research. At the core of our approach is experimentation—not in a chemistry lab, but within the National Museum’s sites, where we actively seek to create change and generate knowledge. We call these action experiments.

## Experiments that drive change

Our approach rests on the premise that one of the best ways to understand the world is by attempting to change it. In MMTP, this means that we do not simply test assumptions—we actively challenge museum practices. Rather than a top-down model where changes are imposed, we work from the bottom up. We aim to create frameworks that support and encourage colleagues in the program to continuously explore, test, and develop prototypes as part of their own practice in creating museum experiences.

The goal is to develop methods and insights that are meaningful and useful for those who are going to use them. This focus on applicability is central

and is reflected in our ongoing emphasis on collecting lessons and improving the program’s initiatives along the way. Our approach builds on experimental museology, which moves design processes from “behind the scenes” into real-world practice. In MMTP, we extend this approach with a specific focus on play.

## Play from a design perspective

In MMTP, we do not view play as a fixed activity. Instead, we see it as a dynamic interaction that emerges in the encounter between the playful individual and the environment, which with its affordances invites certain playful actions. It is in this meeting between curiosity and contextual opportunities that playful experiences are created.

We can design for play by creating frameworks and activities that invite playful engagement. Ultimately, however, it is the individual’s choice, and their level of involvement that determines whether play becomes part of the museum experience.

Our review of the research literature reveals a growing interest in play in museums, alongside a need for more empirical results, evaluations, and

methods. Relevant studies suggest that playful approaches hold great potential for fostering engagement, learning, and enjoyment, but they also present challenges that we will continue to explore within the program.

## **Two research strands**

The research in MMTP unfolds across two closely connected strands that together generate knowledge and strengthen museological practice:

**Audience research:** This strand investigates playful experiences across different age groups: children, young people, and adults. We combine qualitative and quantitative methods to shed light on how museum audiences engage with playful experiences. We recognize that existing methods often fail to fully capture the diverse motivations behind play. Therefore, we place strong emphasis on identifying and developing new methods that can examine playful museum experiences in ways that account for participants' different approaches to play, depending on the situation and context.

**Design and organizational research:** This strand examines development processes at the eight partici-

pating sites using methods such as action research and accompanying research. Rather than studying the museum from the outside, our research is embedded in practice, where we continuously learn together with the staff who develop playful museum experiences, from what works and what does not. Through an active and participatory approach, we investigate how we as a museum of cultural history design, develop, and implement play in our museological practice.

# Method

The insights in this report are based on the experiences of more than 1,000 museum audiences, studied through a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods across participating sites, including:

- 124 semi-structured interviews with audience groups of varying sizes, involving a total of 426 museum visitors.
- 25 days of fieldwork with ongoing participant observations.
- 16 walk-along observations with 48 museum visitors.
- 72 timed and tracked observations with a total of 165 museum visitors.
- A questionnaire of 370 museum audience members aged 10–99.
- A children's questionnaire with 101 museum visitors aged 1–14.

Throughout this report, we use museum audiences as our overarching term for people engaging with museums. In the method descriptions below, we use museum visitors only when referring to the specific individuals who participated in interviews, observations, or questionnaires.

## Semi-structured interviews

To gain insight into the immediate experiences of audience members, we conducted short semi-structured interviews at several sites. Some were carried out directly after the audiences' encounter with a selected exhibition or activity (exit interviews), while others took place in situ during the museum experience. Interview length varied across experiences, ranging from 3 to 22 minutes.

The interview guide combined experience-specific questions with cross-cutting themes.

We asked about:

- Motivation for visiting.
- Specific actions and interactions within the exhibit, activity, or experience.
- Evaluation of different elements, with particular focus on interactive or playful aspects.
- General experiences of and attitudes toward play in museums.
- Demographic information.

## Participant observation

Audiences' interactions and behaviors were studied at several sites through participant observation—a qualitative method where the researcher actively joins a group or environment to observe behavior, social relations, and habits from within, without standing out as an external observer.

We examined:

- Audiences' immediately observable emotional reactions.
- Social interactions such as collaboration, role distribution, and negotiation of actions.
- Assumed gender and age.

## Walk-alongs

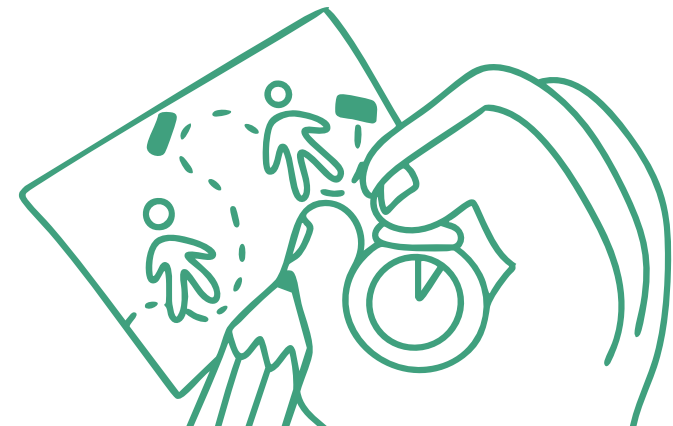
To gain deeper insight into audience experiences, we used the walk-along method at selected sites. This qualitative method involves the researcher accompanying an individual or group throughout their visit, engaging in conversation or asking questions in real time. Consequently, it provides situated and context-rich insights into how audiences experience and interpret their surroundings.

We examined:

- How audiences navigated the physical space and the choices they made during their visit.
- Which elements they noticed, how they interacted with exhibitions, and their verbal interpretations of these elements.
- How audience members related to each other and with other guests during the museum experience.

## Timing and tracking

Audience engagement with selected experiences was measured using timing and tracking observations—a quantitative method used to map audiences' movements and record the time they spent in defined areas. At selected sites, we tracked individuals' paths and the amount of time they spent in each location using floor plans of the area. This ap-





proach allowed us to identify patterns in how audiences behaved during museum experiences, how much time they spent on, and who engaged with different (playful) elements.

We focused on:

- The length of time audiences spent in defined areas.
- Which elements were noticed, which were engaged with, and the forms of engagement or interaction.
- Assumed gender and age.

## Questionnaire

We conducted questionnaires at selected sites to establish a quantitative data foundation. The questionnaires enabled the comparison of museum sites across the program and an examination of the relationship between expectations and self-reported experiences of play. In addition to demographic data, the questionnaires included a set of questions tailored to the specific experiences, as well as a cross-cutting framework applied across all questionnaires.

We asked about:

- The composition of audience groups.

- Motivation for the visit.
- Value words associated with the experience.
- Perceptions of “play” and “playful elements.”
- What audiences considered most important in museum experiences of cultural history.

At some sites, the questionnaire could be completed in both Danish and English, while at others it was available only in Danish.

## Children’s questionnaires

We carried out a dedicated questionnaire to explore children’s museum experiences. Several children received assistance from an adult when completing the questionnaire.

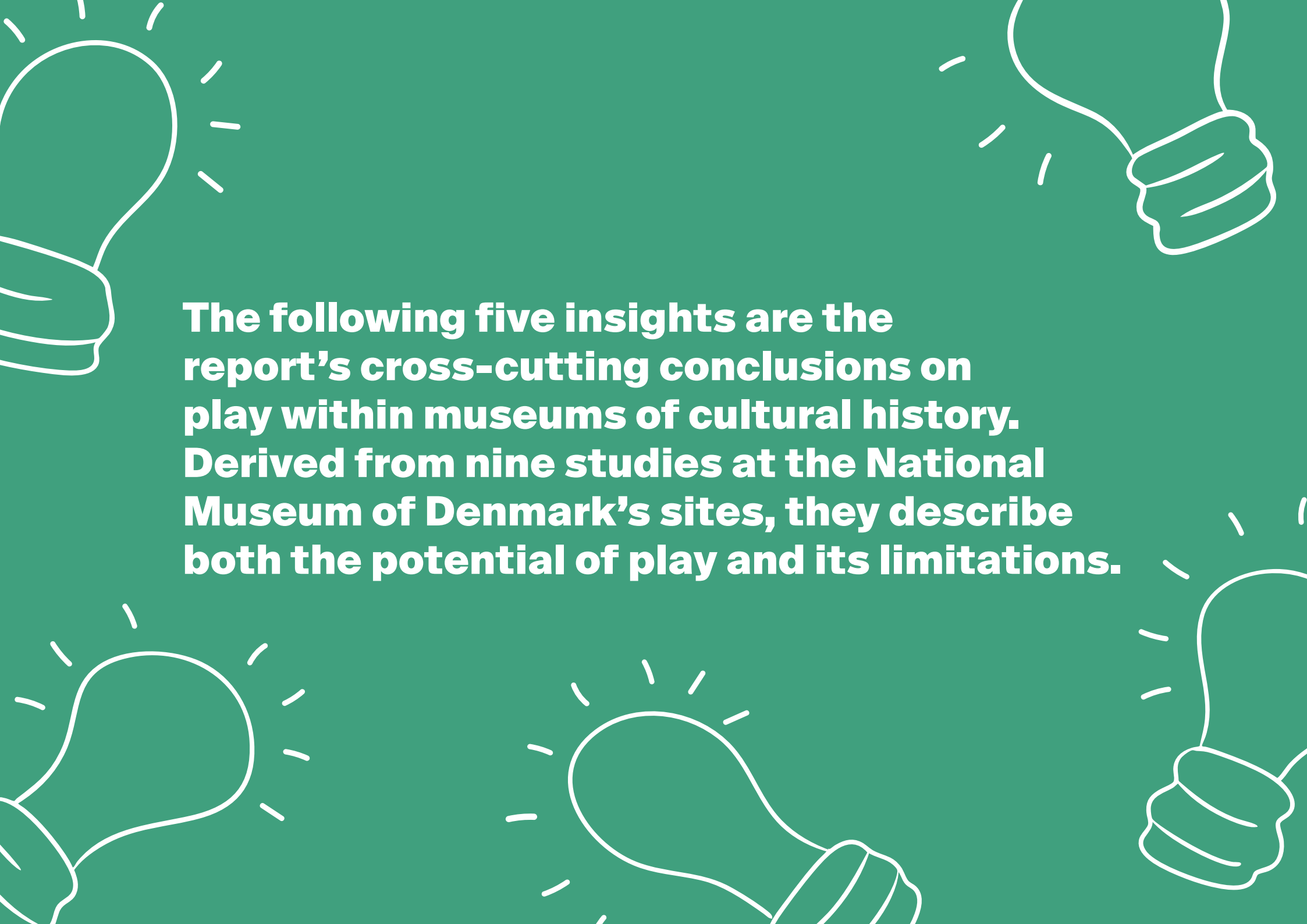
We asked about:

- With whom the child visited the site.
- The child’s overall assessment of the experience.
- The activities the child participated in during the visit, and which activity they liked best.
- Age, gender, and place of residence.

The questionnaire could be completed in both Danish and English.

# Five Cross-Cutting Insights





**The following five insights are the report's cross-cutting conclusions on play within museums of cultural history. Derived from nine studies at the National Museum of Denmark's sites, they describe both the potential of play and its limitations.**



# Play Breaks with Museum Conventions

Playful museum activities and exhibitions contrast with the traditional museum experience. The museum audience in our studies regarded these as an inventive break with convention. Both Danish and international audiences, particularly the latter, considered them a welcome innovation.

***“It’s very different from a normal museum. In a normal museum, you either can’t touch, or things are in glass display cases. But here, you are genuinely invited to play with it.”***

– 35-year-old Singaporean man, visiting with his partner (Kongernes Jelling)

## **A contrast with previous museum experiences**

At the different museum sites, the audience can have various richly interactive experiences, including some of a particularly playful nature. These stand in stark contrast with their previous experiences of exhibitions, where objects in display cases were the primary focus.

***“I always associate museums with being boring, and don’t bring the children for that reason. You just kind of look. Here, you can look and participate. Here, it’s different.”***

– 29-year-old Danish woman, visiting with her family (The Ships at Holbæk)

## **Is it okay to play here?**

When museums encourage playful behavior, it sometimes creates a dilemma for their audience, who are not entirely sure how to behave at the site. Should they stick to the classic, focused, and quiet “museum behavior”? Let loose with joy, laughter, and all the emotions that may accompany the play? Or should they try to combine the two behaviours or move between them depending on where they are within the visitor site?

***“[My children] can sense that they have to ask permission, but at the same time they are like: ‘Oh, can I play here?’”***

– 32-year-old Danish woman, visiting with her family (The Children’s Museum)

# The Playful Museum Experience Is Shaped by the Museum Audience's Behavior and Engagement



Playful museum experiences arise through the actions that unfold in the meeting between audience and the activity or exhibition. In line with our design perspective, we view play as a dynamic interaction with one's surroundings, which is why our analysis focuses on capturing the diverse expressions that play can take.

“Playful behavior” rarely appears in isolation. In practice, actions and expressions flow together: Playful and non-playful behavior are mixed, and different forms of playful action are combined. Overlap is therefore a central part of playful expression; what determines the form play takes is the individual's choice and engagement.

Many types of play combine behavior and engagement from multiple categories. For example, the combination of role-play and movement in battle/warrior-playing, or how dressing up could become a mixture of role-play and creation through taking photos.

The breadth of this range of actions shows that play can function as a flexible and inclusive dissemination tool: one that arises in the encounter between the players' curiosity and the opportunities their surroundings offer.

At the various sites in this study, play thus spans different types of behavior and engagement:

- **Role-play and storytelling:**

Audience members adopt fictional or historical roles through role-playing and dressing up, and they stage narratives in the physical space. For example, they might dress up as historical figures or role-play as Viking warriors.

- **Exploration and problem-solving:**

Audience members engage in problem-solving and knowledge testing, deciphering mysteries and finding hidden clues. Examples include solving riddles and mysteries in a narrative framework or participating in quizzes and games.

- **Creation and construction:**

Audience members process materials and make structures to create a temporary or permanent product. Examples include crafting (braiding rope, sewing pouches), building a wall, or experimenting with cookery.

- **Sensing and movement:**

Audience members challenge their motor skills and actively use their senses to explore their physical surroundings. Examples include motor challenges (climbing), tactile exploration (touching materials), and technical expression (archery).

# Play Supports Social Interaction



Play and playful behavior create new dynamics and interactions between museum audiences. This primarily happens within the visitor group itself, but also includes interaction between different groups and with the sites' hosts.

Social interaction varies across the activities and exhibitions. In some places, people collaborate to solve a challenge; in others, they compete; while some sites facilitate free social interaction. Play is socially anchored; according to the audience themselves, being together with others is a driving force for play and a central element of a visit's success.

***“It creates a sense of solidarity. It feels playful, and without others, it's harder to find the meaning of the game. It's not only about enjoyment, but about collaboration—being together.”***

– 50-year-old Japanese man, visiting with his family (Kronborg Castle)

***“We've been with someone, and you play when you are with others.”***

– 9-year-old Danish girl, visiting with her family (The Ships at Holbæk)

Although such playful experiences both create and demand immersion and focus, this immersion does not occur at the expense of social interaction. On the contrary, audiences become immersed collectively, and the social dimension reinforces their playful experience. According to the museum audience, the shared experiences make their visits memorable, just as playful, social moments create joy and laughter, acting as a positive addition to their overall experience at the site.

***“We laughed together, and that completes the museum experience.”***

– 31-year-old Dutch woman, visiting with friends (The War Museum)

***“When we are in a world together, ... you forget you are at a museum and can be in the moment.”***

– 39-year-old man, visiting with his family (The Children's Museum)

# Play Is a Physical and Emotional Way to Interact with History



At some of the sites, the body became a primary focus for playful behavior. It thus became an active point of entry into the experience: Elements such as movement and physical participation framed the tempo and intensity of audience's actions, among other things. Museum audiences built things, pulled ropes, balanced, dressed up, and repeated actions to test the effects.

Play also gave them a desire to touch objects and props, smell materials, and sometimes taste them, when the site facilitated it. Audiences reported that history felt closer when the senses were activated in play.

***“I think that [interactive areas] make museums better, because you can feel what they did back then.”***

– 41-year-old American woman, visiting with her son (The War Museum)

***“You could use your senses, touch things, imagine what you looked like in the mirror and put on their clothes, get closer to how they felt and acted. Here, you get closer to the past.”***

– 54-year-old German woman, visiting with her family (Kronborg Castle)

## Emotions brought into play

Play also set a broad spectrum of emotions in motion. Audiences expressed joy and curiosity, as well as pride when they succeeded in doing something, while their concentration manifested as silence and repeated movements. At the same time, difficult tasks caused frustration.

Playful experiences were often associated with positive feelings like fun and joy, which the audiences described strengthened the relevance of play for the museum:

***“[Play] has to be fun and arouse curiosity: ‘What happens if you do this?’ It’s why it fits well with museums.”***

– 40-year-old Danish man, visiting with his family (Trelleborg)

Several audience members also highlighted how play created a closer emotional connection with the history the site was communicating.

***“[The experience] created an emotional connection to history. In other museums, we have experienced a distance, where it is just facts and objects.”***

– 32-year-old English woman, visiting with friends (Kronborg Castle)



# Play Requires Ethical Reflection and Clear Boundaries

Although most of the audience in this study were very positive about play at the National Museum of Denmark's sites, there were hesitant attitudes about what shouldn't be played with.

## **Authenticity, objects, and replicas**

There is a widespread understanding that original, historical objects should not be directly included in playful activities. To ensure their preservation, play must be physically separated from the most historically valuable objects.

***“It shouldn't be ‘Come and blow the Golden Horns,’ because then it stops being play. [Historical] treasures can break, and we must protect them.”***

– 34-year-old Danish man, visiting with his family (Trelleborg)

As an alternative, many point to the use of replicas, which can give the museum audience opportunities to explore these objects through multiple senses, without compromising the preservation of the originals.

## **Handling difficult and complex topics**

Some members of the audience expressed concern that when a museum uses play in connection with weighty subjects, like war, death, oppression, or trauma, this may seem inappropriate or downplay the significance of serious suffering.

***“War means sacrifice. So, it is important not to offend the dead. But I think a lot is possible, as long as it happens within a historical context.”***

– 42-year-old Belgian man, visiting with his partner (The War Museum)

At the same time, others pointed out that levity is not the only outcome play can have; it can also open up difficult emotions and realizations. Several emphasized that play is a universal human phenomenon and people have always used it, even in times of crisis.

***“Play doesn't just have to be fun; it can also be something creative. It can be a creative way to communicate difficult history on and get down to a child's level.”***

– 45-year-old woman, visiting with her family (The Open Air Museum)



Overall, their attitude was that playful experiences in museums are welcome, as long as they take place in a respectful and thoughtful way that considers both the museum space and the historical context. Play therefore requires ongoing reflection on the balance between protecting and pushing boundaries.

This is the ethical dilemma: Play must be implemented in a way that uses its potential to build bridges and disseminate complex histories, while also respecting their context.



*Frøsnapperbyen  
(The Frog-Snapper Town) at*

# **The Open-Air Museum**

# Frøsnapperbyen (The Frog-Snapper Town) at The Open-Air Museum

Parents found that their children could play freely and imaginatively across Frøsnapperbyen's diverse areas, where they engaged in activities from role-playing and physical movement to creative expression. According to the adults' museum audiences, a physical environment at children's height promotes independence and a desire to explore. They felt they could take on a more observational role while the children in their company played, and that it was also possible for them to become involved if they wanted to and were allowed to by the children.

*"I like the freedom inherent in the curation of the place. That they don't have guides or explanations for how to use things. It's up to you to figure out how you want to use it in your play. Which I imagine was also the case in the past."*

– 36-year-old New Zealand man visiting with partner and children

Frøsnapperbyen functioned as a gathering point for families with children and groups of friends.

## Location:

The Open-Air Museum (Frilandsmuseet), a cultural history museum featuring historic buildings and environments from across Denmark.

## Experience:

Frøsnapperbyen (The Frog-Snapper Town) is a large outdoor area that combines historical buildings with an imaginative universe inspired by the stories of Ole Lund Kirkegaard. Frøsnapperbyen is primarily aimed at children, families with children, and daycare institutions.


## Methods:

Questionnaire, interviews, and participant observations.



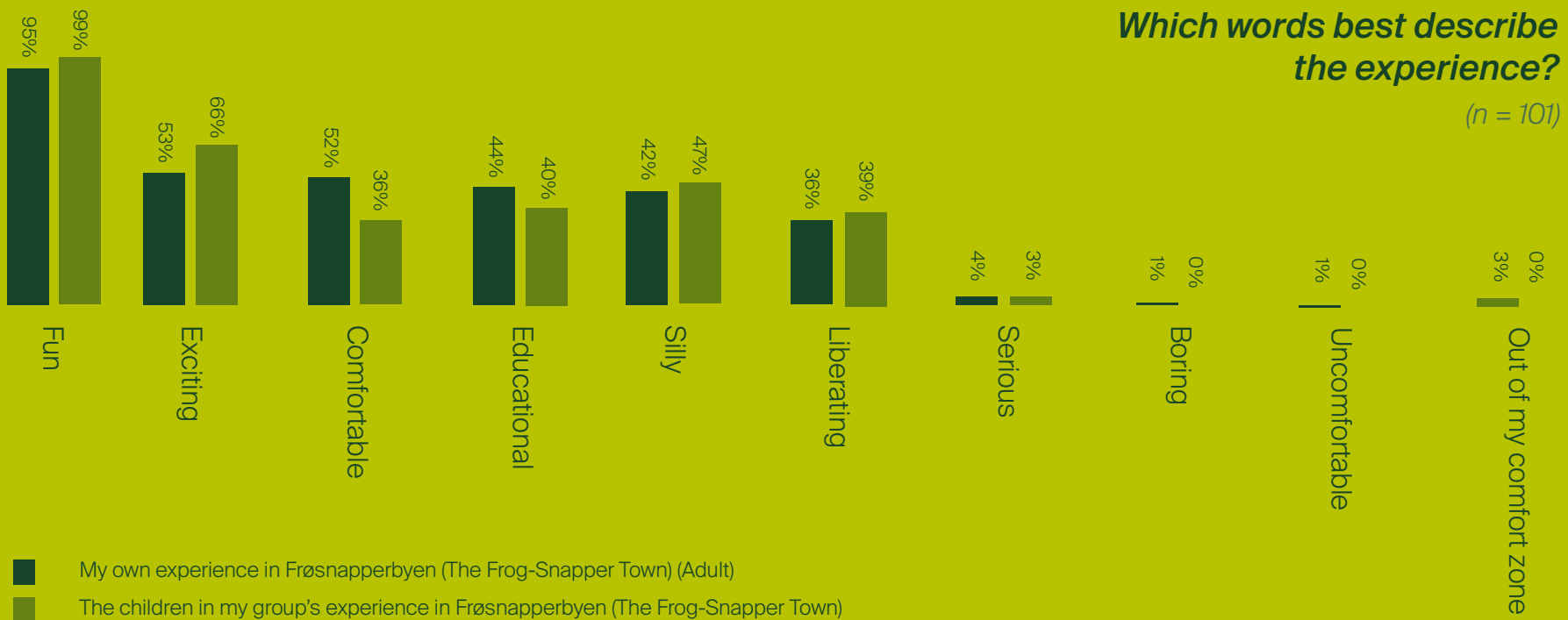
foto: Barak Projects



A photograph of a child lying on their back on a sandy surface, possibly a beach. The child is wearing a pink long-sleeved shirt and brown trousers. Their legs are bent, and their feet are visible. To the left of the child is a large pile of old, black, worn-out tires. The background is a vast expanse of sand. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**83 % of the respondents in the questionnaire believed that it was important or very important that the children in their company could play without adult involvement.**





Repeat visits and traditions helped create a special attachment to the site. Many of the area's users were, therefore, returning visitors, and approximately seven out of ten had visited the Open-Air Museum several times before.

Adult museum audiences highlighted that their children were allowed to touch and play with the items

in Frøsnapperbyen, permitting them to use their bodies in a unique way in a museum context. Most saw Frøsnapperbyen's dual function as a playground and a museum as a strength, leading to fun and memorable experiences for the whole family on the children's terms.

***"It's the best combination of playground and museum. It invites more people in who then realize what museums can do."***

– 67-year-old Danish woman visiting with husband, children, and grandchildren

*"Illegal Missions" at*  
**The Frøslev  
Camp Museum**



# "Illegal Missions" at The Frøslev Camp Museum

In practice, "Illegal Missions" functions as a treasure hunt game. The missions were experienced as somewhat challenging and occasionally confusing, which created both engagement and frustration, but museum audiences described them as positive.

The activity set the museum audience's bodies into motion. In the letter hunt, participants had to find letters hidden in the museum with a UV flashlight, which required significant physical activity. Participants moved around the museum's display cases, bent down, shone lights into cracks, and systematically examined the entire exhibition area.

***"It's also exciting that you have to investigate the exhibition. You enter a room, attempt to solve it, and then you talk about it, and that's cool".***

– 8-year-old Danish girl visiting with her family

The activity also promoted cooperation both within visiting groups and across groups. Groups followed each other's actions, exchanged advice, and were inspired by others' task-solving methods.

## **Location:**

The Frøslev Camp Museum, a museum and prisoner-of-war camp from World War II.

## **Experience:**

"Illegal Missions" is an interactive museum activity thematically anchored in the resistance movement during the occupation. Museum audiences are equipped with a shoulder bag and invited to answer questions and riddles in the exhibition areas. The activity combines problem-solving and the exploration of museum spaces.

## **Methods:**

Interviews, participant observations, and walk-alongs.



foto: Stefanie Steinbek



Several museum audiences did not directly connect the activity with play. They preferred to call it an “activity” or “interactive experience.” For some audience members, the word “play” became problematic in the context of Frøslev Camp, where the history was considered too serious to be made silly.

***“Play? We don’t really do that, it’s too serious for play. Or... yes, it probably was a little bit anyway, but it wasn’t fun play, or maybe it became a little bit anyway.”***

– 45-year-old Danish man visiting with his two children

Audiences shared divided opinions on whether Illegal Missions strengthened or disrupted children’s immersion in the museum’s historical content. Some were concerned that the competitive element that often arose in user groups drew children’s focus away from the immersive content. Conversely, others described the activity as a way to make history present and relevant for children. A few visitors emphasized that the missions gave younger audiences something to do, which permitted adults to immerse themselves in the museum content.





*Home of the Viking Kings*

**Kongernes**

**Jelling**



# Kongernes Jelling - Home of the Viking Kings

Museum audiences spent an average of 19 minutes in the three rooms, while groups that included children spent slightly less time on average (13 minutes). The majority of visitors (92 %) pressed buttons to activate narratives in “The World of the Vikings.” Many people interacted with the installation “The Journey to Valhalla” (81 %), where each audience member’s body was projected onto a large screen while the visualization changed as they moved through a series of “steps.” Active interaction with “The Warrior’s Death”, an installation in The World of the Vikings, was lower—73 % of visitors looked at it, while only one in four interacted with it.

The Journey to Valhalla installation was particularly engaging. Audience members smiled and laughed through the experience, and many moved through it multiple times, involved others in their visiting groups, and physically expressed themselves creatively. They described the experience as surreal, fun, and special.

## **Location:**

Kongernes Jelling - Home of the Viking Kings (Oplevelsescenter Kongernes Jelling), a cultural history museum featuring the Jelling Stones and focusing on the royal seat in the Viking Age.

## **Experience:**

Three parts of the experience center: “The World of the Vikings,” “The Burial Chamber,” and “The Journey to Valhalla.” In the selected rooms, the museum audience can explore the life of the Vikings by, for example, pressing, touching, pushing, and dancing through various interactive elements.

## **Methods:**

Timing and tracking observations and interviews.



foto: Katrine Dalum Hesselødt

Museum audiences felt that the experience center challenged traditional museum conventions by making most of the presentation interactive. They described their previous museum experiences as usually just looking at objects and reading texts, whereas the Kongernes Jelling invited a distinctive form of interactive engagement:

***“The whole spontaneity of the artifacts and things that invite you to press, things that invite you to touch... It’s very different from a normal museum. At a normal museum, either you can’t touch, or things are in glass cases. But here, you are really invited to play with it.”***

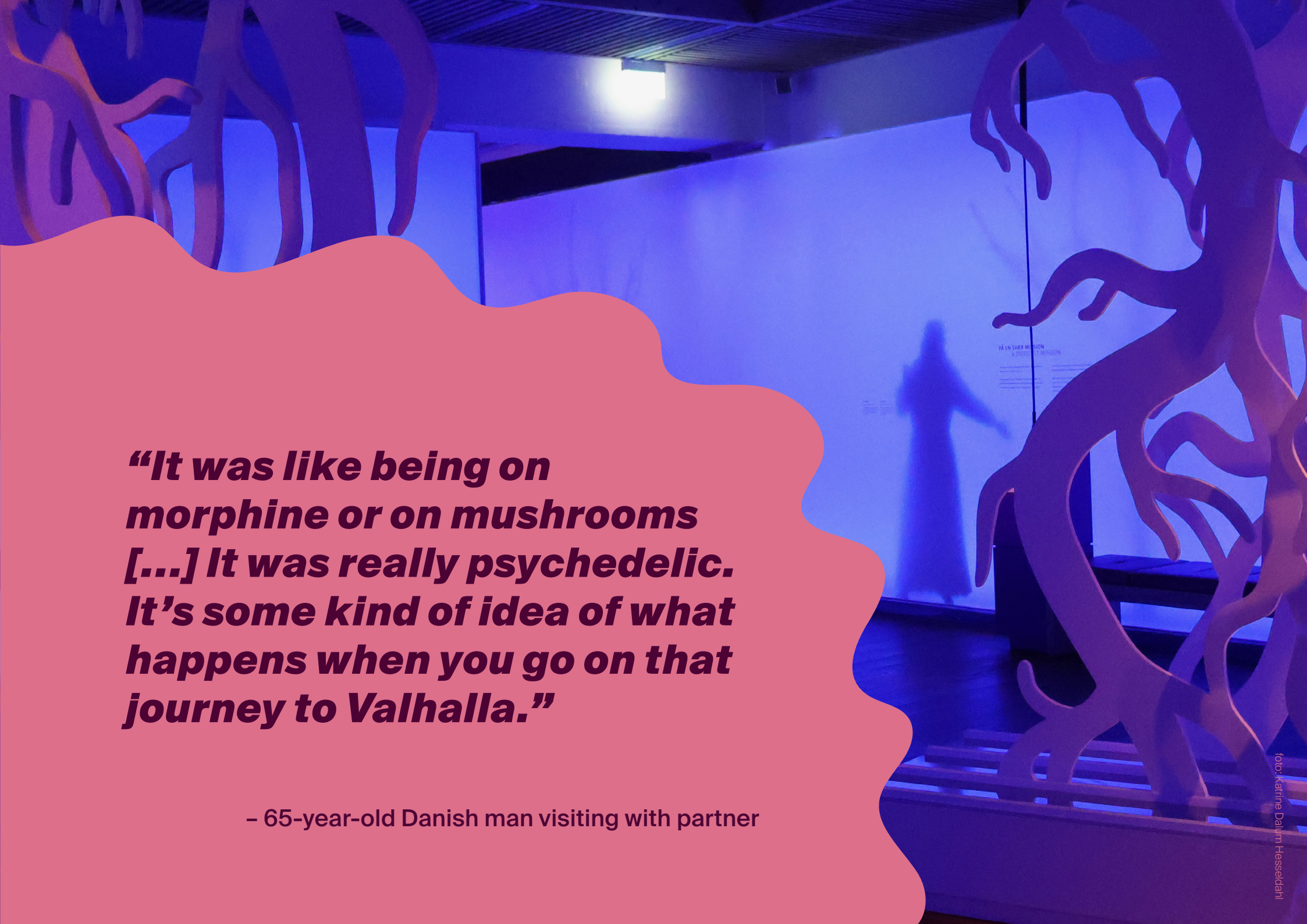
– 35-year-old Singaporean man visiting with partner

When an audience member in the room interacted with an exhibition element, their experience was contagious. Other guests were then more likely to interact with items. In The Burial Chamber, where audience members could solve screen-mediated visual riddles, a form of hyper-focused engagement arose that led to social problem-solving within the visiting groups.

Museum audiences did not describe their experience in the three rooms explicitly as “play” – with the exception of The Journey to Valhalla and a board game in The World of the Vikings. Visitors were, however, enthusiastic about the playful exhibition design, and did not hesitate to describe the experience as interactive.







***“It was like being on morphine or on mushrooms [...] It was really psychedelic. It’s some kind of idea of what happens when you go on that journey to Valhalla.”***

– 65-year-old Danish man visiting with partner



*"Below Deck" at*  
**The Danish War  
Museum**

# "Below Deck" at The Danish War Museum

Museum audiences spent an average of 3 minutes and 40 seconds in this area. The costumes were the most popular element: half of the audience members in the area looked at them, and about one-quarter put them on. The time spent primarily depended on how many and which elements the audience members engaged with.

Museum audiences smiled and laughed as they engaged with both the costumes and the head-in-hole figure. They fooled around, put costumes on each other, and photo-documented the experiences, which was also cause for amusement. Some visitors used the hammocks for relaxation, while other audience members started a kind of physical swinging game that also resulted in loud laughter. The positive facial expressions that arose during some audience members' encounters with the different parts of "Below Deck" contrasted sharply with their behavior elsewhere in The War Museum.

*"If you just walk around and look, you get a little tired. And this is a little break that gives you energy to see the rest."*

– 31-year-old Dutch woman visiting with friends

## **Location:**

The Danish War Museum (Krigsmuseet), a cultural history museum on Denmark's military history and the history of war.

## **Experience:**

"Below Deck" is an area in the exhibition Denmark's Navy at The Danish War Museum. The area consists of four hammocks mounted on a lowered ceiling, from which costume jackets, wigs, and hats also hang. The area around the hammocks displays, among other things, a table-bench set with a game and a "head-in-hole" figure of Tordenskjold.

## **Methods:**

Timing and tracking observations and interviews.



foto: Ronja Melbye-Hansen





When asked whether they experienced Below Deck as playful, and what else they thought about play at a war museum, some were hesitant, as they did not believe true “play” could involve professional communication. Others were comfortable using the word “play” and elaborated that they thought one could indeed “play” with war to engage with a historical context and that the communication purpose was clear.

Museum audiences felt that the interplay between their imagination and the interactive elements permitted empathy and created a concrete starting point for historical reflection.

***“For me, playing the game was exciting. It made me think about how the sailors back then played exactly that game, and I also think we commented a little on what it must be like to try to play with the sticks on a ship that is moving. That makes it harder.”***

– 27-year-old Romanian man visiting with friends

The opportunity for interaction made the experience in Below Deck memorable, according to museum audiences.





### Mød besætningen

Hvordan er livet ombord på skibet  
BORNHOLM i 1700-tallet?

*Vend kortene. Mød kaptajn  
Schønning og hans besætning.*

### Meet the crew

How is life on board the ship  
BORNHOLM in the 18th century?

*Turn the cards. Meet Captain  
Schønning and his crew.*

***“When you see a picture,  
you forget it. But when  
you’ve tried it yourself,  
you can remember it  
much better.”***

– 81-year-old Danish man  
visiting with wife and grandchild



*FEST at*  
**Kronborg  
Castle**



*Sikke en fest*

# ***FEST*** at **Kronborg Castle**

Museum audiences experienced FEST as a different exhibition. Only 10 % thought it resembled their previous museum experiences, and participants described the experience in interviews as surprising and unexpected, particularly due to its use of interactive, sensory, and playful elements.

***“You engage emotionally with the exhibition through fun and laughter, and that makes the experience more memorable.”***

-26-year-old Polish man visiting with conference participants

In total, 80 % of visitors agreed that the exhibition was playful, and 76 % agreed that it encouraged them to use their imagination. Physical and imaginative play were recurring themes in the audience's behavior: Some people danced, others dressed up in Renaissance clothing, and several interacted with installations such as the “banquet table,” where one could place their head into a feast, the “drunk room” with slanted floors and carnival mirrors to mimic the sensations of intoxication, and the “quiz” on facts about Renaissance parties.

## **Location:**

Kronborg Castle (Kronborg Slot), a Renaissance castle and fortress, renowned as Hamlet's castle.

## **Experience:**

FEST is a special exhibition that represents the lavish parties that occurred at the castle during the Renaissance through various interactive and scenographic installations.

## **Methods:**

Questionnaire, interviews, and participant observations.



foto: Kronborg Slot




The exhibition invited adult museum audiences to do things they normally would not do in a museum, creating a legitimate space for them to behave playfully.

Social interaction was perceived paradoxically: Questionnaire respondents mentioned interaction as the least appreciated element (22 %) of the experience, but we observed how users laughed with each other, commented on the exhibition, and improvised spontaneous, small role-plays, creating common engagement.

Several visitors emphasized that the experience worked best as a supplement to the other exhibitions. Audience members described special experiences like FEST at Kronborg Castle positively, but also noted the importance of retaining a traditional exhibition space.





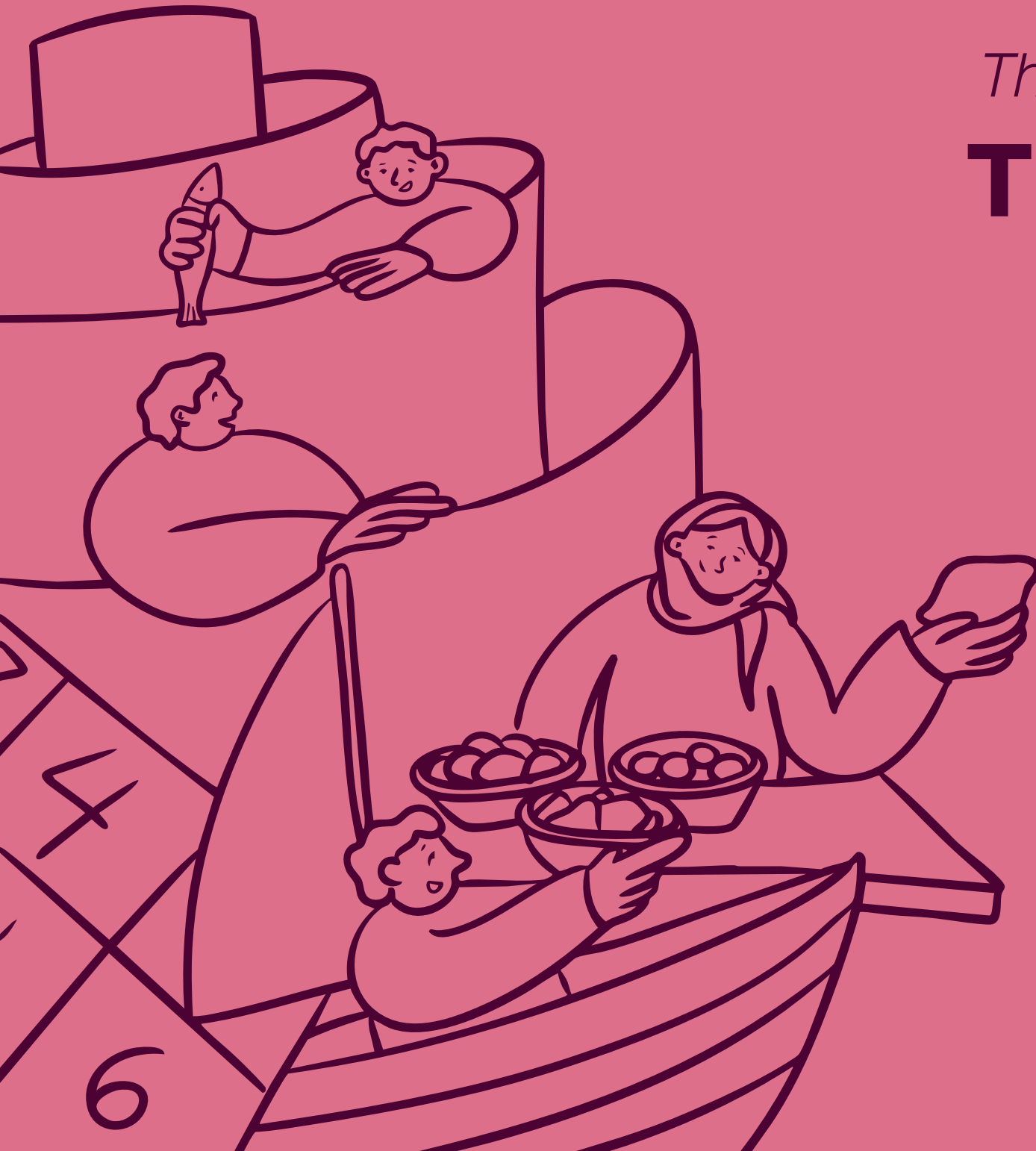
***“I have never seen anything like it in a museum. You hear the music, you come in, and it’s playful. It’s really nice. I mean, I have never seen a museum that is not so strict, without boundaries. You can play a little, you can be yourself.”***

– 27-year-old Polish woman visiting with her mother



*The Children's Museum*

# **The National Museum of Denmark**



# The Children's Museum at The National Museum of Denmark

87 % of respondents stated that they had played in The Children's Museum, and the audience interacted with rooms and props with imagination and curiosity. Role-playing, in particular, where participants dressed up and immersed themselves in a role, was observed multiple times and described by more than half of the audience as the best part of the visit.

Adults described play as a meaningful gateway to learning, making history accessible without feeling like instruction.

*"One of the coolest experiences we've had. The hands-on elements, and how it's a snapshot of a time period with things like Vikings and dolls. There are narratives, objects, something you can touch, but also learning about the stories while [the children] play and share."*

– 37-year-old American woman visiting with her child

## Location:

National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, a cultural history and ethnographic museum with collections from around the world.

## Experience:

The Children's Museum is a permanent interactive area aimed at children, families with children, and childcare institutions. The area consists of a series of activity zones that are thematically furnished to reflect historical and cultural settings, offering various forms of physical and creative interaction.

## Methods:

Children's questionnaire, interviews, and participant observations.



foto: Nationalmuseet København

The Children's Museum was experienced as a place where the body was allowed to be involved. Activities such as movement (37 %) and "touching things" (33 %) were highlighted as the best part of the visit. Children ran, climbed, tumbled around, and used the rooms actively and physically.

Several areas in The Children's Museum functioned as gathering points for social play, in which children and adults were actively engaged in joint play. For example, the "warrior area," where one could play warrior, was characterized by a higher degree of adult participation in the form of dressing up and play-fighting together with the children. In other places, adult participation was more passive and withdrawn.

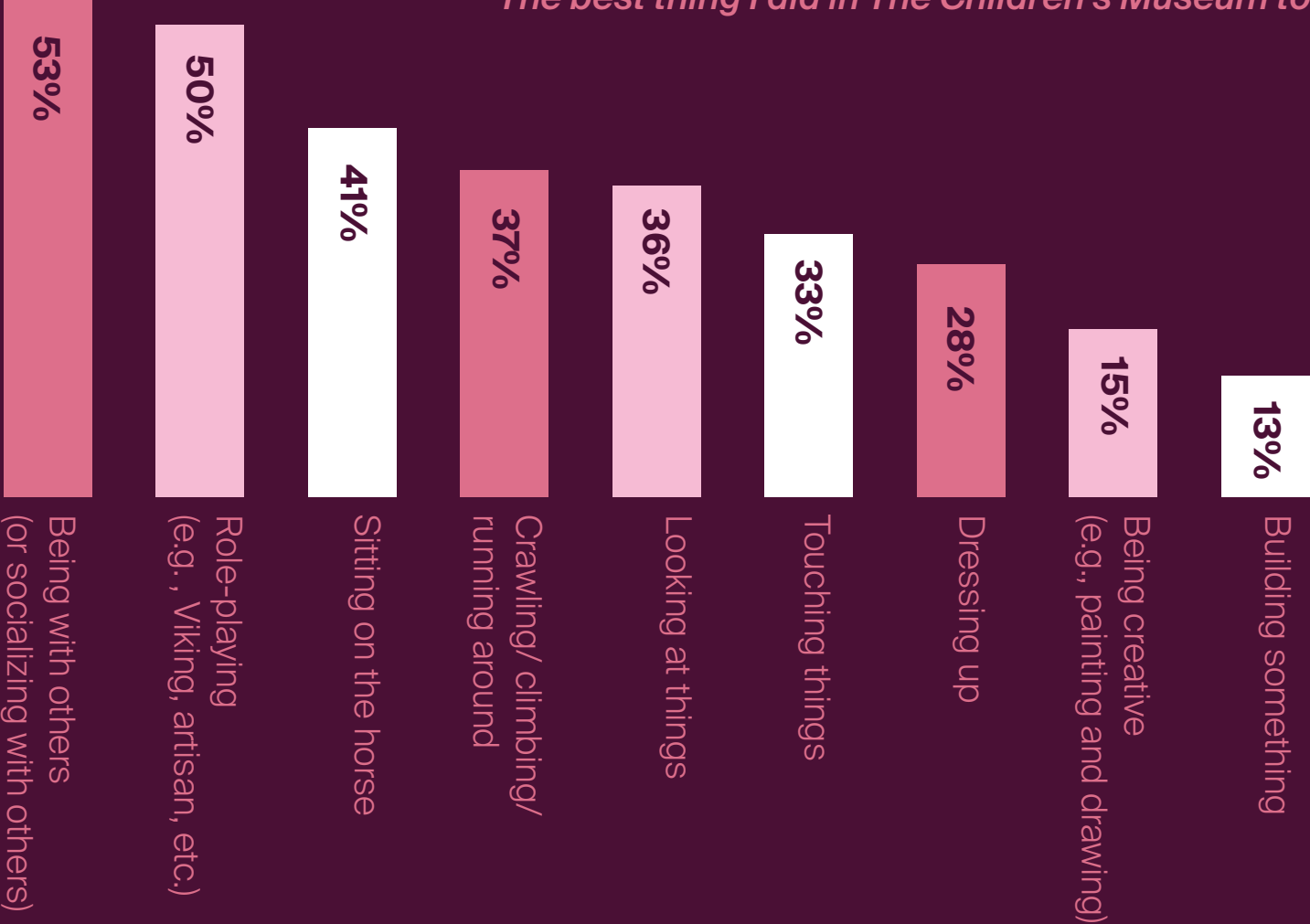
The Children's Museum was popular among both audiences from Denmark, who expressed nostalgic recognition, and international audiences, who described it as a unique museum offering. Even older children outside the target age group (0-10 years) wanted to use it for play.



foto: Ronja Melbye-Hansen

*The best thing I did in The Children’s Museum today was ...*

(n = 101)







*KA-CHING! at*

**The National  
Museum of  
Denmark**

# KA-CHING! at The National Museum of Denmark

The “Money Game” formed the framework for a visit to KA-CHING!. At the exhibition entrance, the museum audience was met by a host who handed out money cards that enabled interaction with the exhibition’s three game stations. We observed that the three game stations helped create a special form of playful engagement with the exhibition—a type of play that appeared more serious and goal-oriented than the play observed at other visiting locations. The game also changed the dynamics within visiting groups. Family members and friends became competitors or teammates, and their high engagement in the Money Game was sometimes expressed through outbursts of joy or anger at the different game stations.

*“I’m going to win against you!”*

– 23-year-old Mexican woman visiting with partner

Four out of ten museum audience members did not participate in the Money Game despite its central role in the exhibition. Some adults considered the

## **Location:**

National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, a cultural history and ethnographic museum with collections from around the world.

## **Experience:**

The KA-CHING! exhibition introduces museum users to the significance of money for society and life throughout time. The exhibition combines various forms of currency in display cases, infographics, and videos with the interactive “Money Game,” which consists of three game stations: the hamster wheel, the money quiz, and the investment game.

## **Methods:**

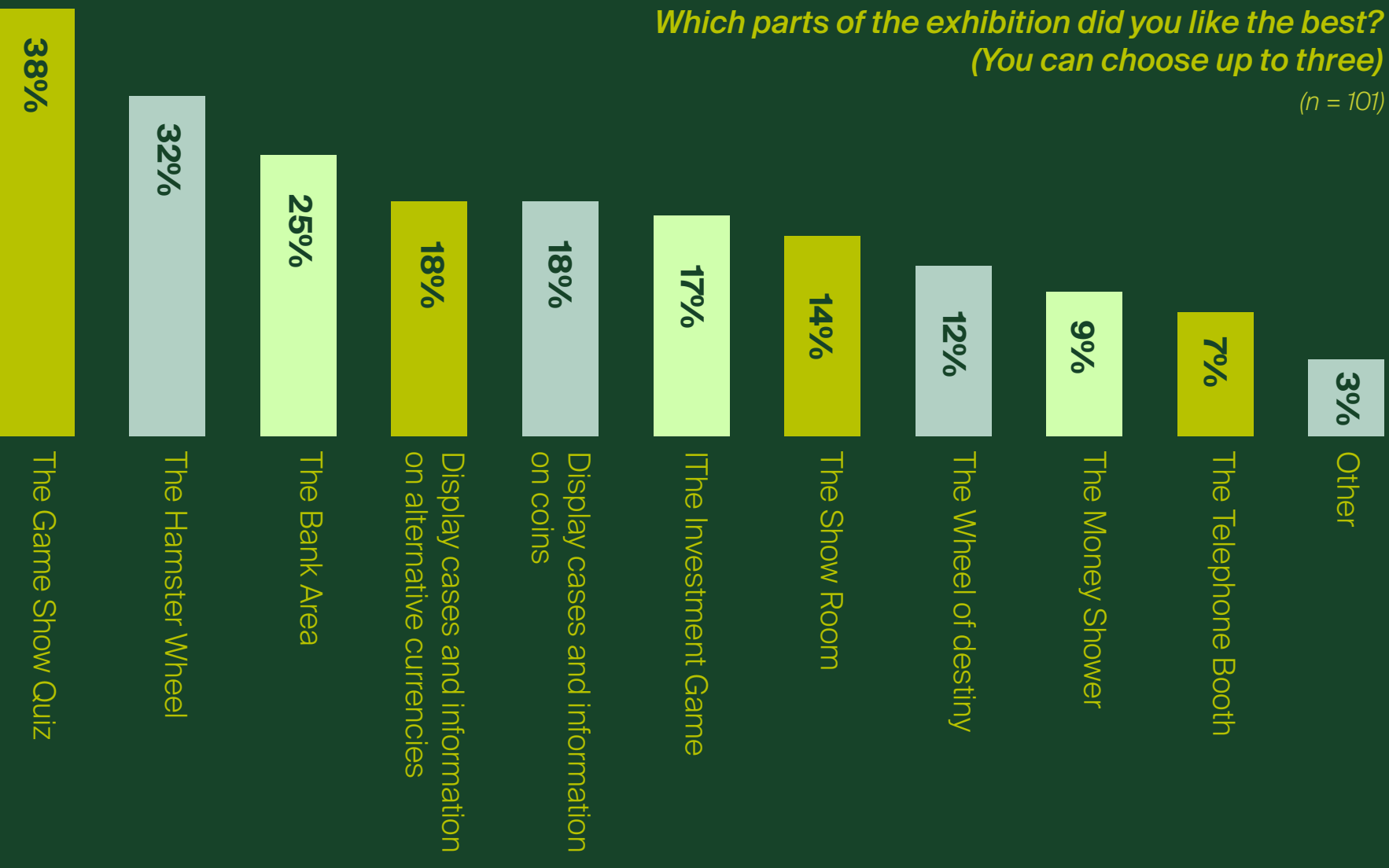
Questionnaire, walk-alongs, and participant observations.



foto: Joakim Züger

*Which parts of the exhibition did you like the best?  
(You can choose up to three)*

*(n = 101)*





**Among the participants,  
51 % of those who played the  
Money Game in KA-CHING!  
stated that they engaged  
with the game to a high or  
very high degree.**





game to be exclusively for children, while others shared that they had visited alone and only cared for that type of involvement if they visited with a group.

***“At first, I had a hard time accepting it [the game] because it seemed like a game for children. But as I explored the exhibition, I realized: ‘Okay, now I’m learning something’.”***

– 67-year-old American man visiting with partner





*"The Children's Boatyard" at*  
**The Ships in Holbæk**

# “The Children’s Boatyard” at The Ships in Holbæk

Togetherness was the driving force behind families’ experience at “The Children’s Boatyard.” Visiting groups varied from large to small and spanned generations, but all had one goal: to build a boat, most of them working collaboratively. Both children and adults experienced joy in creating something together. The interaction between children, adults, and staff created a community that was characterized by cooperation and recognition.

*“It was really cozy! We worked together, and it was really fun.”*

– 12-year-old Danish girl visiting with family

Although the museum audiences were given a concrete goal of building a boat, preferably one that could float, which they could test in a basin outside, there was ample room to experiment in the absence of fixed construction instructions. This made the activity creative and open, and seemed to have a positive effect on the audience’s experience.

## **Location:**

The Ships in Holbæk (Skibene i Holbæk), a shipyard specializing in traditional wooden ships.

## **Experience:**

“The Children’s Boatyard” is an annual event aimed at children, held as part of the SKVULP Harbor Festival. At the event, children and families could build wooden boats from materials found at the shipyard, as well as try sparring with ship carpenters, skippers, and the shipyard’s young volunteer sailors.

## **Methods:**

Interviews and participant observations.



foto: Stefanie Steinbek



***“I love that there’s no set of rules. That there is no goal. You can also see how the parents in there get caught up in it.”***

**– 45-year-old Danish woman visiting with family**





The presence of the old ship Ruth, a sloop from 1854, and the ship carpenter were described as well-functioning elements of the experience, as concrete connections were made to the craft and history that the audiences were engaging with through boat building. The same was true of the raw materials and the traditional, handheld tools that visitors utilized in the building process.

The creative and physically demanding process of building a boat created immersion and social interaction. Audiences described being unconscious of learning new things in the moment, but upon reflection, broadly agreed that it was an educational process.

***“It’s a good way to learn something without knowing that you’re learning.”***

– 10-year-old Danish girl visiting with family

Although audiences rarely used the word “play” to describe their experience of building a boat, many described it as a “playful” experience when directly asked. We also saw spontaneous and informal games arise at the shipyard, and the materials provided for boat building were used in alternative ways. For example, a group of older children began

to compete over who could hammer a nail into a board with the fewest hammer blows, and younger children used the water basin in which finished boats could be launched for imaginative and tactile water play.

***“You play with your kids here. It’s play when you’re having fun and you’re allowed to make things.”***

– 42-year-old Danish man visiting with family





*Viking Festival at*  
**Trelleborg**  
**Viking Fortress**

# Viking Festival at Trelleborg Viking Fortress

The Trelleborg Viking Festival engaged festival guests in various ways, which met many guests' desires for an active or partially active role at the festival. This happened through sensory activities such as archery, crafts, and cooking. Living presentations through historical environments, crafts, and volunteer actors in Viking costumes made history present and concrete. Visitors' sensory and bodily engagement strengthened their experience of authenticity. The Viking Festival's atmosphere was described as sensory, authentic, and immersive, and festival guests felt they were stepping into a time pocket.

Although only 11 % of respondents answered that they behaved as they would have in the Viking Age at the Viking Festival, that kind of "role-playing" was described with many positive words: 75 % described it as "educational," 63 % as "fun," and 60 % as "exciting." There is, therefore, potential to create better opportunities for festival users to participate through role-playing.

## **Location:**

Trelleborg Viking Fortress (Vikingeborgen Trelleborg), a Viking Age fortress from the 10th century and a cultural history monument.

## **Experience:**

The annual Viking Festival, for which more than one thousand volunteers from Denmark and abroad move into the Trelleborg area. They dress in Viking costumes and engage festival guests in a living recreation of the Viking Age.

## **Methods:**

Questionnaire and interviews.



foto: Alexander Peter Gilbert



**“[It’s] a bit of a mix  
of role-playing and  
Copenhell.”**

*– 45-year-old Danish man  
visiting with his family*





Play arose in many forms: Children explored activities such as sword fighting and jewelry workshops, while adults enjoyed freedom, curiosity, and the opportunity to explore. However, several respondents described a lack of playful offerings specifically targeting adult audiences.

When asked for examples of “play” and playful experiences at the Viking Festival, the respondents mainly mentioned archery, warrior training, and interaction with actors. Many festival guests experienced the volunteer actors’ engagement as a form of role-playing or immersion in history, and reported that it contributed to the festival’s playful character.

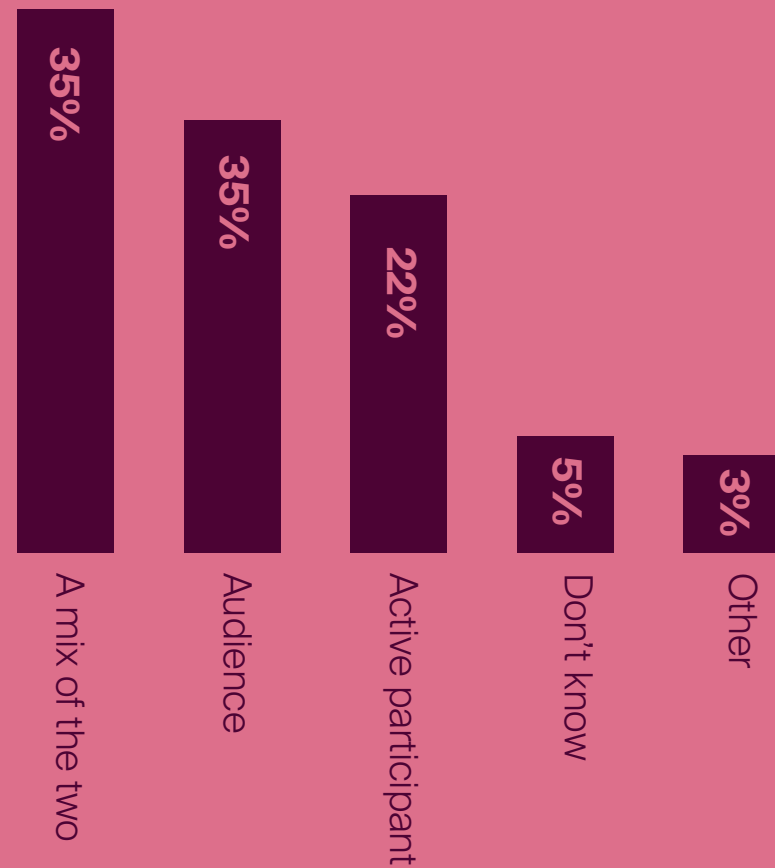
***“It’s enormously exciting and authentic. The fact that the blacksmith is standing there making things, and you have the way they make bread. You get the whole picture, right? And, of course, the costumes.”***

– 46-year-old Danish man visiting with his family

The festival was a recurring tradition for its audiences. It inspired feelings of community in return visitors and first-time visitors alike and created space for togetherness, memories, and cultural exchange.

### ***Which role do you prefer at the Viking Festival?***

(n = 63)





# Future Work

The following themes have all been identified as relevant nuances in relation to play at cultural history museums. These themes hold significant analytical potential, but they require more in-depth research than this report allows. We present them here to acknowledge their presence and illustrate the complexity associated with playful museum dissemination.

## **Facilitated play versus free play**

The study highlights tension between structured forms of play, facilitated through the museum's official offerings, and unstructured, spontaneous forms of play, both of which are valued by museum audiences. Experiences vary significantly: some audiences appreciate the clear framework, while others emphasize the freedom to explore at their own pace.

## **Play's dual relation to learning**

A dilemma emerges regarding play and its effect on learning. While some museum audiences noted that play can make learning easier and almost imperceptible ("you learn without realizing you're learning"), others pointed out that playful behavior can interfere with

the opportunity to engage deeply with the museum's traditional content.

## **The social coding of play as a children's phenomenon**

Play in museums is still predominantly associated with children and families with children. This creates a social barrier for adults without children, who often only begin to engage in playful behavior in the museum, when they have a socially accepted framework (children). Even then, they sometimes need to be explicitly encouraged that they are welcome to participate in playing, rather than merely act as facilitators.

## **Museum staff as conscious or unconscious boundary-makers**

Museum staff (hosts, guards, and educators) have a decisive influence on how play unfolds. Their presence can either affirm playful behavior or unintentionally halt it, as audiences often revert to traditional museum norms when staff enter the space.

# Summary

## **Play breaks with museum conventions:**

Playful exhibitions and activities at the National Museum of Denmark's sites are experienced as innovations that contrast with the classic museum experience. However, they can create doubt among the audience about appropriate behavior in the museum space.

## **The playful museum experience is shaped by the museum audience's behavior and engagement:**

Many different forms of playful behavior arise across the National Museum of Denmark's sites. Individuals' own engagement and choices determine what form play takes within their experiences.

## **Play supports social interaction:**

It supports social dynamics and collaboration, both within and between visitor groups. This strengthens their sense of community and makes the museum visit more memorable.

## **Play is a physical and emotional way to interact with history:**

It activates the body and the senses through movement, touch, and sensory impressions; evokes emotions such as joy, curiosity, frustration, and pride; and creates a closer connection to the history which the National Museum of Denmark's sites communicate.

## **Play requires ethical reflection and clear boundaries:**

Playful experiences must be balanced with respect for the museum space and the historical context. Original historical objects must be preserved and serious topics handled responsibly, whilst the potential of play as a dissemination tool is brought into use.



