

The leaderful qualities of matterly encounters: How does leadership emerge, unfold, and entangle with creativity and play at work?

A new materialist examination in a UK-based creative micro-business firm

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the leaderful effects produced within human-nonhuman encounters and their flows of affect in the context of creative and playful practices at work. In the field of leadership studies, it is often argued that for creativity and play to happen in organisations, it is necessary to have 'skilful leadership' able to nourish creativity by facilitating and managing play. This rhetoric often perpetuates performative, heroic, and anthropocentric assumptions focused on disembodied and deterministic skills, competencies, and behaviours of individual leaders or relations and actions unfolding exclusively within leader-follower dyads. Such assumptions take for granted the affective presence of nonhuman bodies and the material effects, trajectories, directions, and consequences they produce. Inspired by new materialist and affect theories, I conducted a 34-week online and affective ethnography in a UK-based design and software development micro-business firm. For data collection, I employed multiple methods including observation, semi-structured interviews, projective techniques, and participatory workshops. My analysis was informed by an abductive approach to grounded theory employing a new materialist coding framework. The findings question leadership as the sole product of human individuals and collectives. Rather, I will argue that leadership emerges through the flows of affect produced within human-nonhuman encounters at work thematising five 'leaderful qualities of matterly encounters': affective spell, consonant and dissonant vibrancy, affective hindrance, decomposing rupture, and present presence/absence. These findings contribute to a better understanding of how heterogeneous materialities can lead creative and playful practices articulating leadership as an ongoing effect of affective encounters in the workplace.

Keywords: Leadership, creativity, play, new materialism, affect, posthumanism

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Research motivation

As a designer, I have worked on numerous projects developing design solutions to fulfil specific requirements and aspirations in both the public and private sectors. Throughout my design work, I have aimed to foster organisational development and branding performance by creating multiple proposals at strategical, communicational, and aesthetic levels. The nature of my profession has led me to work very close to this thing called 'creativity', for being a designer seems to 'demand' creativity, and consequently, to develop 'creative' solutions. Thus, I have been always interested in how this creative 'thing' unfolds and manifests in the workplace and what leadership has to say or do about it. This is how my interest in studying the relationships between leadership and creativity began in the first place.

At the infancy of my research project, I wanted to understand how leaders could 'lead' creativity, and soon after, I incorporated the realm of play, wondering whether leaders could enable or hinder the creative process through play. Indeed, a very functional and performative approach. However, this thesis not only illustrates what this research project finally became but attests to a transformation process, a change of paradigm I experienced throughout my PhD journey, a transformation that began when I started to engage with critical literature. Early in the process, I had a sort of a weird feeling, I felt uncomfortable with the notion that for some strange reason all managers were labelled as leaders and that they were somewhat 'different' or even 'special'. I began to feel at a visceral level that something was out of place, but I did not know how to explain it yet. By then, I lacked the theoretical tools to better understand what was happening. It took me around a year to fully understand it, to overcome the paradigm, to challenge the romantic view of leadership or what I began to call the 'fairy tale', a myth filled with heroes and stories of salvation and success, for leadership always seems to be a force for good.

As I developed my critical thinking, I comprehended that the leadership rhetoric was filled with gaps, unquestioned assumptions, and problems. Thus, as I began to better understand alternative approaches to leadership, I opened my research towards the role of bodies aiming to explore how leadership is made from relations and encounters between human and nonhuman materialities at work. As a designer, I have been always fascinated by the role of bodies and their senses. Designing often demands to let oneself be guided by vibrant materialities. Consequently, my work has been always the material consequence of my leaderful encounters with clients, users, reports, concepts, typographies, visuals, graphics, and so on. Due to the nature of my profession, I felt at

the bodily level that studying leadership-making materialities was the right direction for my research project.

Unexpectedly, this thesis was additionally challenged by a worldwide pandemic including a Covid-19 pathogen, unseen to the human eye. Bodies affecting and decreasing my capacities to act, forcing me to adapt to the new contingencies, and to find alternatives to carry out my project. Certainly, finishing my thesis was not an easy task. The work I present to the reader is the product of these processes, a personal journey of transformation and adaptation, an academic adventure that began with an idea, an idea that mutated along the way, an idea that also affected me. This thesis is far more than a mere research project, it represents a journey of discovery and growth.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis concerns itself with understanding the *materiality of leadership* and its entanglement with creativity and play in the workplace. In the field of leadership studies, mainstream research frequently assumes that for creativity and play to happen in organisations, we need to turn our attention toward the skills, behaviours, and actions of specific human individuals we uncritically identify as 'leaders' and the ways they supposedly support employees' creativity encouraging them, for instance, to play at work. This romantic narrative often positions individual or collective leaders at the centre of the research enquiry privileging ideas around creative performance and effectiveness whilst ignoring, silencing, and suppressing the role that more-than-human materialities play in the production of organisational direction. This thesis aims, therefore, to question and confront these prevailing notions of leadership by making visible the active and leaderful role of matter. In this way, by de-centring the heroic figure of the human leader, this thesis will reveal the rich ways in which *bodily encounters lead* by exploring human-nonhuman relations, the flows of affect that emerge from such encounters, and the material effects and consequences that human-material relations produce in the context of creative and playful practices at work.

This chapter introduces this research as follows: To begin with, section 1 describes the research context providing the rationale for the study of leadership and materiality in the context of organisational creativity and play. Section 2 depicts the objectives and research questions I aim to answer throughout this thesis. Section 3 briefly articulates the significance and contributions of this research. Finally, section 4 describes the structure the thesis shall follow.

1 The research context

1.1 The issues with ‘leading’ creativity and play at work

In the contemporary management discourse, creativity is often pinpointed as a key factor to ensure organisational performance, survival, success, and competitiveness (Gilson, 2008). On the other hand, following a similar line of argument, play has been traditionally prescribed as a fundamental managerial technology to motivate employees (Webster and Martocchio, 1993), increase productivity (West, Hoff and Carlsson, 2016), and more importantly, to improve the much-desired creative behaviour (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006). Based on the pivotal roles that creativity and play are believed to hold in contemporary organisations, scholars have additionally identified leadership as the ‘grand’ solution to guide, foster, support, and advance creativity (Mainemelis, Kark and Epitropaki, 2015) as well as to manage and balance playful experiences at work (Kark, 2011). Consequently, mainstream research often professes leadership to tackle and solve almost every organisational challenge for the sake of efficiency (Tourish, 2014); thus, leadership studies often depict a ‘performative intent’ (Fournier and Grey, 2000).

Performativity has been conceptualised and interpreted in the management literature around multiple strands (see for instance Gond et al., 2016, for a review of the literature) largely inspired by the writings of Austin (1962), Lyotard (1984), Butler (1993), Callon (2007), and Barad (2007). In this thesis, I refer to performativity in the Lyotardian sense, a perspective that questions the “intent to develop and celebrate knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input; it involves inscribing knowledge under means–ends calculation” (Fournier and Grey, 2000, p.17). In this context, leadership knowledge is often developed based on its capacity to strengthen organisational efficiency; thus, placing performance as a predominant criterion (Lyotard, 1984). Consequently, leadership studies often aim to understand how leaders can increase organisational efficiency and profitability by harnessing, for instance, employees’ creativity. Such an understanding of performativity depicts how mainstream research conceptualises leadership based on ‘instrumental rationality’ (Townley, Cooper and Oakes, 2003). The Lyotardian view, therefore, invites us to question the paramount relevance attached to efficiency, a notion deeply ingrained in the management discourse and knowledge-production apparatus (Fournier and Grey, 2000).

Moreover, although several studies have explored leadership and its relationship with organisational creativity (cf. Hughes et al., 2018; Mainemelis, Kark and Epitropaki, 2015) and play (cf. Anderson, 1994; Kark, 2011; West, 2014), these research efforts have

largely focused on issues around the heroic and romantic figure of the leader (Collinson, Smolović Jones and Grint, 2018; Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985), the glorified manager (Fournier and Grey, 2000), and how she or he is supposed to manage and support creativity and play in the workplace. Consequently, mainstream research regularly provides prescriptive accounts of how leaders can direct and foster creativity by uncovering a myriad of actions, strategies, and tactics they can enact (e.g. Amabile and Khaire, 2008) treating creativity as something that can be simply increased or decreased by leaders and their technical skills, competencies, and 'special insights' (Fournier and Grey, 2000). Moreover, aligned with this performative logic, play has been additionally instrumentalised for the sake of creative production (Ashton and Giddings, 2018) highlighting how leaders can benefit from play either as a technology to develop their personal skills (Holliday, Statler and Flanders, 2007) or how by implementing play at work (Anderson, 1994) they can produce 'playful conditions' for creativity to flourish (West, 2014). Under this rhetoric, leadership arises as the gatekeeper for creativity and play to happen in organisations.

Consequently, heroic narratives focus on how leaders influence passive followers promoting ego-centric accounts that largely ignore the impact of other reciprocal forces and influences (Schweiger, Müller and Güttel, 2020) excluding, for instance, nonhuman artefacts and objects. In focusing on how leaders can foster creativity or instrumentalise play for the sake of creative production, organisation studies frequently highlight the role of the human, either as a heroic individual or heroic collective (Collinson, Smolović Jones and Grint, 2018), to understand what qualities and competencies individuals have or lack, or how multiple leaders interact together (Dovey, Burdon and Simpson, 2017). This anthropocentric rhetoric places the human subject as the basic unit of reference and analysis (Braidotti, 2013) largely neglecting the role of more-than-human materialities at work (Gherardi and Laasch, 2021). Thus, nonhumans are often made "marginalised subjects in organisational theory" (Sayers, 2016, p.371), materialities that, as I contend, have the affective capacity to lead and be led.

1.2 The neglection of matter

Leadership studies have traditionally ignored the material aspects of leadership processes and practices (Knights, 2018a). This omission cut across not just leadership research but to most areas of management and organisations (Orlikowski, 2007) including fields such as creativity and play (e.g. Duff and Sumartojo, 2017). Mainstream leadership research often privileges narratives focused either on disembodied traits, abilities, behaviours, and styles of individual leaders (e.g. Jaussi and Dionne, 2003) or

human-human relations unfolding within leader-follower dyads (e.g. Pearce, Conger and Locke, 2008). These narratives silence nonhumans rendering materiality as something passive, inert, and without agency (e.g. Arvedsen and Hassert, 2020); thus, taking for granted the affective presence of nonhuman bodies and the material and leaderful effects they produce at work.

In organisation studies, materiality is often treated as an 'absent presence' (Dale, 2005; Ford et al., 2017); however, as Monteiro and Nicolini (2015, p.63) observe, "[t]ake the materials away and you are left with no work, no worker, and no way to account for the social relationships amongst them". This absence is surprising given that previous research on materiality in work organisations has shown that objects and artefacts are much more than passive objects filling the social background but are consequential for leadership to happen and emerge (cf. Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021; Hawkins, 2015; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013; Sergi, 2016). The problem, as Sayers (2016, p.371, italics added for emphasis) contends, is that the nonhuman bodies "like all precarious subjects, are not voiceless; *they are deliberately silenced*". For instance, when materiality is taken into consideration, it is just as a mere companion or aid, something that humans can use or discard at will (see for example Arvedsen and Hassert, 2020). And yet, materiality is more involved in leadership processes and practices than research traditionally give credit for. Thus, more than being a mere companion, matter plays an active role in co-constituting the social world (Latour, 2005; Monteiro and Nicolini, 2015). Materiality has the capacity to act, to do things beyond human control and intervention, for nonhuman bodies are more dynamic and less static than commonly thought (Leonardi, 2011), they animate and drive organisational actions and practices (Clifton and Mueni, 2021).

1.3 Turning towards materiality

To date, research has not yet provided in-depth insights on how leadership emerges, unfolds, and entangles with creativity and play at work. However, aiming to understand how human and nonhuman bodies co-enact leadership, during the last decades a small but growing corpus of literature has begun to recognise how leadership is linked to material forces (see for example Ladkin and Taylor, 2014; Melina, 2013 for edited books; Pullen and Vachhani, 2013 for a special issue). In light of this material turn, Sergi (2016) observes that rather than ask ourselves *who* is the singular human leader or the plurality of human individuals that 'lead' organisations, we should ask instead *what* leadership is *made of*, and subsequently, what this leaderful assemblage *does*, what capacities its constituent relations have *to affect* and *to be affected*, and what these relations produce

(Fox and Alldred, 2017), for leadership involves not just human minds and souls as commonly argued (Sinclair, 2005), but human bodies as those of managers and subordinates' (e.g. Ropo and Sauer, 2008a; Sinclair, 2005) as well as non-human-others including buildings, rooms, clothes, documents, tools, and so on (e.g. Ford et al., 2017; Hawkins, 2015; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013; Ropo and Salovaara, 2019; Ropo, Sauer and Salovaara, 2013).

However, even though an increasing number of studies have begun to provide valuable insights to understand the role that human and nonhuman bodies play in the emergence and production of leadership processes and practices, scholars have frequently focused on how leaders convey a sense of leadership performance, effectiveness, ability, and competencies based on deterministic bodily traits such as physical appearance (e.g. Henderson et al., 2022) and other bodily performances (e.g. Talley and Temple, 2015) to accomplish leadership functions. These studies conceptualise leadership as something that is 'housed' in the individual, reduced to an issue of bodily posture, gesture, and expression (Melina, 2013); thus, promoting utilitarian attitudes that value the body just for its usefulness. Studies in this field tend to elevate the figure of the leader-hero and her/his bodily traits and competencies focusing on instrumental prescriptions to enact 'better' leadership.

Given the assumptions that underpin mainstream research, noticeably missing from researchers' consideration is the issue of materiality in the context of leadership and its relationships with creativity and play at work. Although leadership studies have begun to include materiality, little is known about how human-material encounters and the flows of affect that emerge from such encounters *lead* employees' creative and playful practices. The problem with such omission is that for as long as the productive capacities of matter are neglected from organisation studies, "our understanding of organizational life and its consequences will remain necessarily restricted" (Orlikowski, 2007, p.1435); thus, hiding the multiple ways in which materiality *affects*. This is problematic for materiality has been pinpointed as an inherent property of organisational and leadership phenomena (Cooren, 2020; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013; Orlikowski, 2007). Central to my argument is, therefore, that by acknowledging the affective and leaderful capacities of matter we can make visible previously unnoticed and often unseen forces that circulate between bodies, forces able to disclose valuable insights on how human-material relations *lead*; thus, developing alternative approaches to the functional view of managing creativity and play. In doing so, this thesis articulates five conceptual ideas that depict the leaderful qualities of human-material encounters in the context of creative and playful practices at work.

It is important to note, however, that the posthuman project does not aim to abandon or ignore humans, but to place the individual subject in a web of relations with other human and nonhuman entities (Gherardi, 2019a). The objective here is, therefore, not to advocate for anti-humanism, but to expand the human prerogatives “into the realm of the posthuman” (Hayles, 1999, p.287), for no theory seems complete without the inclusion of nonhuman entities (Develennes and Dillet, 2018). Such a position does not claim human or nonhuman superiority; however, it acknowledges the differences between their agencies and capacities. Humans are a different kind of agent, one with self-consciousness, intentionality, imagination, reflexivity, and subjectivity; thus, we have the capacity of making choices that nonhumans cannot (Kipnis, 2015). It was I, the human researcher, for instance, who made a bundle of decisions on how to conduct this research and what human and nonhuman entities consider or not. It was I who collected, created, organised, analysed, and presented data in particular ways. And yet, in turn, it was that very data, the very presence or absence of humans and nonhumans in the field that affected me in return, leading me in one direction or the other, inviting or even inducing me to make further choices. Likewise, it was this very human who acted as an ‘interlocutor’ of the nonhuman, making things ‘speak’ through discursively constructed accounts of the organisational life I witnessed as filtered and curated by my methodological choices. This project, therefore, was about a human researcher observing humans and their encounters with other human and nonhuman entities in the context of work.

Consequently, as Soper (2012, p.376) contends, we need to “resist the posthumanist resistance to making clear the inevitable reference back to human beings as uniquely placed to represent or reconceptualize their own and other forms of being”, for some degree of humanism inescapably leaks into posthumanism. Thus, the ‘post’ in posthumanism does not represent a departure or break from the human, but rather, a rewriting of the claims made by humanism (Badmington, 2003). Such a project recognises multiple and distinct agencies inviting us to cultivate a posthuman sensibility and trace the many ways in which nonhumans contribute to shaping human action, intention, and subjectivity. Thus, the posthuman project I advocate in this thesis does not aim to overmining nonhumans by undermining humans, but to consider how the relationalities between them and their capacities to affect and to be affected configure leadership processes in the context of creativity and play in the workplace.

2 Research objectives and questions

To tackle the issues and assumptions described above, the primary purpose of this thesis is to develop a better understanding of how leadership emerges, unfolds, and entangles with creativity and play at work (see Figure 1 below). In doing so, I aim to broaden the empirical and theoretical knowledge of the materiality of leadership focusing on a posthuman, post-heroic, and non-performative articulation.

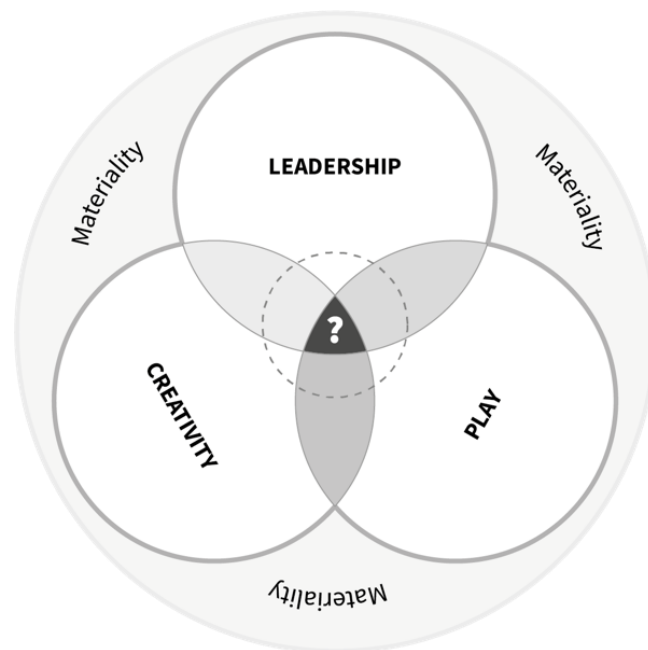


Figure 1: The materiality of leadership, creativity, and play

Inspired by the foundational tenets of new materialisms (e.g. Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012; Fox and Alldred, 2017) and affect theories (e.g. Deleuze, 1978; Spinoza, 1996), throughout this research I enter and contribute to the ‘thing-ness’ of leadership (Hawkins, 2015) examining affective flows unfolding within humans and nonhuman encounters at work; thus, approaching my enquiries from a relational and processual position. This research, therefore, aims to fulfil the following objectives and questions:

- **Objective 1:** To better understand how leadership emerges, unfolds, and entangles with creativity and play in the workplace.
 - **Research question 1** (RQ1): How does leadership emerge, unfold, and entangle with creativity and play in the workplace?

- **Objective 2:** To identify how human and nonhuman bodies co-produce leadership and direction in the context of creativity and play at work.
 - **Research question 2** (RQ2): How do human and nonhuman bodies co-produce leadership and direction in the context of creativity and play at work?

- **Objective 3:** To uncover the flows of affect and material effects that human and nonhuman bodies produce when encountering each other.
 - **Research question 3** (RQ3): What are the flows of affect and the material effects produced within human-nonhuman encounters in such contexts?

To investigate the above questions, the scope of this research was circumscribed to a micro-business within the creative industries field. Micro-businesses are defined as organisations with fewer than ten employees (Gherhes et al., 2016). Surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of firms in the UK fall under the micro-segment comprising more than 95.7% (n=5,724,700) of the overall businesses makeup (Department for Business Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2020). However, even though this category of firms embodies a major subset within the small and medium enterprises sector (SMEs) as well as an important source for job creation and economic growth (Reijonen and Komppula, 2007), micro-businesses have remained largely under-researched (Gherhes et al., 2016).

Likewise, in the field of leadership studies, research has traditionally focused on large-sized corporations (Bamiatzi et al., 2015) paying scarce attention to how leadership unfolds within the context of micro-businesses (Jensen and Luthans, 2006). Therefore, immersing myself in a creative micro-firm represented an interesting opportunity to better understand leadership and its entanglement with creativity and play in this rather overlooked business segment, contributing with empirical evidence to this emergent and yet limited corpus of literature.

Consequently, this study was conducted in a UK-based creative-digital agency I have given the pseudonym '*Digital Co.*' (see [chapter four](#) for further details). Digital Co. was a micro-business specialising in web design and software development. In total, the company had four male employees ranging from 32 and 50 years old. To fulfil the objectives and questions this research sets up, in this field site I conducted a 9-month affective ethnography (Gherardi, 2019b) employing face-to-face and online methods for data collection (see [chapter three, section 3](#) for further details). Adopting a new

materialist approach to ethnography allowed me to capture the multiple ways in which humans and nonhumans entangle in the workplace and the affective flows they produce (Gherardi, 2019b); thus, giving organisational actors, humans and not, the chance to speak (Humphries and Smith, 2014) rendering their doings visible and affective. This field site revealed a series of human-material encounters and how such encounters lead creative and playful practices at work.

To collect data, in this research I employed a combination of methods including ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, projective techniques, and participatory workshops employing Lego® bricks. These methods helped me to sensitise myself to the doings of matter. By observing and inquiring about daily practices and examining bodily encounters, I documented human and nonhuman actors, places, events, and activities directing my attention to the entanglements of bodies and the flows of affect that emerged when these bodies encountered each other. Thus, the aim was to follow and trace relational encounters and flows of affect between human and nonhuman bodies at work producing a set of empirical, theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions.

3 Research contributions

This thesis advances our knowledge on the physicality of leadership (e.g. Ladkin and Taylor, 2014) and its entanglement with creativity and play at work, a largely overlooked and taken for granted research territory in organisation studies. Taking into consideration the active and affective role played by human and nonhuman bodies and their involvement in co-producing leadership in work organisations, my contributions to management theory and practice emerge by incorporating the materiality of leadership in the realm of organisational creativity and play. More specifically, this thesis advances our knowledge of affective leadership theories (e.g. Knights, 2018a; Munro and Thanem, 2018). By adopting a new materialist and affective framework to investigate and trace material encounters, relations, flows of affect, and material effects in a creative micro-business setting, this thesis develops a rich theoretical and empirical understanding of how human-material encounters lead creative and playful practices at work in such settings. To summarise, this thesis contributes to theory and practice as follows (for further details see chapters [six](#) and [seven](#)):

- (1) **Empirical:** To the best of my knowledge, this study constitutes one of the first pieces of empirical research that bridges the literature on leadership, creativity, and play in work organisations, and more specifically, in micro-businesses

settings. In doing so, this thesis provides an in-depth and ethnographical exploration of how leadership emerges in the context of creativity and play providing thick descriptions of human-material encounters and how such encounters lead creative and playful practices in the workplace. Moreover, this thesis empirically illustrates that creativity and play are less distinct than the literature commonly suggests, being almost one and the same set of practices; that is, ongoing connection and arrangement.

- (2) **Theoretical:** The findings of this study provide theoretical contributions extending and deepening our understanding of *affective leadership* theories (e.g. Knights, 2018a; Munro and Thanem, 2018) and the physicality of leadership in general (Ladkin and Taylor, 2014) by arguing that leadership in the context of creative and playful practices at work is not only the product of human-human or human-material connections but an ongoing and generative effect produced by the flows of affect that such encounters produce. In doing so, this thesis proposes a theoretical construct I conceptualise as the 'leaderful qualities of matterly encounters' uncovering at the same time five of these qualities.
- (3) **Methodological:** By employing a projective technique with Lego bricks to uncover human-material relations at work, this thesis develops a methodological contribution providing a novel application of such techniques. Previous work employing similar approaches has often privileged to uncover what is hidden in the individual's mind and how, for instance, leaders 'do' leadership. Questioning this assumption, this thesis argues that using Lego not only reveals unconscious aspects of work practices but the capacity to re-materialise bodies and their doings, bodies hidden in plain sight; thus, widening the depth and scope of projective techniques as a method for data collection.
- (4) **Practical:** The empirical findings of this thesis propose practical contributions to practitioners involved in the development of creative, software, and design projects in micro-firms. Understanding leadership as a phenomenon that emerges and unfolds within human-material encounters between bodies as well as the material effects produced in such encounters, practitioners can begin to identify and navigate the doings of bodies and their leaderful effects to better understand the forces that either can decrease or increase the organisational capacities to act.

4 Thesis structure

This thesis is divided into seven sections. In [Chapter One](#), I have introduced this study by providing the research context, objectives, questions, and an overview of contributions. In [Chapter Two](#), I present a review of the extant literature on leadership, creativity, and play in the workplace, as well as the interrelations between these three bodies of literature. Subsequently, I discuss the literature on the embodied, corporeal, and material aspects of leadership. Throughout this review, I identify three key assumptions: the issue of (1) performance, (2) heroism, and (3) anthropocentrism. To tackle these assumptions, I additionally present the theoretical framework I adopted to approach my research enquiries inspired by the theoretical tenets of new materialist and affect theories. In [Chapter Three](#), I present the methodology and research design that guides this thesis depicting the philosophical position this research undertakes justifying the adoption of a relational ontology of becoming. Moreover, I describe the data collection methods, techniques, and analysis framework I considered to develop my findings. In [Chapter Four](#), I introduce the field site by describing the situatedness of the study including details on three key situational aspects: actors, activities, and spaces. Furthermore, I also provide thick descriptions of how creativity and play emerged and unfolded in this field site. In [Chapter Five](#), I present the empirical findings of this study displaying a series of acts and scenes based on material storytelling of bodily encounters at work. Overall, this chapter depicts five acts that illustrate human-material encounters and how such encounters produced leaderful effects. In [Chapter Six](#), I discuss how my empirical findings relate to the extant literature on leadership, creativity, and play. Finally, in [Chapter Seven](#), I present the main conclusions of this research, as well as the empirical and theoretical contributions, limitations, and opportunities I draw from this study.

5 Chapter summary

This chapter has introduced the research context that inspires this thesis including the objectives and questions I aim to explore and answer. Moreover, it has presented an overview of the contributions to knowledge and practice this thesis articulates. Finally, the chapter has depicted the structure this research will follow. The next chapter provides a review of the extant literature on leadership, creativity, and play as well as its interrelations discussing later the theoretical framework that supports this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The main purpose of this review is to examine the underlying assumptions that dominate the extant literature on leadership and its relationship with creativity and play in work organisations. To begin with, in section 1 I explore the literature on leadership, creativity, and play. The main objective of this section is to build a deeper theoretical understanding of what leadership, creativity and play are, and to uncover the main and individual assumptions that underpin each of these research areas by discussing both, mainstream and critical perspectives.

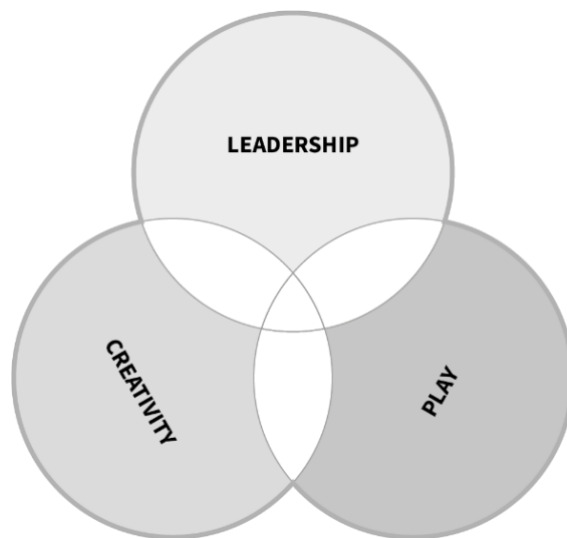


Figure 2: The three main bodies of literature covered in this review

After individually exploring each of these three bodies of literature, in section 2 I deepen my analysis by discussing the interrelations between creativity and play, leadership and creativity, as well as leadership and play. The objective of this section is to illustrate how the assumptions revealed in each individual corpus of literature are reproduced and perpetuated along these intersectional territories.

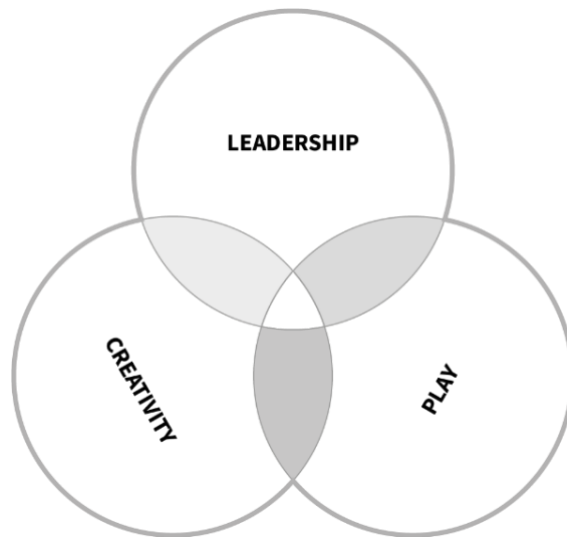


Figure 3: The interrelations between leadership, creativity, and play

In section 3, I delve yet further into the field of leadership discussing the multiple perspectives in which bodies, human and not, have been explored in the literature. In this section, I delineate four research territories often employed to explore the material, embodied, and corporeal aspects of leadership: (1) leaders as the embodiment of leadership, (2) leaders mastering the material, (3) leadership in-between leaders and followers, and (4) humans and nonhumans co-producing leadership. In doing so, I provide an overview of the underlying assumptions and problems that each of these research fields underpins.

Subsequently, to address and tackle the assumptions identified in this review, in section 4 I discuss new materialist and affect theories providing an overview of key concepts depicting how these theories can contribute to building deeper understanding on the material and relational aspects of leadership in work organisations. Finally, in section 5, I present the conclusions I draw from this literature review illustrating the assumptions and omissions this thesis aims to address. In doing so, I outline what remains to be studied presenting the research questions that emerge from the gaps and problems this chapter uncovers and identifies.

1 Leadership, creativity, and play in work organisations

1.1 Exploring leadership

This section explores the notion of leadership and presents the dominant discourses that underpin mainstream research. Throughout this section, I discuss the seductive power of leadership and the emphasis placed upon human beings, particularly around the heroic figure of the individual leader. Then, I offer a revision of post-heroic and shared theories revealing how these articulations reproduce and perpetuate leadership romanticism, heroism, and anthropocentrism.

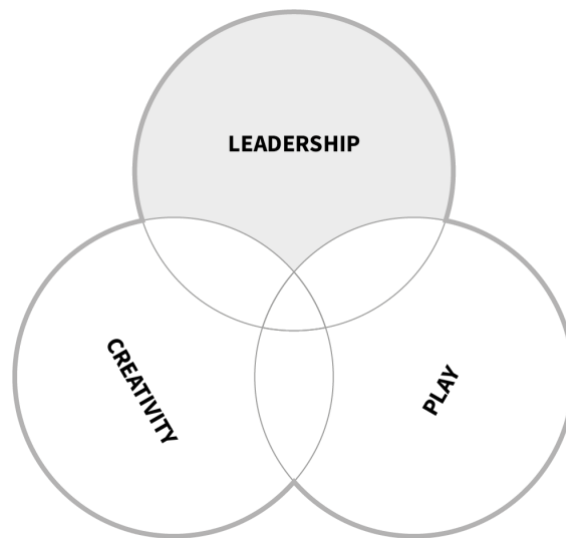


Figure 4: Literature review section: Leadership

1.1.1 *An irresistible fairy tale: The leader as the locus of leadership*

Leadership has had a long and fertile research history (Grint, 2011) becoming the breeding ground for a plethora of leader-centric theories that often aim to answer “what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the general effects they have on our lives” (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985, p.79). Scholars such as Grint, Smolović Jones and Holt (2017) hold the view that the literature often follows five leader-centric perspectives: leadership (1) as a person, (2) result, (3) position, (4) purpose, and (5) process. Therefore, leadership studies tend to discuss why and how specific individuals should lead and why and how others should follow (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007). Most definitions of leadership, as Ciulla (2002, p.340) describes, “say the same thing – leadership is about one person getting other people to do something”.

Table 1: Five approaches to defining leadership

Approach	Meaning
Leadership as Person	It is WHO 'leaders' are that makes them leaders.
Leadership as Result	It is WHAT 'leaders' achieve that makes them leaders.
Leadership as Position	It is WHERE 'leaders' operate that makes them leaders.
Leadership as Purpose	It is WHY 'leaders' lead that makes them leaders.
Leadership as Process	It is HOW 'leaders' get things done that makes them leaders.

Source: Grint, Smolović Jones and Holt (2017, p.4)

It is frequently argued that organisational leadership is a process of *influence* where the *leader* (commonly known as the manager) mobilises his or her *followers* (commonly known as the subordinates) via constructed *visions* to develop a sense of purpose and thus *inspire* employees' collective and organised action (Nanus, 1992; Taylor, Cornelious and Colvin, 2014) towards the accomplishment of the *organisational goals* (e.g. Achua and Lussier, 2010; Bass, 1960; Northouse, 2018; Yukl and Van Fleet, 1992). Under these leader-centric and performative articulations, the figure of the leader-manager is often elevated to positions of unquestioned authority and power (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019) and other quasi-religious (Spoelstra, 2013) larger-than-life attributes (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985). Thus, mainstream research often depicts organisational 'leaders' as exemplary human beings, heroic figures (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985) always ready to transform and serve their corporate acolytes (Hopfl, 1992), the followers, a seemingly abstract, compliant, and passive entity widely overlooked in the literature (Meindl, 1995).

Consequently, it is often assumed that leaders hold a fundamental role in interpreting organisational situations to guide employees toward a shared understanding of the organisational reality (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). This assumption installs the pervasive idea that leadership belongs to, and is exclusively exercised by, single individuals at the top of the organisational pyramid. As Pearce and Manz (2005, p.130) illustrate, this extensive body of literature is engrossed

with a top-heavy model – the glorified chief executive office, or CEO – of leadership. This mythology is coupled with romantic conceptions of leaders as heroic figures who single-handedly save followers – who are largely viewed as interchangeable drones – from their own incompetence.

From this perspective, one of the most powerful distinctions that romanticise the heroic character of leadership can be found within the leadership/management debate. As Ford and Harding (2007, pp.475–476) argue, “[l]eadership rather than management is currently advocated in the mainstream management literature and organizational policies as the key to effective organizational performance”. This assumption has led organisations towards the obsessive and misguided quest to find a ‘messiah’ or ‘corporate saviour’ (Khurana, 2002): a heroic leader rather than a manager. These theoretical orientations strengthen what scholars such as O’Reilly and Reed (2010, p.962) conceptualise as the ideology of *leaderism*, “the belief that many core aspects of social life can and should be co-ordinated by one or more individuals who give direction and/or purpose to social activity conducted by themselves and others”.

1.1.2 *The leadership/management delusion*

To protect the ‘sacredness’ of leadership (Grint, 2010), the literature has introduced and perpetuated a bold distinction between management and leadership (cf. Bennis, 2009; Kotter, 1990; Kotterman, 2006; Simonet and Tett, 2012). This distinction has installed the widespread assumption that leaders and managers are somewhat different. Within this dichotomy, the *influence* exerted by leaders is often denoted as something glamorous and mystical and the *authority* exerted by managers as something mundane or even oppressive (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014). Therefore, whereas ‘leaders’ establish direction, align people, motivate and inspire *followers*; ‘managers’ budget, organise, and control *subordinates* (Kotter, 1990).

This conceptual distinction perpetuates the assumption that whereas leadership is essentially concerned to change, vision and persuasion, management is instead concerned with control and stability (e.g. Barker, 1997; Bennis and Nanus, 2007; Kotter, 2001). Therefore, leaders are supposedly aligned with those who lead while managers are aligned with those who rule; thus, reconceptualising and reconfiguring power relations at work (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019; Spoelstra and Ten Bos, 2011). Under this heroic rhetoric, it is frequently argued that we need more leaders, better leadership, and fewer managers (e.g. Goleman, 2000; MacCoby, 2007). Consequently, the leadership discourse blurs positions of power between managers and subordinates (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019) reinforcing and camouflaging relations of domination and control (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) taking for granted that leaders exercise power – better known as influence– in productive and positive ways (Burns, 1978; Collinson, 2012).

The leader/manager and follower/subordinate conceptual reconfiguration respond to the 'industrial paradigm of leadership' (Barker, 1997; Rost, 1993; Rost and Smith, 1992), a paradigm that conceptualises leadership as a management ability or property possessed by specific individuals (Knights, 2018a). This assumption is supported by two key and interrelated distinctions: (1) leadership as a process of influence, and (2) leadership as a formal management position (Kotter, 1990). Therefore, by definition, *managers lead*, being often assumed that leadership exists to a greater or lesser degree within the executive or top managerial positions, the upper echelons of organisations (Hambrick and Mason, 1984), circumscribing leadership within a web of corporate and hierarchical roles (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). As Collinson (2017, p.278, italics added for emphasis) explains, "because of the ways that power and control are typically enacted in contemporary organizations, many employees may well *have to 'follow'* a strategic direction for their organization that is *set and imposed* by corporate leaders". The uncritical celebration of individual leaders and the marginalisation of management is problematic for the rhetoric of leadership tends to cover asymmetrical superior-subordinate relations at work. Thus, mainstream literature has built an irresistible fairy tale that glorifies managers (Pearce and Manz, 2005), for being "called a leader is tantamount to being touched by Tinkerbelle's wand. It is a word that connotes greatness and wisdom" (Dentico, 1999, p.175).

1.1.3 *In leadership we trust!*

Leadership seems to be the *all-in-one* solution to every problem regardless of its nature and context (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Tourish, 2014), for it is argued that "literally nothing gets accomplished without it" (Yammarino, 2013, p.149). Based on these grandiloquent assumptions, scholars have stubbornly persisted in trying to understand what makes leaders and leadership more effective and successful (Bresnen, 1995; Collinson, 2011; Tourish, 2014), transforming leadership into a powerful and ubiquitous social myth (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992), portrayed as always necessary, always good, and above all, always positive (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Blom and Alvesson, 2015; Collinson, 2012).

The hegemonic positivity of leadership theorisation has been described by scholars such as Collinson (2012) as 'Prozac leadership', a conceptual articulation to symbolise the tantalising addiction we have with the positive bias ingrained within the leadership rhetoric. Consequently, as leadership seems to be always good and positive, management literature is overpopulated with prescriptive accounts on how to be a good leader and how to have more and better leadership (e.g. Avolio, Waldman and Yammarino, 1991; Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2003; Maxwell, 2007; Sinek, 2014;

Sternberg, 2003). Thus, glorified managers are portrayed as a source of pure goodness, love, and self-sacrifice (cf. Fry, 2003; George et al., 2007; Greenleaf, 1970; Grint, 2010; Sinek, 2014).

Curiously, if leadership is found to be negative, it ceases to be seen as such; thus, the beauty, purity and divinity of leadership is in one way or another always protected (Spoelstra and Ten Bos, 2011). For instance, Gini and Green (2012) suggest that bad leaders should not be called leaders but 'misleaders' and that bad leadership is not leadership but 'misleadership'; thus, reinforcing the essentially positive hegemony of the leadership construct. Consequently, the organisational leadership literature has been strongly influenced by heroic perspectives arguing that leader-managers by their authentic (Avolio and Gardner, 2005), charismatic (Fiol, Harris and House, 1999), visionary (Nanus, 1992), servant (Greenleaf, 1970), spiritual (Fry, 2003), and transformative (Bass, 1990) power, will save organisations and lead us towards success and prosperity.

For instance, one of the most pervasive leadership theories, the transformational approach (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978), often depicts leaders as positive agents of change and growth. As Burns (1978, p.4) describes,

Transforming leadership, while more complex, is more potent. The transforming leader recognizes and exploits an existing need or demand of a potential follower. But, beyond that, the transforming leader looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower.

Under the above lens, transformational leadership is about unlocking followers' full potential and empowering them to become leaders (Bass and Riggio, 2006). Thus, transformational leaders arise as 'SuperLeaders' that nurture and prepare others to lead themselves (Manz and Sims, 1991). The main assumption behind this flamboyant rhetoric is that transformational leaders can motivate, inspire, and empower others to do more than what is originally expected of them, to 'go the extra mile' (Bass and Riggio, 2006). This transformation process operates via raising employees' awareness and consciousness regarding the value of the task at hand, beyond self-interest, and for the organisation's sake (Bass, 1985), instrumentalising the leadership rhetoric under means-ends calculations (Adler, Forbes and Willmott, 2007) to exploit employees in the name of organisational efficiency (Fournier and Grey, 2000).

Avolio, Waldman and Yammarino (1991) argue that transformational leaders develop, communicate, and aim to fulfil an organisational vision; hence, it is often argued that organisational leaders have to amplify employees' interests and ideas towards the fulfilment of this 'prophecy'. In doing so, the authors propose that transformational leaders can display four characteristics they conceptualise as 'the Four I's' of transformational leadership (Avolio, Waldman and Yammarino, 1991, pp.13–15): (1) *individualised consideration*: leaders pay attention to individual needs and concerns listening and building employees' confidence; that is, the leader as a mentor. (2) *Intellectual stimulation*: leaders provide reasons and resources for employees to change the way they think to face diverse problems from new perspectives being open to listening to ideas; that is, bottom-up influence. (3) *Inspirational motivation*: leaders set the example of hard work, dedication, and commitment; that is, leaders inspire through past accomplishments and communication skills to embody their visions. And (4) *idealised influence*: leaders behave in a certain way that they serve as role models for their followers. Consequently, by displaying these four characteristics, transformational leaders can inspire and motivate others to achieve goals and commit themselves beyond expectations (Avolio, Waldman and Yammarino, 1991).

This romantic rhetoric (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985), however, constitutes an important dimension of organisational control in which leaders are magically called to "frame and define the reality of others" (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p.258); thus, building a powerful device of control that aims to secure employees' compliance and cooperation, reduce resistance and dissent, and cover asymmetric relations of power (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019). Such rhetoric prescribes at the same time patterned divisions of labour (Gronn, 2002): leaders create visions, transform, and inspire whilst followers supposedly assent and follow. Consequently, leadership transports powerful rhetoric that elevates corporate egos (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019), glamorises management positions (Pearce and Manz, 2005), and transforms ordinary activities into extraordinary ones (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a). Under this view, leadership is just another ideological solution that "offers identity, status, and legitimation support through promises of moral goodness and grandiose action, mediated by ideas such as transformational, servant, empowering, authentic, and other "feel good" leadership, presented as recipes for creating a wide range of positive outcomes" (Alvesson, 2020, p.2).

However, the grandiloquent and larger-than-life ideologies behind most leader-centric theories tend to embellish and cover a less magical and darker side of organisations. Whilst most research stubbornly focuses on the bright side of leadership (Blom and

Alvesson, 2015), less attention is paid to its darker side, ignoring, for instance, that leadership can be destructive, abusive, aversive, exploitative, toxic, corrupt, despotic, tyrant, and evil (see Krasikova, Green and LeBreton, 2013; Mackey et al., 2021; Schyns and Schilling, 2013 for comprehensive reviews). Falling under the umbrella of 'destructive leadership', this dark side has been defined as the "systematic and repeated behaviour by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organisation by undermining and/or sabotaging the organisation's goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates" (Einarsen, Aasland and Skogstad, 2007, p.208).

Boddy (2005, p.30), for instance, employs the term 'organisational psychopaths' to describe managers "who are self-serving, opportunistic, ego-centric, ruthless and shameless but who can be charming, manipulative and ambitious". These 'psychopaths' at work, create conflictive, dysfunctional, and fearful workplaces nurturing a culture of intimidation, bullying, and coercion that leads to high staff turnover, the creation of extreme work environments, and ultimately, to ethically and financially bankrupt organisations (Boddy et al., 2015). These kinds of managers are often perceived as unprofessional, autocratic, and unethical, as well as lacking leadership, decision, delegation, operational, and technical skills. In turn, this lack of capacities and abilities produces high levels of stress, burnout, and turnover, as well as low levels of motivation (Hight, Gajjar and Okumus, 2019). As Kellerman (2004) observes, bad leadership falls therefore under two distinct meanings: 'ineffective' and 'unethical'. Ineffective leadership is the kind of leadership that fails to achieve desired outcomes whilst unethical leadership fails to discern between what is right and wrong either inducing followers to pursue destructive goals and outcomes or employing destructive and coercive methods to do so (Krasikova, Green and LeBreton, 2013).

This 'dark side' literature challenges the positivity bias that dominates most extant research in which leaders are invariably depicted as agents of change and positive transformation, and leadership as something that gets only good results (Blom and Alvesson, 2015) when adopting the right leadership recipe (Alvesson and Einola, 2019). This rhetoric obscures power asymmetries between managers and subordinates and its destructive consequences. From this perspective, power is pivotal to leadership and yet this is an aspect that remains silenced and downplayed (Śliwa et al., 2012). This pervasive assumption is clearly illustrated by Burns (1978) who distinguishes leaders from power-wielders arguing that "[a]ll leaders are actual or potential power holders, but not all power-holders are leaders"; thus, mainstream research tends to treat leaders' influence as something positive whilst conceptualising power as something negative

(Collinson, 2005). Critical leadership studies, on the other hand, do attend to the issue of power, control, and resistance addressing how dominant leadership ideologies create and perpetuate problematic relations between the so-called leaders and their followers (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014). Under this lens, leadership is seen as a seductive game (Calás and Smircich, 1991) that aims to produce compliant and conformist employees (Collinson, 2011).

Leadership can be deeply harmful (Krasikova, Green and LeBreton, 2013); however, the leadership fairy tale tends to cover and mask this darker side acting as a counter-acting device that glorifies and launders managers' images concealing the fact that they can intentionally harm others with destructive and dysfunctional anti-organisation and anti-subordinate behaviours (Einarsen, Aasland and Skogstad, 2007). Therefore, we need to wake up from the leadership fantasy and de-mythologise those heroic white knights (Liu and Baker, 2016); corporate psychopaths (Boddy, Ladyshevsky and Galvin, 2010) disguised behind attractive and seductive leadership theories that aim to capture employees' minds and souls (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Śliwa et al., 2012).

1.1.4 *Shifting from heroic individuals toward heroic collectives*

Aiming to question the leader-centric rhetoric that pervades most leadership theories, scholars have expanded the scope of analysis from *leadership-as-individual* theories recognising instead multiple networks, relationships, interactions, and practices enacted by multiple individuals (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2010; Pearce, Conger and Locke, 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This approach, often labelled under the umbrella of *post-heroic* theories, understands leadership as something that happens *in the plural* (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012); and therefore, as something that "should be seen not only as position and authority but also as *emergent, interactive, dynamic* – a complex interplay from which a collective impetus for action and change emerges when heterogeneous agents interact in networks" (Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2009, p.299). Thus, post-heroic theories attempt to go beyond the 'unitary command perspective' of leadership (Pearce and Manz, 2005) conceptualising instead collective practices of following and leading (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007).

The problem with numerous plural approaches, such as the case of shared (Pearce, Conger and Locke, 2008) or distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002), is that these theories reproduce and perpetuate multiple assumptions ingrained within heroic perspectives in what appears to be a conceptual rearrangement that displaces individual and heroic leaders placing instead *heroic collectives* (Collinson, Smolović Jones and Grint, 2018); thus, preserving the leadership romanticism (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985). Often,

the plurality of leadership has been understood as the “combined influence of multiple leaders in specific organizational situations” (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012, p.211); therefore, if once it was believed that stand-alone individuals at the top of the organisational pyramid were the site of leadership, now we all can be leaders; and consequently, anything done by employees (e.g. downwards, upwards, lateral and peer influence) can be seen as leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011), a paradigm that flattens corporate hierarchies ignoring, just as numerous heroic theories, power asymmetries and issues (Collinson, 2018; Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012; Gordon, 2002; Empson, 2020; Fletcher, 2004). The main assumption operating behind post-heroic theories is that in distributed settings, power is shared or rather ‘granted’ by the organisational elite to the ordinary organisational members (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012).

However, as Empson (2020, p.25) argues, “it is precisely the contestation, negotiation, and resolution of power among individuals which renders leadership collective”, and yet, the issue of power and its relationship with leadership remains unproblematic in most post-heroic theories (Empson, 2020; Gordon, 2002). Empson (2020), for instance, holds the view that in collective leadership groups, authority is ambiguous (an aspect often celebrated by the group members) creating hidden hierarchies that cover power relations between managers and subordinates. However, as she additionally observes, individual leaders can still exert considerable influence by mobilising the hidden hierarchy whilst ‘reasserting’ the notion of the ‘collective’ by building visible consensus and decreasing active interventions within the group. Similarly, others such as Denis, Lamothe, and Langley (2001) hold the view that collective leadership tends to be *fragile* due to the diffuse and fluid nature of power in such groups. In this regard, the authors suggest that the tensions and conflicts that may arise between the group members and the existence of multiple objectives, positions, and rivalries inside the group can shatter leadership making it vulnerable to membership change as well as lengthier and less efficient in the attainment of goals.

Even though post-heroic theories aim to decentre the leadership locus focusing, for instance, on actions and interactions within *networks of individuals*, such approaches still reproduce well-known leadership stereotypes in terms of heroic individuals, now reconceptualised as heroic and harmonious collectives (Collinson, Smolović Jones and Grint, 2018), and as something that happens exclusively between temporal and situated leaders, followers, and their interactions. Such rhetoric positions leadership *in* and *around* individuals (Sergi, 2016), as something they *have* (Knights, 2018a) obscuring the

affective presence of non-human entities and the directional effects that heterogeneous encounters between bodies can produce in the workplace.

1.1.5 Section summary

In this section, I have explored the concept of leadership in work organisations uncovering several assumptions surrounding the idea of leadership, the function of leadership, and the heroic and human-centric roles embedded within the leadership rhetoric. Overall, I have shown that leadership transports a powerful and highly seductive discourse. Often, leadership is conceptualised as the solution to the problem of collective organisation and organisational performance (Avolio, Waldman and Yammarino, 1991) highlighting mostly positive outcomes (Alvesson and Einola, 2019). Thus, the literature builds the distinction between leadership and management to separate control from inspiration and thus increase employees' motivation and performance whilst covering asymmetric relations of power (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019). Consequently, leadership is often placed as a managerial ability that glamorises heroic 'leaders' bestowed with the responsibility of building a vision that every follower must feel inspired to follow (Nanus, 1992). Moreover, when 'de-centralised', shared and distributed theories still convey a heroic component illustrating that every single employee can step up in the leadership role (Collinson, Smolović Jones and Grint, 2018) perpetuating the competency paradigm (Bolden and Gosling, 2006). Finally, the literature locates leadership in the figure of the human leader, or within human collectives, as a property of human beings (Knights, 2018a) largely ignoring the presence of nonhuman bodies within the leadership process.

1.2 Exploring creativity

In the following section, I examine the notion of creativity providing a review of mainstream and critical perspectives discussing the performative relevance of creativity in work organisations, the imperative for the creation of new and useful ideas, as well as critical perspectives that situate creativity as a non-performative, mundane, material, and moment-to-moment practice.

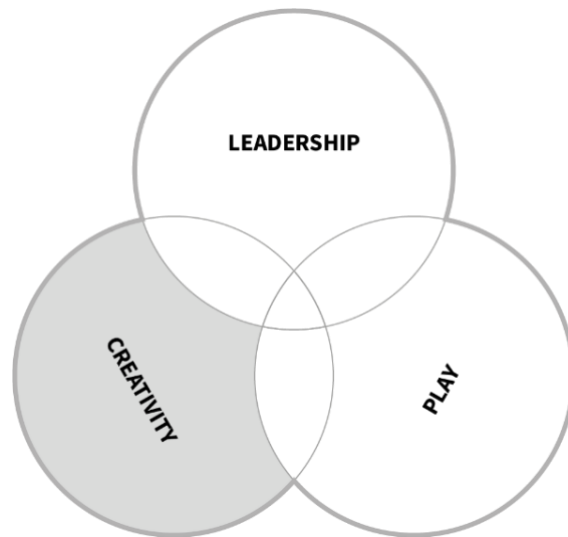


Figure 5: Literature review section: Creativity

1.2.1 An organisational imperative

Functionalist researchers often pinpoint organisational creativity as a key predictor of performance (Anderson, Potočnik and Zhou, 2014; Mumford et al., 2007) and productivity (Tuori and Vilén, 2011) at work. Based on the widespread and largely unquestioned assumption that organisations navigate in highly competitive, unpredictable, turbulent, and dynamic business environments, it is often argued that to remain competitive, organisations should abandon time-tested formulas (Williams and Yang, 1999) pursuing instead new ways to improve products, services, and processes (Carmeli, Gelbard and Reiter-Palmon, 2013) and thus capitalise the *benefits* of such endeavours (Andriopoulos, 2001). Consequently, organisations have placed a premium on creativity: they *need* creativity and they want it at all costs (Koch et al., 2018). As Egan (2005, p.161, italics added for emphasis) observes,

The fostering of creativity is a *necessity, not an option*, for most organizations interested in responding to: (a) advancing technology; (b) a changing environment; (c) changing organizational structures or strategies; (d) overcoming competitors that improve their products, processes and services; (e) evolving customer desires; and (f) evolving societies influenced increasingly by global issues and diversity.

The above rationale has led to the premise that thanks to creativity, organisations will innovate (Amabile et al., 1996), grow (Zhou and Hoever, 2014), adapt to change (Basadur, 1997), succeed (Martins and Terblanche, 2003), enhance performance (Mumford et al., 2002), foster competitive strength (Shalley, 1995), and achieve

competitive advantage (Kwaśniewska and Nęcka, 2004). Under this productivity rhetoric (Blomberg, 2014), it is not surprising to find multiple calls for organisations to embrace creativity (Gilson, 2008). This frantic and somewhat unquestioned pursuit is clearly illustrated by Barzun (1989, p.338) who argues that “[c]reativity has become what divine grace and salvation were to former times. It is incessantly invoked, praised, urged, demanded, hoped for, declared achieved, or found lacking”. Creativity has become the new mantra (Jeanes, 2006) or organisational fetish (Prichard, 2002). Being creative seems an obligation, not an option in almost every aspect of life (Mould, 2020) and work (Gilson, 2008).

1.2.2 *Praising the ‘new’ and the ‘useful’*

The study of creativity has led to a broad and diverse range of descriptions ‘in’ and ‘around’ the notion of novelty (Styhre, 2006). Overall, definitions of creativity fluctuate between four popular lenses: the person, the process, the product, and the press/situation (Mooney, 1963; MacKinnon, 1970; Rhodes, 1961). Most scholars, however, adopt the outcome-based approach: creativity as a *product* (Blomberg, 2014). This lens understands creativity as the “production of novel and useful ideas by an individual or small group of individuals working together” (Amabile, 1988, p.126, original in italics). Consequently, the ‘standard’ definition of creativity frequently includes ‘originality’ and ‘effectiveness’ (Runco and Jaeger, 2012).

The value of *novelty* and *usefulness* embedded within the ‘bipartite’ definition of creativity (Runco and Jaeger, 2012) has installed the pervasive assumption that everything new is better than what was before (Josefsson and Blomberg, 2020; Rehn and De Cock, 2009; Styhre, 2006) over-romanticising creativity as a critical competency (DiLiello and Houghton, 2008; Thompson, 2003) and as a valuable asset in the workplace (Anderson and King, 1991; Andriopoulos and Lowe, 2000; Malmelin and Virta, 2021). The rhetoric of the ‘new’ has largely instrumentalised creativity surrendering it to contemporary capitalism (Jeanes, 2006; Mould, 2020; Rehn and De Cock, 2009). Thus, it is often argued that we must put creativity ‘to work’ (Baer, 2012; Redmond, Mumford and Teach, 1993). As Mould (2020, pp.201–202) contends, this ‘capitalist’ creativity “enacts a ‘slow violence’ that grinds down any other forms of societal organization, to the chorus of ‘there is no alternative’... creativity is trumpeted as the force that will change the world for the better”. Consequently, under neo-liberal and market-oriented ideologies, creativity is frequently elevated, praised, celebrated, and rarely questioned (Jeanes, 2006).

In search of the putatively new (Osborne, 2003), mainstream research tends to glamorize creativity, celebrating individual achievement (Sawyer and DeZutter, 2009;

Tanggaard, 2013) as well as the production and implementation of creative ideas (Baer, 2012; Goldschmidt and Tatsa, 2005). Glăveanu (2010), for instance, holds the view that the individualistic, person-centred perspective of creativity follows two main trajectories or paradigms: (1) the HE-paradigm, or the assumption that creativity belongs to creative geniuses; and the I-paradigm, or the assumption that everyone can be creative. This view, in turn, has contributed to formulating further distinctions regarding the creative product such as the 'Big-C' and 'small-c' creativity (cf. Boden, 2003; Csíkszentmihályi, 1996; Kaufman and Beghetto, 2009). These distinctions, however, reflect how organisations aim to normalise and harness creativity, attempting to position it as something that not only belongs to 'gifted' individuals but as something that any employee can reach and deliver for the sake of organisational performance.

1.2.3 *Creativity is always good, isn't it?*

Creativity seems to be the answer to all problems (Gilson, 2008). As Wennes (2009) portrays, "[e]verybody wants it, and everybody should live by it... Anything creative is by definition good, and if new, even better – in all lines of business and all professions". Consequently, creativity is often "sacralized beyond contestation" (Osborne, 2003, p.515) taking for granted the idea of creativity as something always necessary, good, and beneficial (Cropley, 2010; Khessina, Goncalo and Krause, 2018; Josefsson and Blomberg, 2020). From this perspective, it is often argued that creativity can improve business-related outcomes (Forgeard and Kaufman, 2016) reflecting the performative and neoliberal drivers that underpin mainstream research. Therefore, the literature tends to focus on factors and variables that promote creativity appealing to its bright side and ignoring the fact that organisations often send the message: "[i]f you don't produce, you are fired (or stupid, inadequate, uncreative, or a poor performer)!" (Dickson, 2003, p.40), contributing to perpetuate exploitative and oppressive working relations against 'creative subjects' (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017; Prichard, 2002). For instance, in examining Google's 'Innovative Time Off', a policy where employees are 'allowed' and encouraged to spend 20% of their time developing personal projects, Walker (2011) argues that through modulating and documenting projects that benefit the organisation, Google intensifies managerial control, surveillance, and exploitation subjugating employees' freedom and creativity to serve the corporate end. As Staw (1995, p.479) contends, "creativity suffers from a large case of false advertisement", for creativity is not neutral nor a self-evidently good thing for organisations (Rehn and De Cock, 2009).

Decades of research have led us to believe that we can profit from all the benefits of creativity without thinking about any of the counterproductive consequences (Khessina, Goncalo and Krause, 2018). For instance, Baucus et al. (2008) hold the view that the

organisational creativity literature tends to prescribe unethical behaviours encouraging employees to (1) break the rules, (2) challenge authority, (3) create competition, conflict and stress, and (4) take risks, rewarding and encouraging employees' misconduct. As Sutton (2001, p.100) keenly illustrates, “[i]f it is creativity what you want, you should encourage people to ignore and defy superiors and peers – and while you're at it, get them to fight among themselves”. Moreover, creative employees can be unethical as they are more likely to bend the moral rules by being skilful in justifying their dishonest behaviour (Gino and Ariely, 2012; Vincent and Kouchaki, 2016). These findings resonate with further studies that suggest that creative behaviour can be associated with negative personality traits such as narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellism (Jonason et al., 2017; Kapoor, 2015; Lebuda, Figura and Karwowski, 2021), as well as lower moral integrity (Beaussart, Andrews and Kaufman, 2013). Such behaviours have been found that ignite co-worker envy, ostracism, and incivility (Breidenthal et al., 2020; Mao, He and Yang, 2021); which in turn, can lead to conflict and tension at work (Breidenthal et al., 2020).

Others as Tuori and Vilén (2011) have shown that the division of labour in creative organisations produces informal and hidden hierarchies affecting negatively employees' commitment and motivation. From this perspective, 'creative employees' may feel entitled to get a different treatment at work (Khessina, Goncalo and Krause, 2018) since creativity might be seen as a “rare valuable attribute” (Vincent and Kouchaki, 2016, p.1451). Finally, Cropley (2010) and Sternberg (2010) attribute the obscure side of creativity to the production of ideas and inventions conceived to harm individuals. Consequently, as the above studies and findings demonstrate, creativity can bring oppression, conflict, destruction, loss, pain, and suffering (Glăveanu et al., 2020; Jeanes, 2006; Josefsson and Blomberg, 2020).

1.2.4 Enhancing and hindering creativity at work

Within the contemporary management discourse, organisation studies have often focused on performative approaches that aim to understand how creativity might be stimulated or restrained in the workplace (cf. Blomberg, Kallio and Pohjanpää, 2017; Egan, 2005; Mumford et al., 2002; Shalley and Gilson, 2004; Zhou and George, 2003) producing a plethora of theories (see for instance Amabile, 1983; Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian, 1999; Ford, 1996; Woodman, Sawyer and Griffin, 1993) that aim to capture and harness organisational creativity in several ways. These theories often attempt to identify and dissect the individual, group, organisational, and environmental forces that influence the much-desired creative behaviour. These research efforts tend to generate knowledge on “how to perform 'creativity' in the workplace” and the subsequent

production of 'creative body-subjects' (Prichard, 2002, p.272). Thus, mainstream research prescribes tools, mechanisms, and techniques to foster creativity; however, not any kind of creativity, but the 'useful' kind (Prichard, 2002), prescriptions often subordinated to the needs of organisational, capitalist, and economic needs (Mould, 2020; Rehn and De Cock, 2009; Osborne, 2003; Prichard, 2002). In organisation studies, creativity is often conceptualised as something that organisations "can simply decide to increase, adopt or even let loose" (Blomberg, 2014, p.944).

Paradoxically, even though creativity seems to be an organisational mantra (Jeanes, 2006), scholars such as Amabile (1998) have argued that creativity is 'killed' more often than it is 'supported', particularly in organisations that place a premium on productivity, control, and coordination. Similarly, creativity tends to generate resistance either against new and risky ideas, creative employees, and creative leadership, being perceived more as a threat rather than a benefit (Khessina, Goncalo and Krause, 2018). As Staw (1995, p.479) describes, in reality "only a few individuals and organizations really want to be creative". Due to the uncertainty, prospective failures, errors, or rejections that creativity can invoke, even though organisations desire creativity they reject it at the same time, especially when other unoriginal and more practical solutions might be already available or have shown past success (Bilton, 2010; Mueller, Melwani and Goncalo, 2012).

Furthermore, the organisational literature illustrates that creativity might not be managed, at least not in a direct way (Amabile and Khaire, 2008; Anderson, 1994; Serrat, 2017; Woodman, 1995). As Anderson (1994, p.80) illustrates, "you can't *make* creativity happen, you can only *allow* it to happen". Thus, the key concern of most mainstream research has been to uncover variables and determinants to enhance the 'climate' for organisational creativity and performance and if hindered, how to avoid it. The main assumption operating behind this corpus of literature is that organisations can manage, facilitate, and control the aspects of the situation or environment that trigger and enhance creative behaviour (cf. Amabile et al., 1996; Ekvall, 1996; Hunter, Bedell and Mumford, 2007; Mathisen and Einarsen, 2004; Shalley and Gilson, 2004; Woodman, 1995).

Woodman (1995), for instance, proposes that organisations should set the necessary conditions to increase the probability of creative acts occurring in the workplace, either incorporating tools, strategies, or activities to the situation with the potential to enhance creative behaviour or removing elements from the situation that might obstruct it. Similarly, others hold the view that to increase the probability of creativity occurring, organisations should build a culture that stimulates creativity by encouraging supportive leadership (Amabile et al., 2004), risk-taking (Tyagi et al., 2017), idea generation (Paulus

and Yang, 2000), play (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006), humour (Lang and Lee, 2010), a proper physical workspace (McCoy, 2005), as well as training for employees (Baruah and Paulus, 2008) and managers (Williams, 2001). Consequently, organisation studies tend to conceptualise creativity as something that we can capture and harness so it can be properly managed (Shalley and Gilson, 2004; Tan, 1998) and taught (Williams, 2001) to “normalize ‘creative’ managers and professionals” (Prichard, 2002, p.266) and thus satisfy the ‘innovate or die’ market-oriented mantra (Getz and Robinson, 2003).

1.2.5 A mundane, relational, and socio-material perspective

As Osborne (2003, p.507) vividly suggests, we must liberate ourselves “from the potentially moronic consequences of the doctrine of creativity”, a dogma that, as I have shown above, is obsessed with novelty and usefulness, portraying creativity as a common good and a necessity for organisations (cf. Blomberg, 2014; Jeanes, 2006; Josefsson and Blomberg, 2020; Osborne, 2003; Prichard, 2002; Rehn and De Cock, 2009; Styhre, 2006; Tuori and Vilén, 2011). To tackle this doctrine, scholars such as Rehn and De Cock (2009) propose three deconstructive moves to challenge the common assumptions that underpin most creativity research: (1) creativity does not need to be predefined by the capitalist imperative of novelty to satisfy the market’s demands; (2) we must not exaggerate the role of originality; and (3) creativity is not ipso-facto good and beneficial, nor neutral, as it is tied to ideological and moral contexts. In a more radical view, Osborne (2003) invites us to abandon the idea of creativity and adopt that of ‘inventiveness’, a less heroic and less romantic construct. As he argues,

Invention is not just a question of novelty, or rather, we need to broaden our conception of novelty away from artefacts and objects towards arrangements and practices... Inventiveness is more anonymous, more collective, more processual than the rather heroizing, romanticist notion of creativity. (Osborne, 2003, pp.519–520)

The above perspectives encourage us to appreciate creative work as relational processes (Sundgren and Styhre, 2007), as humble practices (Jeanes, 2006) present in mundane and everyday activities emerging and unfolding when thinking, working, connecting, and combining elements. Under this lens, creativity is seen as an arranging practice (Osborne, 2003), as an act of “making connections and constituting hybrids” (Styhre, 2006, p.148) dislocated from dominant market-led discourses (Vachhani, 2013). Consequently, critical creativity scholars offer a non-performative perspective arguing that creativity is essentially ingrained in every mundane aspect of life and work (Styhre, 2006; Tanggaard, 2013; Vachhani, 2013). As Vachhani (2013) contends, everyday

creativity is an affective process of organisation and reorganisation, connection and association of bodies.

Following the notion of connectivity and arrangement, scholars such as Duff and Sumartojo (2017) hold a posthumanist view arguing that creativity is an emergent quality of *heterogenous connections* between semiotic, affective, and material forces, a distributed action between people, objects and places. A relational view, therefore, conceptualises organisational creativity as an “*emergent, enacted and distributed* phenomenon existing ‘in-between’” bodies (Thompson, 2017, p.230), a day-to-day, socio-material and world-making process between humans and nonhumans (Tanggaard, 2013). Under this lens, creativity does not belong to individuals being distributed instead between “people, artifacts and the situated context, and the sites of creative activity” (Parolin and Pellegrinelli, 2020, p.438) in which nonhuman others play a central role in propagating creativity (Panourgias, Nandhakumar and Scarbrough, 2014).

Relational perspectives, like those described above, often question anthropocentric and performative theories understanding creativity as an ongoing flow (Panourgias, Nandhakumar and Scarbrough, 2014) or moment-to-moment process (Parolin and Pellegrinelli, 2020; Sawyer and DeZutter, 2009; Tanggaard, 2013). In this thesis, therefore, I adopt a less romantic and mythologic view of creativity ascribing to a more relational, socio-material, and mundane view, that is, of creativity as an everyday process unfolding within arranging and affective practices between human and nonhuman bodies at work.

1.2.6 Section summary

In this section, I have examined the concept of creativity in work organisations illustrating the performative and market-oriented ideologies that underpin mainstream research. Overall, I have shown that creativity is often described as a key predictor of organisational performance and productivity (Forgeard and Kaufman, 2016); a somewhat necessary and positive process (Gilson, 2008); a corporate mantra (Jeanes, 2006). Based on this performative drive, organisational theories often aim to normalise creativity aiming to produce ‘creative subjects’ (Prichard, 2002) for the sake of corporate performance prescribing techniques to increase and encourage the much-desired creative behaviour whilst intensifying corporate control and exploitation (Walker, 2011). In doing so, the literature focuses on how to capture employees’ creativity, installing the assumption of creativity as a human ability; thus, ignoring the material aspects surrounding the creative process (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017).

1.3 Exploring play

In the next section, I discuss play in the context of organisation studies. To begin with, I provide a general notion of what play is highlighting its main characteristics and attributes. Then, I explore how play has been framed in the field of organisation studies examining the performative and business-oriented articulation of 'serious play'. Finally, undertaking a critical perspective, I discuss how organisational play constitutes a technology of neo-normative control and exploitation.

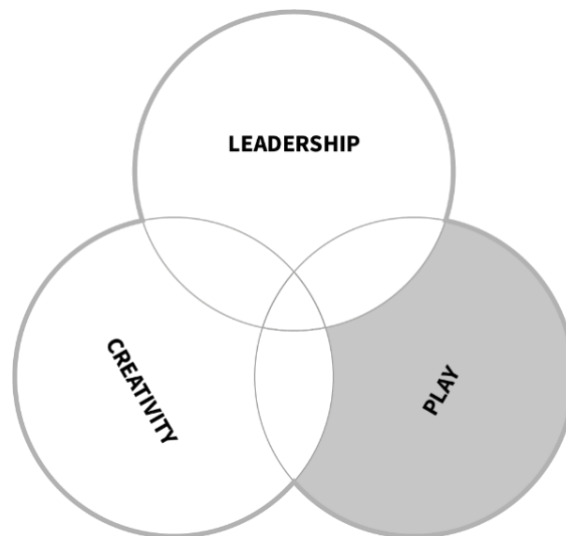


Figure 6: Literature review section: Play

1.3.1 *The notion of play*

We have all played at some point in our lives and we might know what play feels and looks like; yet, there is little consensus on what play is due to its ambiguous (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and elusive nature (Burke, 1971). Consequently, play seems easy to identify in practice but difficult to explain in theory (Neubauer, 1987; Sutton-Smith, 1997). As Nachmanovitch (2009, p.3) illustrates, “[p]lay is the way we do it or say it, whatever *it* may be”. From this perspective, play has been defined as a social function (Huizinga, 1949), an activity (Caillois, 1961; Starbuck and Webster, 1991), a form or category of behaviour (Bateson and Martin, 2013; Pellegrini, 2009), an activity or behaviour indistinctly (Van Vleet and Feeney, 2015a), a mode of experience (Henricks, 2015; Malaby, 2007), and as a form of metacommunication that carries the message ‘this is play’ (Bateson, 2006). Caillois (1961, pp.14–26), for instance, depicts four manifestations of play he describes as (1) *agôn*, competitive games between rival players or teams; (2) *alea*, games where the decision or outcome does not depend on the player such as in chance games; (3) *mimicry*, make-believe games where players abandon the self to

adopt a created character or personality; and (4) *ilinx*, where players pursue vertigo, change of perception, panic or shock.

Due to the ambiguous and multifaceted nature of play, scholars frequently attempt to describe what play is by dissecting its distinctive qualities (Colarusso, 1993; Solnit, 1998). As Smith and Vollstedt (1985, p.1042) argue, “[i]t is obviously arbitrary to put forward yet another armchair definition of play. Anyway, it may well be that it is a combination of features, rather than the presence or absence of one defining characteristic”. Play features are commonly described in the literature as: (1) *voluntary*, players can enter and out of play whenever they choose; (2) *extraordinary*, taking place in a temporary world; (3) *episodic*, play has its own time and space; (4) *ruled*, play is governed by conventions that suspend ordinary laws; (5) *safe*, the consequences are not applicable outside the play world; (6) *uncertain*, the course of events cannot be predetermined; (7) *unproductive*, play does not create any goods nor profits; and (8) *fun*, carried out to experience joy (cf. Anderson, 1994; Caillois, 1961; Eberle, 2014; Huizinga, 1949). As scholars suggest, the more of these elements present at the same time, the more likely that the observed behaviour may be labelled as play (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006; Smith and Vollstedt, 1985).

Van Vleet and Feeney (2015b) hold the view that play can be defined as a behaviour or activity that fulfils three main characteristics: (1) is motivated with the purpose of having fun; (2) involves an enthusiastic approach; and (3) is highly interactive. Therefore, one of the main characteristics of play is its enjoyable and fun nature (e.g. Malaby, 2007; Van Vleet and Feeney, 2015a), an *autotelic* practice (Csíkszentmihályi, 1975) carried out for its own sake, an end in itself (Schmid, 2011). As Huizinga (1949, p.13) illustrates, play is “an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it”. Thus, play operates for no other purpose beyond the enjoyment of the player, it is an ‘intrinsically rewarded’ activity (Csíkszentmihályi, 1975). This aspect is central in distinguishing *play* from *work*. Consequently, whereas work produces ‘value’, play does not produce any other outcome beyond itself (Statler, Roos and Victor, 2009). However, with the rise of neo-normative management ideologies (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009), the boundaries between play and work have begun to blur “creating new subject positions, and new relationships between work, enjoyment, personal well-being and productivity” (Costea, Crump and Holm, 2005, p.149) articulating notions such as serious play (Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004) or productive play (Starbuck and Webster, 1991).

1.3.2 *Serious and productive play*

In organisation studies, play has rather had a peripheral status (Hjorth et al., 2018) being often depicted as a distinct realm detached from that of work. Whereas work is often idealised as a 'good object', play has been historically marginalised acquiring the status of 'bad object' (Kavanagh, 2011) promoting several contrasting positions: unproductive and productive, non-serious and serious, dysfunctional and functional, unstructured and structured, liberating and constrictive, joy-oriented and goal-oriented (Dougherty and Takacs, 2004; Statler, Roos and Victor, 2009). However, with the evolution, combination, and rise of manifold management ideologies – e.g. scientific management, human relations, normative control, and neo-normative control (cf. Barley and Kunda, 1992; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; Ray, 1986), scholars began to question the notion of play as the antithesis of work arguing that we should take play more 'seriously' at work (Statler, Roos and Victor, 2009).

The 'play turn' in management celebrates individuality, difference, playfulness, and fun (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011); thus, blurring the boundaries between what is considered play and what is considered work (Costea, Crump and Holm, 2007). As Huizinga (1949, p.200) describes, "[t]his process goes so far that some of the great business concerns deliberately instil the play-spirit into their workers so as to step up production". Thus, in the process of colonising play for the sake of work, the main assumption that operates behind mainstream research is that play can enhance organisational performance (Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012), productivity (West, Hoff and Carlsson, 2016), work learning (Rieber, Smith and Noah, 1998), motivation (Webster and Martocchio, 1993), engagement (Kumar and Raghavendran, 2015), strategy making processes (Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004), leadership development (Kark, 2011), creativity (Berg, 2001), and idea generation (Schulz et al., 2015); thus, contributing to achieving better and high-quality work results (Starbuck and Webster, 1991). Consequently, the literature often highlights play's functional attributes.

Advocates of play, such as Kane (2005), suggest that rather than constraining play, we should elevate it as a philosophy for everyday life replacing the Puritan work ethic with the 'play ethic'. The underlying assumption behind this ideology is that play pervades every aspect of our lives going beyond leisure, recreation, and diversion, constituting instead a broad and pivotal role within every society and culture (Kane, 2005; Huizinga, 1949; Zimmerman, 2014). This seductive discourse has contributed to the shift from the Puritan assumption of play as something unvalued and marginal towards the instauration of play as a powerful managerial resource (Costea, Crump and Holm, 2005, 2007; Kavanagh, 2011) As Deal and Kennedy (1999, p.234) illustrate,

If work is fulfilling, people will perform to their optimum. If work is enjoyable, they will be more willing to commit themselves. If work is even more, read “fun”, people will pour their hearts and souls into what they do.

In organisational settings, play can include developing work activities with toys like Lego bricks (Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004), the design of playful office spaces (Alexandersson and Kalonaityte, 2018), the use of game-like features to conduct work tasks such as leader boards, badges, contests, and points systems (Deterding et al., 2011), role-play to simulate and mimic managerial scenarios, positions, and functions (Leyer, Hirzel and Moormann, 2018), as well as the instauration of fun cultures (Fleming, 2005). Thus, play can act either as a form of *engagement* with work tasks or as a *diversion* from them (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006). These manifestations of play-at-work, as Celestine and Yeo (2021) describe, can be either manager-initiated, self-initiated, or peer-initiated.

Management-initiated play –the organised and ‘productive’ kind– must deal with paradoxical situations since “[w]e do not *play* for wages, we *work* for them” (Huizinga, 1949, p.51). From this perspective, the autotelic nature of play implies that we engage in play for our gratification and joy, we play for play’s sake (Csíkszentmihályi, 1975; West, 2014); thus, contradicting the goal-oriented or telic character of work to address formal organisational needs (Statler, Roos and Victor, 2009). ‘Serious play’ occurs when employees engage in playful activities and behaviours to achieve formal and serious organisational outcomes (Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004; Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012; Statler, Heracleous and Jacobs, 2011). This paradoxical synthesis (Poole and de Ven, 1989) instrumentalises play as a medium to address broader organisational goals becoming serious when the activity follows specific purposes. Serious play provides “an explanatory framework for those activities which differ qualitatively from work, yet purposefully benefit the organization” (Statler, Roos and Victor, 2009, p.96).

Through serious play, employees enact the paradox of intentionality (Statler, Heracleous and Jacobs, 2011), or the deliberated quest for work-related goals and outcomes by employing playful activities where employees engage in intrinsically motivating activities to achieve external and objective outcomes. However, as employees receive incentives, rewards, promotions, or sanctions based on their productivity, work cannot be pure play; hence, the free-risk assumption about play in the context of work gets contradicted (Anderson, 1994). Under this view, play represents more than fun or entertainment but another managerial technique to reach instrumental goals (Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012). As Ashton and Giddings (2018, p.88) argue, play at work “must be negotiated and filtered, with some aspects of play selected for the ends of entrepreneurial and business,

and others downplayed or repressed”. Therefore, when examining the work/play relationship, an obscurer and less magical role is revealed, for play is closely attached to new forms of instrumental control, domination, and exploitation (cf. Alexandersson and Kalonaityte, 2018; Bogost, 2014; Butler et al., 2011; Costea, Crump and Holm, 2007; deWinter, Kocurek and Nichols, 2014; Walker, 2011).

1.3.3 *Play as a façade for subordination, control, and exploitation*

Organisations are saturated with overt and covert forms of control and coercion (Walker, 2011) often prescribing and enforcing norms to regulate employees’ behaviours (Hechter, 2008) and thus produce the ‘appropriate’ worker (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). These norms frequently reveal “an increased managerial interest in regulating employees ‘insides’ – their self-image, their feelings and identifications” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p.622). Consequently, contemporary strategies for organisational control appeal to subtle forms of domination aiming to absorb employees’ ‘real’ and ‘full’ selves (Bryant and Cox, 2014; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). These corporate regimes, also described as ‘neo-normative’, are regimes that pursue to harness extra-organisational values (Sturdy, Fleming and Delbridge, 2010) promoting more efficient mechanisms of subordination disguising work, domination, and exploitation with the cult of freedom (Walker, 2011), authenticity (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009), friendship (Costas, 2012), family (Dodson and Zincavage, 2007), fun (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009), and play (Costea, Crump and Holm, 2007). As Cederström and Grassman (2008, p.42) observe, neo-normative strategies “are deliberately used as means to create the impression among employees of not being at work”; thus, blurring the boundaries between personal and organisational life (Fleming and Spicer, 2004). As such, neo-normative techniques emerge to complement bureaucratic and normative strategies to secure organisational domination (Sturdy, Fleming and Delbridge, 2010).

As Fleming (2014) argues, the colonisation of non-work themes allows organisations to infiltrate work into the realm of personal life, to capture the worker’s very soul (Costea, Crump and Holm, 2007) instrumentalising “life attributes that were previously considered exogenous, irrelevant or detrimental to formal organizational productivity” (Fleming, 2014, p.885). Consequently, these subtle forms of domination tend to appropriate subversive and previously repressed sources of dissidence (Walker, 2011) such as fun and play, two genuine expressions of the ‘authentic’ self (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). However, as Butler et al. (2011) argue, “[f]or while play promises to relieve the monotony and boredom of work, it is intimately connected to new forms of management control”; hence, play emerges as a managerial technology to align employees’ performance with the organisational interest (Butler et al., 2011; Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012).

Play in work organisations emerges as a resource, tactic, or technology of control that *reconfigures* the very meaning of work. As Burke (1971, p.47) describes, the aim is to build a utopia where “everyone plays at work and works at play”. Consequently, as employees ‘play’ rather than ‘work’, they are exploited and controlled without them knowing it, for play masks work as something that should be enjoyed (deWinter, Kocurek and Nichols, 2014). In doing so, organisations reconfigure workspaces –including colourful and chilled furniture to emulate home (Alexandersson and Kalonaityte, 2018) or resemble a playground (Fleming, 2005)– as well as work routines employing, for instance, Lego® bricks to explore a bundle of organisational issues (Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004); thus, restructuring the ‘workplace’ into a ‘playspace’ (Meyer, 2010).

Consequently, play at work acts as a colonisation device that subjugates the ‘true self’, reshaping organisational control and inducing employees to work longer hours (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Starbuck and Webster, 1991) or take work home (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006). By bringing the authentic self to work, the main source of control is not the organisation but the worker her/himself (Goggin, 2011), who self-regulates through play (deWinter, Kocurek and Nichols, 2014). Likewise, play not only colonises the soul and heart of the employee but re-captures anti-work practices (Walker, 2011) re-connecting the player-worker with work (Costea, Crump and Holm, 2007). The rhetoric of organisational play, therefore, deconstructs the *homo-faber*, the working individual, to give raise to the *homo et femina ludens* (Kane, 2005), man and woman, the playing individuals (Cederström and Grassman, 2008), acting as an extension of Taylorism, as a means to increase productivity (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; deWinter, Kocurek and Nichols, 2014). At the same time, play technologies contribute to reducing and neutralising employees’ resistance (Costea, Crump and Holm, 2005), and consequently, when work is disguised as play, the player-worker *enjoys* its oppression (Butler et al., 2011). Under the veil of neo-normative control, play constitutes a façade “for the intensification of exploitation, all while making employees believe they are truly free” (Walker, 2011, p.369).

The corporate mandate to play at work often obscures the fact that employees are frequently forced to ‘play’ (Fleming, 2005), and therefore, it becomes an obligation rather than an option (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Consequently, playing at work is not all laughing and fun, it can also produce cynicism and feelings of condescension, inauthenticity, and disidentification (Fleming, 2005). Play can also transform itself into a more autonomous medium to criticise the organisation, its policies, and practices creating spaces of resistance that defy the organisational bottom-line demands (Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012). Moreover, play can intensify power asymmetries

between team members opening unintended spaces for abusive and dominative behaviours triggering negative emotions including sadness, frustration, and disagreement, producing in turn, conflict and tension amongst employees (Statler and Oliver, 2008). Finally, rather than being productive, play can also be perceived as a waste of time making work more inefficient (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006; Statler and Oliver, 2008). This darker side of play, however, remains under-researched (Petelczyc et al., 2018).

The most authentic manifestation of play at work is the one that employees create by themselves (Spraggon and Bodolica, 2014; Fleming, 2005), it is how an activity is framed by the player (Bateson, 1979) rather than a management command via 'packaged fun' (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). In that way, play resists corporate colonisation. As Sørensen and Spoelstra (2012) suggest, we must not reduce organisational play to performative logics of productivity that ultimately do not belong to play. The mainstream rhetoric of play at work often portrays a filtered and carefully orchestrated version of play, selecting the aspects that benefit the performative drive whilst repressing those that do not (Ashton and Giddings, 2018). As Eberle (2014, p.220) suggests, rather than understanding play as a list of more and less defined attributes, we should understand it as "a series of connected events" unfolding within the constant flow of experience (Linstead, 2018). As such, play can be seen as free and unregulated movement (Hjorth et al., 2018) emerging through rhizomatic connections "constantly *in play*, disconnecting, reconnecting, and finding new intersections" (Linstead, 2018, p.325), as the unusual recombination of bodies and ideas (Dodgson, 2017), an inherently creative practice (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006).

1.3.4 Section summary

In this section, I have explored the concept of play, how organisation studies have introduced it into the realm of work, and the performative and exploitative use of play as a tool for management control. Falling under the umbrella of 'serious play' (Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004), I have shown that play at work is often subjugated to the imperative of performance and productivity (Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012; West, Hoff and Carlsson, 2016). Play transports highly seductive rhetoric promising to free employees from the boredom of work (Butler et al., 2011; Deal and Kennedy, 1999). Consequently, organisation studies often highlight the functional attributes of play defying its autotelic, voluntary, and free-risk nature; thus, encouraging employees to achieve work-related outcomes by employing non-work activities (Statler, Heracleous and Jacobs, 2011). This paradoxical synthesis, however, transforms play into a tool for control that disguises work (deWinter, Kocurek and Nichols, 2014) leading employees to enjoy their exploitation

(Butler et al., 2011). In such a way, organisations colonise extra-organisational values (Sturdy, Fleming and Delbridge, 2010) to re-capture anti-work practices and align employees' performance with the organisational goals (Costea, Crump and Holm, 2007; Butler et al., 2011; Walker, 2011). Under this lens, play serves as a managerial resource to exploit employees and makes them believe that they are truly free (Walker, 2011). More often than not, play at work becomes an obligation and not an option (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009).

2 The interrelations between leadership, creativity, and play

Having individually discussed leadership, creativity and play in work organisations as well as the main assumptions and problems that underpin these bodies of literature, in the following sections I examine the interrelations between these three research fields discussing the assumptions that underpin each intersection including creativity and play, leadership and creativity, as well as leadership and play.

2.1 Creativity and play

In this intersection, I discuss how creativity and play have been conceptualised in the literature arguing that, more often than not, play is often instrumentalised for the sake of creativity being frequently articulated as a managerial resource to increase employees' performance and ideation processes.

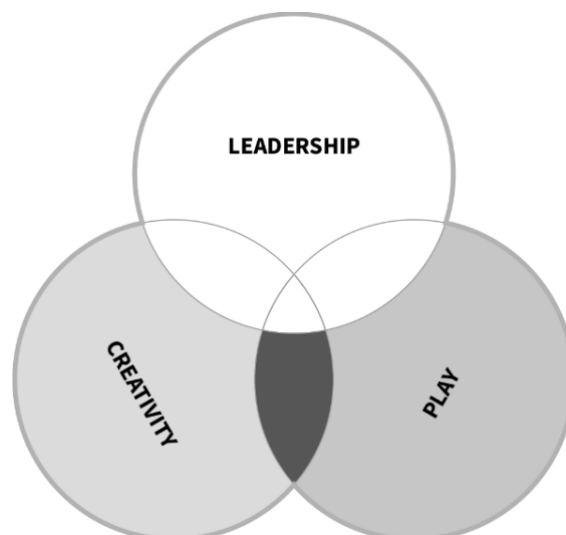


Figure 7: Literature review section: Intersection between creativity and play

2.1.1 *Instrumentalising play for the sake of creativity*

As a means to produce ‘creative subjects’ at work (Prichard, 2002), management literature often aims to uncover the positive effects and functional benefits of play upon organisational creativity (Anderson, 1994; Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006; Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004; Schulz et al., 2015; West, 2014). Scholars frequently argue that play serves as a catalyst to unleash “creative potential” (Statler, Roos and Victor, 2009, p.83). As Mainemelis and Ronson (2006, p.85) describe, play facilitates “the full range of factors that enable individual creativity”. Therefore, the main assumption that operates behind this corpus of literature is that play holds a pivotal and inseparable role in fostering creativity (Stierand et al., 2019). Consequently, most research on the play/creativity relationship aims to encourage the *productive* application and *operationalisation* of play (Ashton and Giddings, 2018) providing prescriptions on how to produce the ‘right’ conditions to use play for the sake of creative work (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006; Nisula et al., 2015; West, 2014).

In a review of the literature, Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) identify how play influences factors that stimulate individual creativity including cognitive, affective and motivational processes, as well as the social and informal dynamics that influence creative work. In this regard, the authors suggest that play is a behavioural attitude or orientation towards any type of activity including work. As such, play functions as an engagement with work tasks or as a diversion from them. Either in one case or the other, Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) suggest that by suspending the rules of the ordinary world and encouraging risk-taking, play can serve as a powerful creative driver. As March (2020, p.127) illustrates, play acts through the “deliberate, temporary relaxation of rules in order to explore the possibilities of alternative rules”. Therefore, play dissolves limitations and boundaries allowing space for creative exploration (Berg, 2001; Gurteen, 1998).

Similarly, West (2014) holds the view that play can enhance creativity by fostering exploratory practices, mental flexibility, intrinsic motivation, and strong collaboration between employees. As Bateson (2005, pp.18–19) observes, “[p]lay is an effective mechanism for facilitating innovation and encouraging creativity. Playfully rearranging disparate thoughts and ideas into novel combinations... is a powerful means of gaining new insights and opening up possibilities that had not previously recognized”. Play fosters combinatorial flexibility and divergent thinking (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006). Moreover, play not only influences employees at the individual level but also the organisation and its creative climate (Agogué, Levillain and Hooge, 2015; Ekvall, 1996; West, Hoff and Carlsson, 2016). Ekvall (1996), for instance, argues that play constitutes a key climate dimension to stimulate creativity contributing to building a spontaneous

and relaxed atmosphere filled with fun, laughter and humour. This view is shared by scholars such as West, Hoff and Carlsson (2016), who found that introducing playful cues in business meetings –such as candy sweets, toy guns, fake moustaches, and other playful activities– has the potential to increase creative climate without stifling productivity.

Besides enquiring on the individual and climate factors that influence creativity, mainstream research has also focused on how the use of play technologies and devices –such as facilitated workshops, serious games, improvisation theatre, role-playing, and contests– can foster organisational creativity and ideation in early stages of the innovation process (cf. Agogué, Levillain and Hooge, 2015; Al-Jayyousi and Durugbo, 2020; Gudiksen, 2015; Kumar and Raghavendran, 2015; Nisula et al., 2015; Parjanen and Hyypiä, 2019; Schulz et al., 2015; Zenk, Primus and Sonnenburg, 2022). For instance, in a comparative study between traditional business meetings and facilitated Lego® Serious Play® workshops, Zenk, Primus and Sonnenburg (2022) argue that participants in Lego settings outperform participants in traditional meetings exhibiting higher levels of creative outputs and individual flow (e.g. Csikszentmihályi, 1996). In a similar vein, Schulz et al. (2015) argue that the use of modelling toolkits –such as Lego, drawings, photography, handicraft paper, and cardboards– fosters co-creation practices increasing participants' creative potential through the construction of 3-D artefacts and models. At the same time, these artefacts can challenge assumptions, inspire, surprise, and potentiate collaboration between participants; processes that foster creative development and shared understanding (Gudiksen, 2015; Nisula et al., 2015) creating 'authorised' (Hjorth, 2005) and ludic learning spaces to explore new possibilities (Al-Jayyousi and Durugbo, 2020; Kolb and Kolb, 2010).

Similar studies have shown how gamified contests, including the introduction of game-like elements such as rewards, points, and badges, can increase employees' participation, motivation, creative engagement, and idea generation performance (Hauge, Duin and Thoben, 2008; Kumar and Raghavendran, 2015; Scheiner, 2015; Zimmerling et al., 2019). For instance, Hauge, Duin and Thoben (2008) have shown that the application of serious games can support idea generation yielding better results in contrast to traditional approaches such as brainstorming (e.g. Gallupe and Cooper, 1993). Others as Kumar and Raghavendran (2015) have shown that building an organisational culture that includes a playful and fun ethos can foster problem-solving and creative engagement. As the authors suggest, playful cultures and initiatives can contribute to finding employees' 'sweet spot', the intersection of what they like to do,

what they do best, and what adds value to the organisation; thus, *capturing* their minds and souls.

Finally, scholars have also explored the use of games such as role-play (Agogu , Levillain and Hooge, 2015) and monopoly-like boards (Parjanen and Hyypi , 2019) to assess the relationship between creativity and play at work. Agogu , Levillain and Hooge (2015) argue that simulating realities through role-playing can support employees' collaboration and idea generation inducing "an immersive experience in which participants must act, make decisions, react to surprising events and develop strategies to achieve one or more goals" (Agogu , Levillain and Hooge, 2015, p.416). As the authors suggest, these kinds of games have the potential to support and stimulate ideation whilst fostering the participation of unusual collaborators. Others as Parjanen and Hyypi  (2019) have employed board games to enhance creativity and collaboration facilitating the idea generation process in a safe and collaborative atmosphere fostering dialogue and the crystallisation of shared views.

The main arguments to encourage the use of play as a means to foster creativity at work lie in its free-risk, safe, exploratory, episodic, and extraordinary nature (Anderson, 1994; Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006). As Dodgson (2011, p.184) describes, "play can generate ideas and produce options to be tested for subsequent execution: it is the intermediary between thinking and doing". Thus, play allows organisations to respond against uncertainty by stimulating adaptation and experimentation (Dodgson, 2017) building an authorised time/space to develop ideas (Al-Jayyousi and Durugbo, 2020; Hjorth, 2005; Kolb and Kolb, 2010) where failure is tolerated (Dodgson, 2011).

Consequently, through play at work, risk-taking, curiosity, and exploration are allowed and actively encouraged (Berg, 2001) contributing to increasing organisational collaboration (Agogu , Levillain and Hooge, 2015; Parjanen and Hyypi , 2019) and thus achieving superior results (Starbuck and Webster, 1991). Play opens barriers to self-expression in a safe environment (Anderson, 1994; Dodgson, 2011; Gudiksen, 2015). The pivotal position of play and its role in fostering creativity is keenly illustrated by Mainemelis and Ronson (2006, p.116) who argue that "more often than not, creativity is born out of play"; therefore, rather than fostering creativity, is creativity itself what is embedded into play (Dodgson, 2011; Sundgren and Styhre, 2007). Under this lens, creativity emerges and unfolds through 'combinatorial play' (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006, p.119). The rhetoric of organisational play tends to portray the benefits of play upon creativity highlighting its brighter and functional side, providing further insights on

'how to' improve the productivity of play (Hauge, Duin and Thoben, 2008) and how to exploit it for the business benefit (Agogu , Levillain and Hooge, 2015).

2.1.2 Section summary

This section has explored the interrelations between creativity and play. The main assumption that underpins this body of research is that play can be used in productive ways to foster organisational creativity. In this way, play gets operationalised for the sake of creative production and performance (Ashton and Giddings, 2018). Consequently, research focuses on providing prescriptive accounts of how play influences creativity (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006; West, Hoff and Carlsson, 2016) and how to use play to nurture creativity and ideation (Agogu , Levillain and Hooge, 2015; Schulz and Geithner, 2014). Under this lens, play is articulated as a managerial resource to harvest superior and creative work-related outcomes (Starbuck and Webster, 1991).

2.2 Leadership and creativity

In this intersection, I explore the relationships between leadership and organisational creativity. Overall, I argue that mainstream research tends to depict leadership as a key aspect for the success of creative processes and outcomes. Consequently, leadership is often conceptualised around the qualities and competencies of heroic individuals working alone or in groups and how they can manage and foster the much-desired creative behaviour at work.

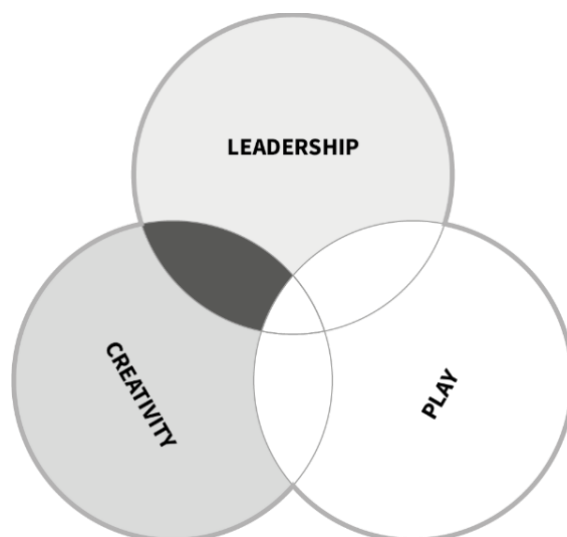


Figure 8: Literature review section: Intersection between leadership and creativity

2.2.1 A heroic enterprise

As Styhre (2006, p.147) points out, the question of 'how creativity is to be managed' dominates most of the mainstream literature. Thus, it is often argued that for creativity to happen in organisations, it is necessary to have 'skilful leadership' (Anderson, Potočnik and Zhou, 2014). From this perspective, a large and growing body of literature has paid particular attention to leadership and its influence in fostering or hindering creativity, for leadership has been addressed as something that makes 'a big difference' for the success of creative projects and outcomes (Mumford et al., 2007). As Amabile and Pratt (2016, p.160) observe,

Within organizations, creativity is affected by the highest levels of leadership, through the strategies they set, the structures and policies they establish, and the values they communicate. Creativity is affected by all levels of management, through managers' everyday practices in dealing with individuals, teams and their projects.

Numerous studies simply assume that for creativity to occur in organisational contexts, leaders must encourage employees to actively engage in the generation of new ideas and solutions having an important function in delivering adequate settings and visions for creativity to be nurtured and exploited (Andriopoulos, 2001; Basadur, 2004; Hughes et al., 2018; Kark, 2011; Mainemelis, Kark and Epitropaki, 2015; Mumford et al., 2002; Shalley and Gilson, 2004). As Dess and Picken (2000, p.19) illustrate, organisational leaders need to focus on "[c]hallenging the status quo and enabling creativity", an assumption that reflects the dominance of heroic discourses. Consequently, mainstream research often emphasises what organisational leaders need to know (Shalley and Gilson, 2004) or what they need to do (Mumford et al., 2002) to foster employees' creativity. For instance, in a review of the literature, Mainemelis, Kark and Epitropaki (2015) argue that leaders foster employees' creativity, provide the primary source or creative vision for employees to follow and materialise, and synthesise multiple creative contributions, which the authors conceptualised as *facilitating*, *directing* and *integrating*. Therefore, one of the main assumptions that dominate the extant literature is that leadership functions to *influence* employees' creative performance by largely focusing on leaders' behaviours, styles, traits, and attributes (cf. Amabile et al., 2004; Jaussi and Dionne, 2003; Shin and Zhou, 2003; Zhou and George, 2003).

Similarly, Brown (2016) proposes three leader-centric roles to nurture creativity he categorises as the *explorer*, who leads from the front not establishing direction but asking strategic and purposeful questions allowing employees to explore alternatives that bring

value to the organisation. The *gardener*, who leads from behind fostering the conditions for creativity to grow, providing the space, tools, and spaces for collaboration to release the organisation's creative potential. And finally, the *player-coach*, who leads from the side, referring to the leader's participation within the creative process without dominating it but anticipating obstacles that the team might not foresee; thus, guiding and encouraging the ideation process. Furthermore, Sternberg, Kaufman and Pretz (2003) argue that leaders can adopt three general approaches to 'propel' organisational creativity. The authors suggest that leaders can either (1) follow or (2) reject current paradigms or (3) combine ideas from multiple paradigms to move the organisation towards one or another location. In doing so, leaders are depicted as replicators, redefiners, forward incrementers, redirectors, reinitiators, and synthesisers.

Others as Amabile and Khairi (2008) and Mumford (2000) illustrate several strategies and influence tactics that managers can employ to encourage creativity including, but not limited to, assembling a diverse team, using incentives and rewards, applying evaluation techniques based on progress and not outcomes, developing filtering mechanisms for idea selection and development, encouraging collaborative practices amongst employees, providing training and the adequate conditions for creative work, as well as embracing failure and uncertainty. Furthermore, scholars have also attempted to understand how, for instance, through multiple leadership styles –such as transformational, authentic, and visionary, amongst others– leaders can positively influence employees' creative behaviour (cf. Rego et al., 2012; Shin and Zhou, 2003; Zhou et al., 2018). The main assumption behind this corpus of literature is, therefore, that leaders coordinate followers' collective actions fostering the discovery, definition, and solution of organisational problems (Basadur, 2004).

However, just as with most of the leadership literature, research often focuses on the bright and performative side of 'leading' creativity (e.g. Blom and Alvesson, 2015) concentrating exclusively on positive leaders' behaviours (Liu, Liao and Loi, 2012) whilst ignoring that leadership can also stifle employees' creative performance (cf. Gu et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2018; Han, Harms and Bai, 2017; Liu, Liao and Loi, 2012; Naseer et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2013). Abusive leaders, for instance, reduce employees' intrinsic motivation and willingness to engage in creative activities (Liu, Liao and Loi, 2012), cause followers' emotional exhaustion (Han, Harms and Bai, 2017), and ignite fearful and intimidating emotions that lead employees towards higher levels of defensive silence, less exchange of ideas and disengagement with creative activities (Guo et al., 2018). Consequently, authoritarian, despotic, and destructive kinds of leadership tend to suffocate creativity (Naseer et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2020).

As shown in the previous paragraphs, it is often argued that leaders hold a pivotal role in the success or failure of creative endeavours at work. This performative and leader-centric rhetoric, however, perpetuates a competency paradigm describing sets of 'best practices' that distinguish effective from non-effective leaders (Hollenbeck, McCall and Silzer, 2006). Thus, the more of these competencies a leader exhibits, the better leader she or he will be at managing creativity. Moreover, the heroic narrative positions the figure of the leader as an ever-present saviour surrounding a seemingly passive follower who is assumed to 'need' support from every side. Likewise, this rhetoric assumes that leaders know best whether an organisation is "in the right place at the right time" (Sternberg, Kaufman and Pretz, 2003, p.457) or not; thus, reinforcing the idea that creativity depends on what leaders do and forecast.

2.2.2 *Leading creativity collectively*

Whereas most studies on leadership and creativity have been amply dominated by leader-centric approaches, a small subset of research has begun to examine this relationship from distributed and shared perspectives (cf. Ali, Wang and Johnson, 2020; Gu, Liang and Cooke, 2022; Hu et al., 2017; Liang, van Knippenberg and Gu, 2021; Politis, 2005; Serban and Roberts, 2016; Xie et al., 2021; Wu and Chen, 2018; Wu and Cormican, 2016). For example, Liang, Knippenberg and Gu (2021) observe that shared leadership is positively correlated to individual creativity and meaning of work, motivating employees to engage with creative work challenges. Similarly, others such as Ali, Wang and Boekhorst (2021) found that shared leadership is positively related to the climate for innovation and team creativity suggesting that employees may have higher levels of horizontal influence in contrast to the top-down influence exerted by formal leaders. These studies tend to suggest positive correlations between shared leadership mediators, moderators, and attributes upon the organisational, team, and individual creativity.

Others as Dovey, Burdon and Simpson (2017) adopted a practice lens (e.g. Nicolini, 2013; Raelin, 2016b) to illustrate a case study on how leadership collectively emerged in an Australian Broadcaster during the creative production of a TV drama. As the authors suggest, leadership is a political process and a collective achievement in which everyday practices lead toward collaborative creative actions between a myriad of actors illustrating three interrelated sets of practices: (1) *wise partnering*, the concerted choice of trusting relationships with production companies; (2) *collective visioning*, the negotiation and development of a co-created and shared production vision between the multiple actors participating in the creative process; and (3) *stakeholder empowerment*,

encouraging the multiple actors to voice ideas, concerns, criticisms, inputs, and take risks.

The main assumption behind this body of research is that multiple team members — independently of the organisational hierarchy— by employing multiple mechanisms, influence processes, and practices can lead themselves by displaying rotating leadership competencies and qualities according to the situations and contexts they face (Pearce and Conger, 2003; Zhu et al., 2018) creating “favorable conditions for creativity” (Liang, van Knippenberg and Gu, 2021, p.69). However, the main problem of this corpus of literature resides in the uncritical celebration of shared and distributed leadership theories as to the solution to the ‘leader-centric’ problem, perpetuating the assumption that leadership is somewhat necessary and beneficial in any form (Blom and Alvesson, 2015) ascribing indistinctively to *pro-leadership* ideologies (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014) and the promotion of heroic collectives (Collinson, Smolović Jones and Grint, 2018). Finally, most studies —either heroic or post-heroic— tend to focus on human agencies around creativity ignoring, for instance, the processes of becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Wood and Ladkin, 2008) within human-nonhuman encounters and how these encounters co-produce leadership in the context of creative work.

2.2.3 Section summary

In this section, I have explored how leadership is related to creativity. Overall, it is often argued that leadership holds a pivotal role in the success of creative endeavours at work. Consequently, scholars frequently adopt leader-centric and heroic approaches arguing that leaders are bestowed with several roles to make creativity happen at work (cf. Amabile and Khaire, 2008; Brown, 2016; Mainemelis, Kark and Epitropaki, 2015) being seen as creativity enablers (Dess and Picken, 2000). This rhetoric positions leaders and their traits at the centre of the research enquiry prescribing techniques and strategies they can adopt to increase employees’ creativity and harvest the benefits of such activities; thus, perpetuating the competency paradigm (Bolden and Gosling, 2006). Similarly, when examined from a collective or shared perspective, research portrays human-centric and performative accounts highlighting how multiple individuals lead themselves (Dovey, Burdon and Simpson, 2017) promoting favourable conditions for creativity to emerge (Hooker and Csikszentmihályi, 2003).

2.3 Leadership and play

In this intersection, I discuss how play has been addressed from a leadership perspective. Overall, I argue that play is often conceptualised as a management technology that can

be either used to enhance leaders' competencies and abilities or applied by managers themselves to improve organisational creativity depicting a highly functional rhetoric.

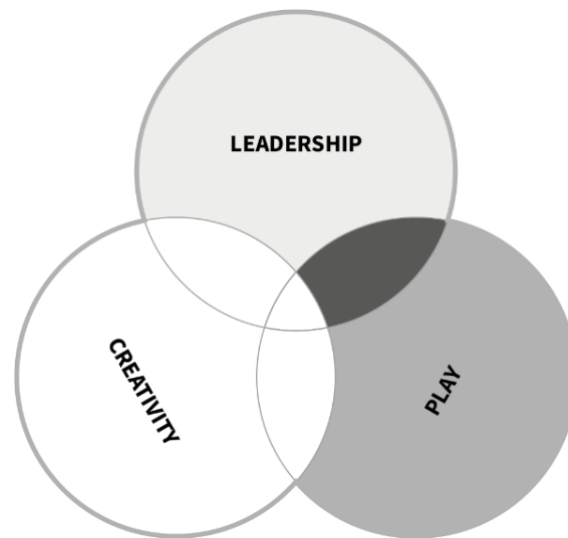


Figure 9: Literature review section: Intersection between leadership and play

2.3.1 *Integrating play into the leadership realm*

Even though the notion of play is often used in the context of leadership in the form of metaphors –such as leaders as ‘team players’ (Maznevski and Distefano, 2000), the ‘leadership game’ (Fiedler, 1976), playing ‘follow the leader’ (Earley, 1999)– to assess issues of leadership development, leader-follower relations, and leadership effectiveness, research in this field remains somewhat embryonic. In this regard, most studies adopt two broad and interrelated perspectives: (1) an instrumental and performative position addressing how play can enhance leadership development and other individual leadership skills (e.g. Agboola Sogunro, 2004; Carucci, 2009; Dentico, 1999; Hamdani, 2018; Henriksen and Børjesen, 2016; Holliday, Statler and Flanders, 2007; Iftach and Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2021; Kark, 2011; Lopes et al., 2013; O’Neil and Fisher, 2004; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2020; Sousa and Rocha, 2019; Tabak and Lebron, 2017); and (2) the prospective role of organisational leaders fostering or hindering play in the workplace (e.g. Anderson, 1994; Dougherty and Takacs, 2004; West, 2014).

A vast majority of research in this field has focused on leadership education, training, and development. As Brungardt (1996, p.83) describes, leadership development is “almost every form of growth or stage of development in the life cycle that promotes, encourages and assists in one’s leadership potential”. For instance, Holliday, Statler and Flanders (2007) hold the view that through serious play techniques –such as Lego®

Serious Play® (Kristiansen and Rasmussen, 2014)– it is possible to develop and train ‘practically wise’ leaders. By discussing highly ambiguous and complex issues, Lego facilitates the development of practical wisdom amongst participants balancing opposite views. In this case, play serves an instrumental purpose in building leadership competencies.

In a similar vein, others have shown how role-play techniques can be used to train and teach leaders a myriad of thinking and interpersonal skills. During a role-play session, participants assume a given role, enter a simulated scenario/situation, and experience how participants undertaking specific roles behave, act, and react in the assigned situation; thus, they learn by doing (Lopes et al., 2013). For instance, Hamdani (2018) argues that through role-play participants can learn leadership influence tactics. Similarly, Tabak and Lebron (2017) employ role-play to teach students and practitioners how multiple followership styles influence leader-follower relations. Other examples include the use of role-playing and computer-based simulations such as the ‘Leadership Bridge Simulation™’ game designed by the Danish company Workz¹, a computer game-based aimed to develop leadership skills in simulated and fictional scenarios.

These kinds of playful activities and simulation gaming experiences, as Agboola Sogunro (2004) O’Neil and Fisher (2004) and Shapira- Lishchinsky (2020) suggest, produce high levels of motivation amongst participants, increase the interest to learn, nurture new knowledge and learning, enhance and accelerate the acquisition of new competencies and skills, allow to test new knowledge, improve communication skills and confidence, and bridge leadership theory with practice. Thus, playful activities such as role-play comprise a kind of interactive learning with better and long-lasting results (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2020). Moreover, simulations and business games create ‘safe’ play spaces to rehearse desired behaviours and skills encouraging participants to take risks, experiment, and test behaviours that could either benefit or harm the organisation in a real-world scenario (Carucci, 2009; Dentico, 1999; Kark, 2011; Lopes et al., 2013). Thus, the main objective of playful activities, simulations, and business games in leadership development activities is for participants to successfully transfer the lessons learnt during the simulated experience to their real-world settings (Henriksen and Børjesen, 2016; Kark, 2011) rewriting behaviours, understandings, and beliefs (Dentico, 1999). As Carucci (2009, p.27) observes, the use of simulation technologies allows leaders “to learn leadership by actually *leading*, rather than by *talking about leading*”; thus, nurturing personal growth, cognitive abilities, and building leadership-relevant skills (Kark, 2011).

¹ The [Leadership Bridge Simulation](#) game. Accessed on April 11, 2022.

However, even though most researchers focus on the positive effects of play for leadership development, some have also highlighted its downsides. For instance, Kark (2011) argues that the use of play not only reinforces regimes of control and exploitation but can lead to a sense of managers' 'childification', which in turn, can erode their authority amongst subordinates. Furthermore, the use of play requires time, knowledge and resources, and could be intimidating for certain participants who might get reluctant to take part in these 'playful' or 'simulated' training sessions (Agboola Sogunro, 2004). Others as Lopes et al. (2013) argue that often there is a lack of theoretical background that compromises the effectiveness of participants' learning processes around the leadership topic. Finally, Henriksen and Børjesen (2016) observe that the game or simulation by itself might not be as effective due to the different learning processes involved in teaching activities. Thus, as Lopes et al. (2013) and Henriksen and Børjesen (2016) conclude, the use of games and simulations does not always guarantee positive results for leadership learning and training. As Kark (2011, p.511) observes, "[w]hen play is designed by organisations and facilitators to develop leadership, it also risks losing its essence".

On the other hand, few scholars have discussed the prospective role of leaders regarding organisational play. From this perspective, the main assumption is that leaders hold an important role in encouraging and fostering playful approaches at work. As Anderson (1994) observes, play can focus and direct activities, therefore, the right balance between work and play might depend on how leaders facilitate and manage the play experiences within the context of work. This view is shared by West (2014) who argues that an "important encourager of workplace play is when senior management clearly gives employees the permission to play". Similarly, Kark (2011), proposes that incorporating play into leadership development programs can raise awareness amongst leaders about the benefits of play. This awareness may increase the chances for managers to introduce and apply playful activities in their daily practices; thus, contributing to enhancing employees' creative performance. The main assumption is therefore that when leaders 'learn' the effects of play by playing themselves, they will transfer the benefits of playful experiences throughout the organisation. This field of research, however, remains under-researched.

2.3.2 *Section summary*

This section has shown how play has been addressed from a leadership perspective. Overall, I have identified two strands of research. On the one hand, play is instrumentalised as a leadership development tool to train and nurture leaders' abilities and competencies (Hamdani, 2018). Consequently, the literature tends to perpetuate

instrumental and performative notions in which play functions as a device or technology to 'create' good leaders prolonging romantic leader-centric and heroic assumptions highlighting play's functional attributes to increase leadership effectiveness (Agboola Sogunro, 2004). On the other hand, the literature discusses how leaders can instrumentalise play and direct playful activities. Under this lens, leaders give 'permission' or 'let' employees play, and they additionally enable and shape play by providing the necessary resources and capabilities for employees to do so (Dougherty and Takacs, 2004; West, 2014).

Having individually examined the literature on leadership, creativity, and play in work organisations, I have depicted mainstream and critical approaches highlighting three sets of assumptions that underpin extant research –the issue of performativity, anthropocentrism, and heroism– and how these assumptions are often uncritically reproduced and perpetuated when reviewing the binary interrelations between these bodies of literature. In the next section, to better understand how scholars have attempted to articulate corporeal, embodied, and posthuman perspectives of leadership, I explore the material aspects of leading and being led to reveal and identify the multiple and interconnected ways in which researchers have approached this field of study.

3 The materiality of leadership

In the following sections, I examine the material aspects of leadership. Overall, I describe four research strands: (1) leaders as the embodiment of leadership, (2) leaders mastering the material, (3) leadership in-between leaders and followers, and (4) humans and nonhumans co-producing leadership. Throughout this section, I explore these four approaches and discuss some of the assumptions and problems identified in each subfield.

3.1 All too human

As I have shown throughout this review, mainstream leadership research has been traditionally dominated by abstract assumptions that tend to ignore the material and physical aspects of leadership, assumptions that are often reproduced and perpetuated when examining its relationship with creativity and play in the workplace (see [section 2.2](#) and [section 2.3](#) in this chapter for further details). From this perspective, leaders and followers are often seen as mere 'human resources' detached from their sensing and material selves (Ropo and Sauer, 2008a). Thus, leadership has been frequently conceptualised as a disembodied site that encourages functional and performative

objectives such as how to get more creativity (e.g. Gilson, 2008) through more play (e.g. Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006). In doing so, bodies, and more particularly nonhuman ones, “are shown to be restraints and resources” (Falkman, 2013, p.85) that humans can use and manipulate at will (Arvedsen and Hassert, 2020) rather than as an affective source of transformation, modification, and distortion (Latour, 2005) that escapes human intentionality, intervention, and control (Leonardi, 2011), for bodies of any kind are able to produce intended and unintended consequences at work (Hawkins, 2015).

Traditionally, scholars understand leadership as “an activity of brains without bodies” (Sinclair, 2005, p.402), as something that stems from the mind or irradiates from the soul (Ropo, Parviainen and Koivunen, 2002). Thus, mainstream research often examines ethereal and somewhat disembodied and heroized traits and behaviours of individual leaders. From this perspective, scholars have sought to understand, for instance, how organisational leaders can influence, increase, or encourage organisations’ performance, effectiveness, and creative behaviour (e.g. Mainemelis, Kark and Epitropaki, 2015) understanding leadership as a rational, cognitive and intellectual activity (Ropo, Sauer and Salovaara, 2013), abstract and shapeless (Hansen, Ropo and Sauer, 2007), perpetuating and extending performative, human-centred, and heroic assumptions that seem to resist further questioning. However, a deeper exploration of the material aspects of leadership can yield valuable insights into how bodies play an active role in co-producing leadership, for “bodies are not just pieces of meat [or matter] awaiting enlivenment by an agentic mind” (Harding, Gilmore and Ford, 2022, p.650).

Thus, by disclosing the doings of matter and how bodies create and undertake leaderful effects, we can widen our understanding of leadership as a process that not only involves the human, but human and nonhuman bodies alike, giving voice and visibility to entities or ‘leadership-making’ materialities (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014) that have been traditionally made silent and invisible. Under this lens, nonhuman bodies are seen as affective agents in producing leadership and not “simply the hapless bearers of symbolic projection” (Latour, 2005, p.10); they can lead in several ways and towards multiple directions, for leadership theory, as Ford et al. (2017) argue, is a theory of materialities in which human and nonhuman bodies are inextricably entangled with leadership practices and processes (cf. Arvedsen and Hassert, 2020; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013; Sergi, 2016; Vuojärvi and Korva, 2020).

3.2 A heterogeneous and rhizomatic field

The increasing interest in the materiality of leadership has taken multiple and somewhat rhizomatic directions revealing a variety of theoretical lenses and perspectives. Based on the multiple approaches undertaken by scholars to explore the material aspects of leadership, I distribute these research orientations along two axes: heroic/post-heroic and human/posthuman, identifying four research subfields: (1) leaders as the embodiment of leadership, (2) leaders mastering the material, (3) leadership in-between leaders and followers, and (4) humans and nonhumans co-producing leadership (see Figure 10 below).

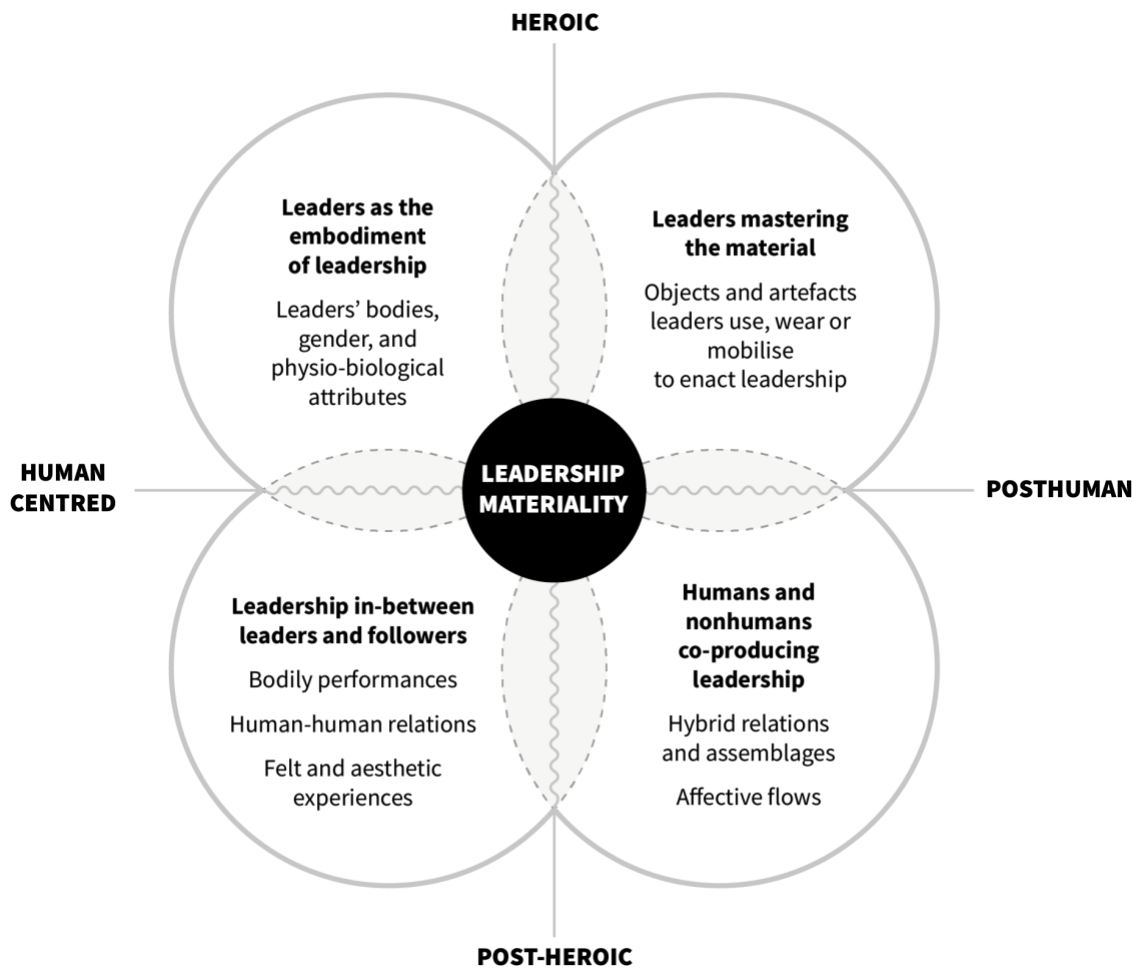


Figure 10: Liminal research territories attending material aspects of leadership

Source: Author's own

It would be misleading, however, to claim that these research areas are independent and unrelated from each other; therefore, these fields do not represent static or deterministic boxes, but liminal research spaces, analogous territories in constant tension, flux, convergence, and divergence (Hassard and Cox, 2013).

3.2.1 *Heroic and human-centric: Leaders as the embodiment of leadership*

This research territory, the most developed one in the field of leadership materialities, explores how leaders embody perceived leadership traits through their physical attributes or how they 'do' leadership with their bodies. Research in this field seems to perpetuate leader-centric, heroic, and superficial leadership accounts by studying leaders' physio-biological traits including, for instance, perceived attractiveness (Geys, 2014; Ling, Luo and She, 2019), facial appearance (Little, 2014; Poutvaara, 2014; Spisak et al., 2012), height (Elgar, 2016; Lindqvist, 2012), vocal attributes (DeGroot et al., 2011), body shape (Henderson et al., 2022), and other less visible and rather microscopic traits such as genetic markers (De Neve et al., 2013), hormonal levels (Bendahan et al., 2015), and brain activity (Balthazard et al., 2012); thus, bearing into question whether leaders are born or made (e.g. De Neve et al., 2013; Ilies, Gerhardt and Le, 2004; Johnson et al., 1998). These studies situate the leader's physical body as the locus of leadership.

Based on how leaders look or sound, scholars such as Ling, Luo and She (2019) have examined, for instance, whether the leader's perceived attractiveness influences career mobility finding that attractiveness produces a 'beauty effect' or cognitive bias around the leader's notion of competence and trustworthiness that facilitates career mobility and advancement. However, the authors also found that attractiveness did not predict leaders' skills, abilities, or performance. In a similar vein, Geys (2014) found that subordinates prefer to work with less attractive superiors as attractiveness was strongly related to followers' perceptions of weakness and lack of assertiveness. Furthermore, others as DeGroot et al. (2011) have discussed whether the leader's 'vocal attractiveness' predicts followers' perceptions of leadership effectiveness. DeGroot and colleagues define vocal attractiveness as a kind of voice with certain attributes that conveys an impression of confidence and relaxation to followers. From this perspective, the authors found that vocal 'pleasantness' and 'attractiveness' are related to leadership perceived effectiveness; however, attractiveness had no direct effect on effectiveness outcomes. Consequently, studies on leaders' perceived attractiveness (either physical or vocal) seem to reveal that even though being 'likeable' has important effects on how followers judge performance, ability, trustworthiness, and competence, attractiveness does not explain real leadership effects on work outcomes or personal skills.

In a similar vein, scholars examining leaders' bodily appearances and attributes have also explored how facial complexions (Little, 2014; Poutvaara, 2014; Re et al., 2013; Spisak et al., 2012), physical stature (Blaker et al., 2013; Elgar, 2016; Lindqvist, 2012), and body weight (Henderson et al., 2022; King et al., 2016) play an active role on how leadership traits are constructed and perceived from a bodily dimension. For instance,

Little (2014) suggests that facial appearance influences the perception of leadership choice across diverse contexts. Based on facial traits such as narrow or spaced eyes, and how these traits affect followers' perception of multiple leadership contexts, including cooperative and physical task contexts, findings suggest that leaders might get chosen for specific tasks if they have a facial and desirable complexion that matches the context. Others as Re et al. (2013) have found that the leader's facial shape, including face elongation, gender, width, and age, affects followers' perceptions of the leader's height, which in turn, has a strong effect on how followers perceive leadership ability. The authors additionally suggest that due to their face morphology, males were perceived as better leaders; thus, conveying a sense of more dominance in contrast to their female counterparts. Masculine-looking faces have been also found to match followers' preferences within competitive settings whilst female-looking faces for cooperative ones (Spisak et al., 2012). Consequently, as Nana, Jackson and Burch (2010) suggest, subordinates often employ facial information to make judgements regarding their superiors attributing whether they have the personality, competence, or ability to lead.

When examining leaders' physical stature, others as Blaker et al. (2013) have suggested that height conveys a powerful leader-like image observing that taller individuals are perceived as more intelligent, physically apt, healthy and dominant (for the case of men). However, others as Elgar (2016) have shown that even though stature is perceived as a desirable leadership trait, in studying athletes' and teams' performance and leader selection during London's 2012 Olympic games, he observes that team captains were not considerably taller than other team members. Thus, in highly competitive sporting teams, leader selection does not depend on stature, but rather, on age, which in turn, is associated with experience and discipline. However, neither stature nor age were found relevant traits to explain team success and performance.

Besides physical stature, scholars such as Henderson et al. (2022) have examined how the leader's weight affects subordinates' perceptions of leadership competence. The authors found that supervisors' weight hurt subordinates' perception of leadership competencies and abilities. A potential explanation for such bias may originate from the obesity stigma that overweight individuals cannot control themselves and therefore they cannot control further areas of life and work. A similar study conducted by King et al. (2016) suggests that body size, as measured by body mass index (BMI) and waist circumference, negatively affects subordinates' perceptions of leadership performance ratings.

Researchers have not only examined how bodily traits affect leadership perceived traits and outcomes but have also explored how leaders 'enact leadership' employing their bodily performances including, for instance, nonverbal cues such as facial expressions (Trichas and Schyns, 2012; Trichas et al., 2017), hand gestures (Talley and Temple, 2015), as well as eye contact and smiling (Maran et al., 2019). For instance, Trichas et al. (2017) examine the effects of a leader's facial expression (happy versus nervous) and its effects on followers' perception regarding leadership implicit traits such as sensitivity, dynamism, tyranny, intelligence and dedication finding that participants assigned higher leadership trait ratings to happy faces, a kind of facial expression regarded as more 'leader-like'.

Others as Talley and Temple (2015) have explored how non-verbal cues such as using specific hand gestures (positive, negative, and no gestures) affect followers' perception of leader immediacy and attractiveness. Immediacy, as Mehrabian (1971, p.1) describes, refers to a kind of behaviour pattern in which individuals "are drawn towards people and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer". The authors conclude that positive hand gestures are perceived positively by followers increasing immediacy. The study provides insights on how leaders can use specific hand gestures to create more immediacy and attraction with followers and thus lead more 'effectively' by employing non-verbal cues. Similarly, others as Maran et al. (2019) suggest that followers perform more effectively when leaders sustain prolonged eye contact when providing instruction; thus, illustrating how non-verbal communication affects followers' perceptions, performance, and sense of immediacy.

As shown above, the leader's body is often pinpointed as the site of leadership expectations and performance. Under this lens, leadership is much more than mental mastery (Sinclair, 2005) comprising physical bodies and their statures, shapes, voices, performances, and non-verbal gestures. However, as Sinclair (2005, 2011) observes, bodies are additionally secluded by pre-existing social structures, norms, and bodily regimes around race and gender. Leadership is often embodied in the figure of the heroic, white, male, and Western body (Liu and Baker, 2016), a body rendered curiously disembodied; and yet, whilst the male body is made invisible and larger than life, the female body is exposed to the gaze of judgement and scrutiny (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011; Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Sinclair, 2011). For instance, whereas the attractive male body is considered an appealing leadership trait (Sinclair, 2011), the female body and its sexual attractiveness have to be oppressed to render a professional businesswoman-like appearance (Kelan, 2012). Consequently, bodies elicit a series of

gender biases that imprison the female body to conform to social roles, norms, and regulations (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011; Sinclair, 2011).

The issue of gender has been studied by several scholars attempting to identify the differences between males and females in leadership positions. However, even though a growing body of research has examined the role of gender within leadership dynamics, a vast majority of research emphasises the cognitive differences, behaviours, and styles of male and female leaders and how these qualities affect or not leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes (see for example Ospina and Foldy, 2009; Powell, 2012; Trinidad and Normore, 2005) rendering leadership as a gendered but disembodied construct. Consequently, research in this field tends to compare abstract traits and stereotypes that differentiate men from women leaders, such as strong versus sensible (Johnson et al., 2008), instrumental versus expressive (Scott and Brown, 2006), competitive versus cooperative (Spisak et al., 2012), and autocratic versus democratic (Eagly and Johnson, 1990); thus, reproducing misleading gender labels and stereotypes that perpetuate inequalities as well as gender-specific female roles such as taking care of family and raising children (Due Billing and Alvesson, 2000). The problem with these distinctions, however, is that individuals tend to ignore and devalue women's leadership potential and competencies despite showing no fewer abilities and effective results than their male counterparts (Eagly, Makhijani and Klonsky, 1992; Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011; Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2008; Powell, 2012), for effective leadership seems embodied in abstract but masculine traits (Rigg and Sparrow, 1994). Fewer studies, however, have undertaken a more 'embodied' approach to examining gendered and racialised bodies and the leadership expectations ascribed to such bodies (e.g. Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Muhr and Sullivan, 2013; Sinclair, 2005).

In studying two leaders in the Australian context, Sinclair (2005) argues that leadership is a physical, visceral, and sensuous performance, a bodily practice circumscribed within wider and highly regulated regimes around gender and race. As she observes, leadership conveys bodywork and bodily performances underpinned by wider regimes in which performances can be either punished or rewarded, pushing leaders to adjust and regulate their bodies and bodily practices. Other as Muhr and Sullivan (2013) argue that leaders' gendered bodies and appearances are used as landmarks with which employees make sense of leadership practices and identities. In studying a transgender leader named Claire, the authors explore how leadership is often underpinned by dualist gender-based assumptions, a heterosexual matrix that when challenged produces confusion regarding what means to be a male or female leader. Interestingly, followers read Claire's leadership competencies when she was John as something natural; yet,

those competencies were seen as unnatural when it was Claire who performed them. Consequently, gender appearance regulates leadership identities and expectations, bodies that when read, encountered, and interpreted shape leader/follower dynamics. As the authors observe, transgressive bodies, such as Claire's, challenge heteronormative leadership gendered stereotypes (Muhr and Sullivan, 2013).

Similarly, Mavin and Grandy (2016) explore how female bodies are often scrutinised by other women at work. Articulating the notion of 'abject appearance', a concept to explain "women's efforts to navigate tensions associated with a *fascination* with their *own* and *other* women's bodies and appearances" (Mavin and Grandy, 2016, p.1113), the authors suggest that elite women leaders often navigate masculine regimes in which they have to self-regulate the body to match the 'appropriate' appearance to embody leadership focusing, for instance, on how to look competent, intelligent, and professional whilst less slutty, mother-like, child-like and so on, perpetuating the domination of male leadership stereotypes (Due Billing and Alvesson, 2000).

To conclude, this research territory seems to perpetuate and reproduce a number of rarely questioned assumptions regarding the nature of leadership. First, an overwhelming amount of research tends to adopt performative, functional, and positivistic accounts reducing the leadership phenomenon to sterile labels and correlations revealing at the same time mixed and inconclusive findings that aim to explain how physical bodies convey effective leadership. Thus, scholars have attempted to understand whether leaders' perceived attractiveness (DeGroot et al., 2011; Geys, 2014; Ling, Luo and She, 2019), body and facial complexion (Blaker et al., 2013; Elgar, 2016; Henderson et al., 2022; King et al., 2016; Little, 2014), body performance (Maran et al., 2019; Talley and Temple, 2015; Trichas et al., 2017), and gender (Mavin and Grandy, 2016; Muhr and Sullivan, 2013; Sinclair, 2005) have effects upon perceived leadership traits, abilities, competences, and performance as *attributed* by followers and subordinates. Attribution, as Tetlock and Levi (1982, p.68) describe, "deals with the processes that underlie the attempts of ordinary people to explain and draw inferences from behavior". Thus, numerous studies rely on followers' attribution processes to explain what kind of bodily traits or performances make an individual more 'leader-like'. The problem, however, is that followers encapsulate the leader's body within cognitive schemas; thus, disembodiment of the body, rendering the material aspects of leadership curiously immaterial.

Second, scholars such as Landridge and Butt (2004) contend that the problem with attribution is that individuals tend to attribute acontextual dispositional qualities to explain

and make sense, for instance, of a certain leader-like behaviour underestimating how behaviour is affected by the environment (Ross, 1977). Moreover, when individuals perceive certain traits or behaviours as positive or desirable, such as leadership, they will tend to exaggerate and encapsulate the perceived individual as a special case (Hewstone, 1990) perpetuating the assumption that leaders are somewhat unique individuals (e.g. Sinek, 2014). In addition, as Heider (1958) illustrates, the attribution of ability is also irrationally spread across other areas. If a manager, for instance, shows ability in one field, it will be expected that she or he is also able in another field. The same process operates in the opposite case. This attribution bias is illustrated in Henderson et al.'s (2022) study on supervisors' weight and its effect on perceived leadership competence. Therefore, research examining bodily traits and performances from the perspective of followers' perception, build theory around abstract, distorted, and often inconsistent processes of attribution in which followers tend to assume that by attractiveness, physical stature, weight, and further bodily attributes and performances individuals are likely to be better leaders or show more leader-like prototypical traits.

Third, scholars examining bodily characteristics assume leader-centric perspectives embodying leadership in the figure of a heroized CEO, manager, or supervisor. Even though these studies consider the presence and perceptions of followers, it is rarely questioned that a person, usually a man holding a management position in the upper echelons is, by definition, a leader. This assumption renders followers as passive recipients of leader influence and not as active actors in the construction of leadership dynamics: a one-way relationship (Meindl, 1995). These studies, therefore, tend to perpetuate the romantic notion of leadership as something embodied in the figure of the leader/manager (Ropo and Salovaara, 2019) and her/his necessary physical presence (Ford et al., 2017; Ropo and Parviainen, 2001) prescribing recipes on how to manage and use the body to convey effective leadership (Sinclair, 2011). Research in this field assumes that leadership can be explained by biological or physiological antecedents or appearances that elevate the heroic figure of the leader 'doing' leadership or 'emanating' leader-like bodily features. However, the state of the art in this field remains highly superficial (Knights, 2018b; Ladkin and Taylor, 2014).

3.2.2 *Heroic and posthuman: Leaders mastering the material*

Another expression of managers as the embodiment of leadership has emerged from studies exploring not only their physio-biological appearance or the perceived attractiveness, competencies, and abilities of gendered bodies at work, but how leaders additionally mobilise, master, employ, and entangle with nonhuman objects to accomplish their leadership functions or build leadership presence (cf. Arvedsen and

Hassert, 2020; Ford et al., 2017; Khalid, Bibi and Akhtar, 2020; Mailhot et al., 2016; Maran et al., 2021; Wellton, Jonsson and Svingstedt, 2019). This body of research assumes, therefore, that objects act as 'reflectors' of leadership (Hawkins, 2015) portraying the heroic figure of the leader as the master of materiality, the one who can use and mobilise artefacts at will to conduct leadership functions and develop leadership meaning (e.g. Arvedsen and Hassert, 2020).

Ford et al. (2017), for instance, hold the view that individuals work on the physical body to present themselves as leaders in front of others. As the authors suggest, the leader must pay attention to what clothes to wear and how these clothes convey a certain leadership appearance to influence followers. Consequently, Ford et al. (2017) observe that leadership is about building 'material presence' through constitutive entanglements (Barad, 2007) between the body and further objects including suits, makeup, and mirrors, entanglements that articulate leadership presence and appearance. In a similar vein, Maran et al. (2021) argue that a leader's selection of certain attires, such as formal versus informal dress codes, affects how followers perceive the leader's charisma and approval. Findings suggest that formal clothing increases the prototypical perceptions surrounding leaders. On the other hand, the authors suggest that how followers shape their perceptions around leaders, their clothing styles, and charisma, are influenced by the organisational culture as well as by deviant and non-conformist clothing selections. Thus, when leaders dress informally in highly hierarchical, formal, and structured organisational cultures or dress formally in dynamic, flexible, and less structured ones, their charisma and approval rates increase as they stand out from the crowd and deviate from the organisational context. Consequently, the authors suggest that leaders can manipulate their clothing style and thus convey a more charismatic leadership presence.

Others as Wellton, Jonsson and Svingstedt (2019) suggest that leadership is accomplished through practice during everyday activities to conduct work efficiently and effectively including three interrelated practices: (1) mastering the material, (2) showing and guiding, and (3) foreseeing. In exploring leadership in the hospitality industry, the authors observe that it is essential for chef leaders to master the materiality of work developing their physical and technical skills in handling objects such as knives, machines, dishes, and so on, artefacts that contribute to their daily work, for "knowledge and experience of the materiality are entwined with the leadership role" (Wellton, Jonsson and Svingstedt, 2019, p.419). Similarly, Arvedsen and Hassert (2020) argue that leadership involves the creation of commitment, alignment, and direction, activities accomplished by humans mobilising discursive and technological resources at work. From this perspective, the authors suggest that leadership unfolds when humans make

use of technologies to discuss work issues. These technologies help to create intersubjective understanding between the team members contributing to set directions to accomplish the work tasks. Under this lens, ICT objects are under the control and supervision of humans serving as coordination devices that help to align dialogue and decisions around work. However, even though Arvedsen and Hassert (2020) hold the view that leadership is more of a relational and collective achievement, they explicitly point out that objects do not have agency arguing instead that materiality is open for interpretation, subjugating matter to the meaning assigned by humans. Moreover, Mailhot et al. (2016) suggest that material artefacts can either facilitate or constraint coordinated action proposing four key leadership moments: (1) leaders mobilise objects to get the project done; (2) the negotiation of the object's meaning amongst multiple human leaders and actors; (3) objects begin to perform in-situ; and (4) the leader adapts his or her role as dictated by the object. Thus, as the authors argue, leaders can mobilise objects and promote the negotiation of the meaning of those objects, materialities that in turn, either hinder or contribute to the project development and the leader's action.

Finally, Khalid, Bibi and Akhtar (2020) suggest that leaders are bestowed with the task of developing and maintaining the organisational culture and its artefacts, including tools and machines, corporate logo, dress code, employees, and norms. Khalid and colleagues argue that from the leaders' perspective, artefacts such as furniture and office equipment convey a sense of professionalism and efficiency in organisations; however, those objects do not always contribute to building the organisational culture. However, the corporate logo, a highly visible and rather intangible body, carries out a series of values reinforced by the use of corporate clothes and norms, aspects that leaders found fundamental to project a professional image. Consequently, as Khalid, Bibi and Akhtar (2020) observe, leaders have to manage and mobilise artefacts to maintain the corporate culture, increase performance, and build the corporate reputation.

Overall, even though this research territory acknowledges materiality, including, for instance, how leaders materialise their presence and charisma through clothing and appearances (Ford et al., 2017; Maran et al., 2021), how they achieve mastery over their tools and artefacts (Wellton, Jonsson and Svingstedt, 2019), or how they mobilise objects to convey meaning and intersubjective understanding (Arvedsen and Hassert, 2020; Mailhot et al., 2016; Khalid, Bibi and Akhtar, 2020), these studies tend to perpetuate the idea of the 'leader' or the 'human' as the master of the material, the one who subjugates objects and use them at will, portraying a rather passive side of materiality. However, as Hawkins (2015, p.953) observes,

by viewing objects as the tools of leaders or as the passive 'reflectors' of leadership values, we risk assuming that leaders are able to fully master both the objects themselves, and the way in which followers interpret the ideas and values that the objects are intended to represent".

Consequently, these multiple strands of research perpetuate the assumption that not only the physio-biological body of leaders are the site of leadership, but their clothes, accessories, tools, and abilities in mobilising and handling nonhuman bodies, articulating and embodying leadership in the ubiquitous figure of the heroized leader.

3.2.3 *Post-heroic and human-centric: Leadership in-between leaders and followers*

Even though the above approaches have contributed to a better understanding of the role of human bodies and objects to accomplish leadership, a small group of studies have begun to question the assumption of leadership as something embodied only in the figure of the heroic leader. Thus, scholars growing disaffected with these assumptions argue that the leadership process is less about leaders (namely CEOs, managers, and supervisors) doing 'leadership' and more of relational and sensuous bodily relations happening in-between leaders and followers (Küpers, 2013; cf. Bathurst and Cain, 2013; Fisher and Robbins, 2015; Hansen, Ropo and Sauer, 2007; Koivunen and Wennes, 2011; Küpers, 2011; Biehl, 2019; Ladkin, 2006, 2008, 2013; Ropo, De Paoli and Bathurst, 2017; Ropo and Sauer, 2008a). Largely inspired by the theoretical tenets of organisational aesthetics (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000; Strati, 1999) and phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), the main assumption that underpins this research territory is that leaders and followers co-construct leadership through the 'living body' (Küpers, 2013; Ropo, Parviainen and Koivunen, 2002) and its sense-based perceptions (Ropo, De Paoli and Bathurst, 2017). Consequently, these studies argue that leadership studies should focus on felt experiences of leading and following (Ropo, Parviainen and Koivunen, 2002). Under this lens, leadership is about relational and leaderful inter-practices between the leader and the led (Fisher and Robbins, 2015).

Multiple studies in this research area have examined relationships and interactions between leaders and followers including, for instance, bodily performances between conductors and musicians in symphony orchestras (Koivunen and Wennes, 2011; Ladkin, 2008), DJs and dancers in clubs (Biehl, 2019), managers and employees at work (Ladkin, 2013), as well as commanding officers and platoon soldiers in the army (Fisher and Robbins, 2015) and how these bodily performances are experienced, felt, and perceived by followers and leaders alike (e.g. Biehl, 2019; Ladkin, 2008). For instance, in studying the relationships between DJs and dancers, Biehl (2019) holds the view that

leadership emerges as the in-between space that connects the DJ/leader and the dancer/follower. As the author suggests, bodies relate to each other through physical proximity, bodily movement, mutual challenging, and continuous adjustment; thus, co-creating dynamic leadership situations through bodily movement and presence. As she suggests, DJs aim to expand and enhance bodily presence by seeking closeness to the dancers enacting bodily gestures to connect with them, aiming to become part of the whole, and constantly assessing the dance situations as these unfold gazing and following the crowd's bodily expressions and postures. The DJ/leader, therefore, employs its sensing body to 'read the room'. Under this lens, leadership emerges as a relational process of becoming happening in-between bodies that co-create the leadership situation moment-by-moment (Bathurst and Cain, 2013).

Others as Koivunen and Wennes (2011) and Ladkin (2008) have explored the embodied and aesthetic experiences of leading and following in symphony orchestras. These studies understand leadership as a relational phenomenon between the symphony conductor, the musicians, and its inter-practices (Küpers, 2013). Koivunen and Wennes (2011), for instance, propose three aesthetic qualities leader/conductors enact namely relational listening, aesthetic judgement, and kinaesthetic empathy. The authors suggest that conductors need to listen to the music emanating from the orchestra, requiring to be consciously *present* in the moment; thus, listening emerges as a relational activity between the conductors, the musicians, and the sound as they adapt themselves to grasp the conductor's idea and interpretation of the musical piece. Moreover, the conductor needs highly tuned ears and expertise to interpret the full music composition and use his (conductors are often male) aesthetic judgement to find the right balance, rhythm, and tone between the instrument sections. This is a relational process in which the conductor evaluates the sound, reacts to it, and directs the musician to find the correct interpretation. Koivunen and Wennes (2011) also suggest that through bodily performances, the leader/conductor communicates what he deems to be the correct interpretation of the musical piece using the body to convey gestures, facial expressions, and movement to direct the musicians, a form of 'show how' that is in turn imitated by the orchestra. Thus, both leaders and followers engage in kinaesthetic empathy when coordinating their movements to find the right musical interpretation as envisaged by the conductor.

On the other hand, Ladkin (2008) suggest that leading consists, in part, of an embodied and relational activity enacted by leaders proposing what she terms 'leading beautifully', an ethically oriented approach that aspire toward human flourishing. Illustrating an account of the musician/conductor Bobby McFerrin and his live performance conducting

the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Ladkin depicts how McFerrin was able to lead the musicians and the audience without emitting words; but instead, through gestures, vocal inflexions, and body movements. Consequently, leading beautifully requires the leader to have mastery over the discipline (Ladkin, 2008; Ropo, Parviainen and Koivunen, 2002; Ropo, De Paoli and Bathurst, 2017; Wellton, Jonsson and Svingstedt, 2019) understanding the here-and-now (Biehl, 2019), knowing 'how much' to enact movements or gestures. Moreover, leaders' performance requires coherence and authenticity between what they say, do, and the purpose they aim to fulfil, a purpose that, as Ladkin (2008) contends, should in turn have an ethical end.

Finally, others as Bathurst and Cain (2013) hold the view that leadership consists of multiple relationships between bodies and their gesturing performances as these unfold moment-by-moment. The authors propose that leadership is a process that emerges in communities "as gestural acts that invite bodies to be in relationship and conversation together in order for music and leadership to be realised in practice" (Bathurst and Cain, 2013, p.359). Examining a classical performance between a classical trio, they suggest that 'gesturing' co-creates temporarily bounded spaces for action and practice. Under this lens, leadership involves a relational process between individuals including bodily performances and sense-based perceptions. As Ladkin (2006) argues, the aesthetic dimension of leadership resides therefore between the perceiving individuals and the object of perception, that is, in-between leaders and followers alike, who co-construct the felt and embodied leadership experience.

As I have shown, this research territory aims to conceptualise leadership as a process unfolding between leaders and followers including as an object of analysis how leaders use their bodies, enact gestures, build presence, and how followers perceive these bodily performances through their senses. These bodily perceptions, as Ladkin (2013) contends, reveal the felt sense of *leading* as well as the felt sense of *being led*, a continuous negotiation between human bodies and their inter-practices (Biehl, 2019; Küpers, 2013; Ropo and Sauer, 2008b). However, to my view, one of the main problems with this body of literature is that scholars still perpetuate the notion of leadership as a process that includes the necessary and seemingly ubiquitous figure of the leader 'doing leadership' in situ, a distinction that still sets into motion a heroic-centric rhetoric that upholds binary and deterministic roles of leading and being led, taking for granted that leadership is about how leaders and their bodily performances are felt, judged, and attributed by followers (Hansen, Ropo and Sauer, 2007; Ladkin, 2013).

Moreover, research in this area tends to emphasise the *presence* of human bodies, often ignoring how absent presences may play an active role in the leadership process. Consequently, it is often argued that the leader by virtue of her or his presence, proximity, and in-situ bodily performance, plays a key role in the leadership construction process (Biehl, 2019; Ropo and Sauer, 2008a). Similarly, these studies tend to highlight and imbue the leadership notion with a sense of ethical purpose (Ladkin, 2008), harmony and balance (Koivunen and Wennes, 2011), as well as trust and courage (Fisher and Robbins, 2015) perpetuating the assumption of leadership as an essentially positive process (Blom and Alvesson, 2015; Collinson, 2012). Finally, even though a vast majority of these studies understand leadership as a relational but dyadic process between leaders and followers (Ropo, De Paoli and Bathurst, 2017), there is a strong focus on human-human instead of human-material relations (Salovaara and Ropo, 2018); thus, portraying leadership as a “corporeal relationship taking place between *people*” (Ropo and Sauer, 2008a, p.470, italics added for emphasis), a subject-subject encounter that takes for granted the affective presence/absence of further ‘leadership-making’ bodies and materialities (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014).

3.2.4 *Post-heroic and posthuman: Humans and nonhumans co-producing leadership*

A small but growing body of research has begun to acknowledge the role that nonhuman bodies play in co-producing and co-enacting leadership. The main argument behind this research territory is that human-human relations between leaders and followers, as well as individual traits and behaviours of heroized leaders, are not sufficient to explain leadership phenomena (Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013). As Sergi (2016) argues, rather than asking ourselves *who* is the individual or human collective leading organisations, we should investigate instead *what* leadership is made of taking into account the presence and doings of humans and nonhumans alike, and what effects they produce when encountering each other. Therefore, as Oborn et al. (2013, p.256, italics added for emphasis) illustrate, “materialities are not passive mediators or neutral channels for leadership but are *consequential*”. Under this lens, leadership does not belong to human beings but rather emerges and unfolds as the product of hybrid relations and encounters between human and nonhuman bodies at work. This corpus of literature conceptualises leadership as emergent, collective, distributed, processual, and mundane (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010; Wood, 2005).

These studies include, for instance, how documents (Sergi, 2016), software (Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021), places and spaces (Ropo and Salovaara, 2019), objects and abstract concepts (Mailhot et al., 2016), protocols (Vuojärvi and Korva, 2020), dreams

and deceased bodies (Clifton and Mueni, 2021), ships (Hawkins, 2015), historical institutions and structures (Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013) lead. For instance, Sergi (2016) highlights the co-productive role of nonhuman actors in the context of a software development project illustrating how 'Document 7', a file distributed amongst the project's team members, provided indications on modifications, limitations, constraints, and how to approach the work under development; thus, directing employees' work. This document played an active role in linking the human members of the team stimulating collective and organised action. Therefore, socio-material assemblages, as Sergi (2016) contends, produce leadership effects *directing*, *shaping* and *ordering* action, revealing the agentic capacities of matter and how objects and artefacts can make and induce humans to act in certain ways co-producing direction at work.

Others as Hawkins (2015) argue that nonhuman bodies hold an active role in mobilising, creating and undoing leadership meanings. Inspired by the concept of affordances, the "bundles of characteristics associated with material things, which emerge from the relationship of an object with other actants in a network" (Hawkins, 2015, p.952), she holds the view that matter has the potential to make a difference when engaging in relationships and practices with other bodies. In the context of the UK navy, Hawkins argues that the 'ship' plays an active role in deploying a network of relations, co-enacting shared routines, ceremonies, seafaring culture, power relations, gendered assumptions, as well as bringing into being leader/follower identities based on hybrid relations between the bundles of bodies embedded to the vessel. Thus, the ship materialises hierarchies, activities, and routines revealing a "constellation of hybridized relationships within which leadership is accomplished, and within which sense is made as to what constitutes leadership and what does not" (Hawkins, 2015, p.960).

In a similar vein, in the context of health policy formulation, Oborn, Barrett and Dawson (2013) hold the view that not only humans, objects, and artefacts perform leadership, but also wider historical and institutional structures of medical work, disciplinary boundaries, protocols, technologies, and norms. As the authors suggest, the entanglements between wider structures and other manifold actors involved in the policy formulation process (such as datasets, PowerPoint Slides, websites, reports, expert authorities, polls, patients, and managers), collectively perform leadership, enabling trustful and legitimate relations amongst policy formulators. In this way, leadership gets disparately distributed across bodies and practices.

Others as Clifton and Mueni (2021) have examined how the notion of transformational leadership is materially constructed and elicited by undertaking a followership approach.

The authors suggest that material bodies influence individuals inducing them to 'follow' transformational leaders. In this respect, Clifton and Mueni (2021) conceptualise materiality as 'things that matter', as the capacity of bodies to animate and drive actions that inspire followers. Based on a well-known Kenyan female and leading environmental activist, the study suggests that not only physical and present bodies lead followers, but also abstract and absent presences. For instance, a follower narrates a dream she had about the leader and how that experience led her to become an environmentalist. Moreover, as the leader had died a couple of years ago, the follower felt equally inspired by this 'spectral presence', an absent body that led her to entangle with books and biographies, as well to start an environmental club. The spectral presence "supplants the presence of a living human with the figure of the ghost which is neither dead, nor alive, but which nevertheless has an impact on the present" (Clifton and Mueni, 2021, p.394). Even though this study still locates leadership as something that happens between leader-follower dyads, it also reveals that not only present bodies can serve as a source of leadership; thus, leadership is seen as something that can be performed by the living and the dead alike, a ghostly matter, an invisible and yet affective force that moves bodies (Pors, 2021). The notion of presence/absence has been also developed by scholars such as Fairhurst and Coreen (2009) who argue that absence can produce effects within human-nonhuman networks; thus, bodily absences materialise themselves as spectral presences that *tele-act* and co-lead from distance.

Another sub-strand of research around the materiality of leadership has also examined the active and performative role of places and spaces to co-produce leadership practices and actions (e.g. Greenlees, 2015; Pöyhönen, 2018; Ropo, Parviainen and Koivunen, 2002; Ropo, Sauer and Salovaara, 2013; Ropo and Salovaara, 2019; Salovaara and Ropo, 2018). As Ropo, Sauer and Salovaara (2013) argue, "[m]aterial places are powerful in leading people, and spaces and places can thus function as substitutes of individual leaders". This approach to leadership, however, does not conceptualise places as brute containers, rather, leading spaces are seen as an effect of embodied experiences that shape and perform actions and directions. For instance, inspired by the theoretical tenets of Lefebvre's (1991) space trialectics (conceived, perceived and lived) and organisational aesthetics (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000), Ropo and Salovaara (2019) hold the view that employees are led by their sensuous and embodied experiences of physical places proposing three aesthetical embodied categories: (1) senses, (2) feelings, and (3) memories. As the authors suggest, places lead through sense-based experiences that instil atmospheres imbued with emotions and feelings invoking, for instance, fear, insecurity, or safety. Moreover, places also recall previous experiences,

gut knowledge, as well as memories and histories that shape action and practice; thus, mobilising a series of abstract and yet affective bodies.

In a similar vein, Pöyhönen (2018) proposes a socio-material approach to leadership in places and spaces exploring how the entanglement of employees with 'dominant spaces', where formal and rigid cultures are embodied (such as offices and boardrooms), and 'liminal spaces', where organisational rules are temporarily suspended (such as corridors, elevators and bathrooms), produce either hierarchical or plural forms of leadership. As Turner (1969, p.95) defines, liminality represents entities that "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial". It is in these liminal spaces, as Pöyhönen (2018) contends, where the experience of *communitas* emerges, relationships between individuals that are not segmented into deterministic roles (Turner, 1969) such as manager-subordinate. Thus, *communitas* "defines whether everyday socio-material practices construct plural or hierarchical forms of leadership" (Pöyhönen, 2018, p.586) in which the absence or presence of *communitas* build leadership modalities either reinforcing organisational structures within dominant spaces or building democratic relations within liminal spaces where employees are seen as equal members.

Others as Greenlees (2015) argue that the symbolic and social dimensions of the space and the multiple artefacts that inhabit organisations have the capacity to influence what employees do and how they behave at work. Using a bookstore as an empirical setting, the author argues that spaces lead through hidden and non-verbal clues that transmit organisational values, rules, hierarchies, routines, practices, and structures including, for instance, offices, spatial arrangements, trophies and diplomas, uniforms, surveillance cameras, and desks. Under this lens, the entanglement of humans, artefacts, and places reproduce power relations and hierarchies (Hawkins, 2015; Pöyhönen, 2018; Zhang and Spicer, 2014). Consequently, places are seen as an active force able to carry, transport, and mobilise emotions, memories, experiences, and symbols, building emergent and always-in-flux relations that in turn produce material effects and the enactment of multiple practices, actions, and directions (Ropo and Höykinpuro, 2017).

Finally, a promising but often overlooked area to explore human-nonhuman relations is found within the 'affective leadership' literature (cf. Knights, 2018a, 2018b; Munro and Thanem, 2020, 2018). Affect refers to bodily capacities and fluctuations of power immanent to human and nonhuman bodies (Deleuze, 1988; Spinoza, 1996), a capacity to affect and to be affected. According to Spinoza (1996), affect refers therefore to how the body's capacity to act is either increased or diminished within joyful and sad

encounters. Under this lens, affect is “an intensive *force* that all bodies (whether human or nonhuman) exert upon each other” (Ott, 2017, p.3). Thus, as Munro and Thanem (2018) suggest, rather than being led by individuals and organisational hierarchies, organisations are instead led by currents of affect that increase or decrease the organisational capacities to act. Thus, the affective lens conceptualises leadership as an emergent *property of relations* rather than inherent characteristics and behaviours belonging to human individuals (Knights, 2018a).

Even though this research territory remains very limited, scholars such as Munro and Thanem (2020, 2018) have explored the relationships between ethical leadership and affect articulating the notion of ‘affective leadership’, a leaderless phenomenon that aims to increase the organisation’s collective powers and capacities for action. This approach to ethical leadership pursues nurturing a truthful and freeing sense of well-being and collective care cultivating joyful affects and organising ‘good encounters’ to foster relations that “pursue the good life through joyful affects and encounters that enhance our capacity to act and be acted upon” (Munro and Thanem, 2018, p.52). This view has been shared by Knights (2018a, 2018b), who argues that an affective approach to leadership can help organisations to become more ethical raising employees’ commitment and collective action.

The problem with the above perspectives; however, is that these studies tend to reproduce the widely unquestioned and positive assumptions around leadership (Blom and Alvesson, 2015; Collinson, 2012) arguing that ‘affective leadership’ is about building ‘good encounters’ and joyful affects (Knights, 2018b; Munro and Thanem, 2020, 2018) ignoring, for instance, that bodies can also lead by decreasing and constraining the collective power of action, causing rupture, conflict, and tension, limiting what people can or cannot do at work (e.g. Mailhot et al., 2016). Moreover, even though these studies have begun to consider bodily affects, scholars such as Munro and Thanem (2018, 2020) still privilege a human-centric approach. However, most studies in this area remain theoretical providing little empirical support and evidence. These limitations open up opportunities to further explore the questions of what kinds of affective flows humans and nonhumans produce when encountering each other, and what directions and possibilities these encounters produce at work taking into account not only ‘good’ or ‘joyful’ encounters, as Munro and Thanem (2018) suggest, but the effects and consequences produced by joy and sad affects alike.

To sum up, the corpus of literature within this research territory moves beyond the sole focus on human agencies acknowledging the active and productive capacities of

nonhuman materialities in making humans do ‘things’ and how these bodies play an active role in co-leading organisations (Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021; Sergi, 2016). Overall, these studies often emphasise the *present presence* of bodies and their doings (Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009; Hawkins, 2015). As Clifton, Fachin and Cooren (2021) explain, the materiality of leadership is a ventriloquial effect in which the human ventriloquist animates the nonhuman dummy and vice versa. As the authors suggest, the nonhuman world speaks to us not by using words but by making us do and say things in return. Thus, by “*having a say* in a given discussion, artefacts can make a difference to the way a discussion evolves, for instance by *leading* the participants to adopt specific courses of action” (Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021, p.270). These capacities, however, do not emanate from the inherent properties of bodies but are immanent to the relational encounters between them (Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013), to its affects and flows (Munro and Thanem, 2018), understanding leadership as a more mundane, emergent, and relational process rather than a distinct realm of individual actions, properties, or behaviours (Hawkins, 2015; Mailhot et al., 2016; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013; Pöyhönen, 2018; Ropo and Salovaara, 2019; Sergi, 2016; Vuojärvi and Korva, 2020).

However, even though these studies provide a wide variety of explanations and theories that make bodies visible and affective, some questions remain to be answered. For instance, if leadership does not represent anything different than daily and mundane management activities and bodily encounters and practices, what makes leadership distinct? Moreover, if socio-material assemblages and manifold bodies co-produce leadership, what are the affective qualities of leaderful material encounters in the workplace? Finally, if these socio-material assemblages have the capacity to direct, shape, or organise work, how do human-material relations enact such effects? Although the literature often provides fruitful insights on how bodies co-produce leadership, it falls short in explaining the very nature of those bodily performances, flows of affect, and encounters in the context of creativity and play in work organisations.

3.3 Section summary

In this section, I have shown the multiple strands of research that scholars have undertaken to study the corporeal, embodied, and physical aspects of leadership. In doing so, I have identified four interrelated research fields. In exploring these research orientations, I have shown that a vast majority of research reproduces and perpetuates performative, heroic, and anthropocentric assumptions that commonly surround the leadership rhetoric.

To sum up, the first research area, *leaders as the embodiment of leadership*, tends to portray how managers convey a sense of effective leadership through their bodily traits and performances positioning leadership as a personal competency embodied in the romantic figure of the leader. The second research area, *leaders mastering the material*, extends the romantic notion of leadership by arguing that effective leaders can use, manipulate, and mobilise materiality to enact better leadership or convey a more persuasive leadership presence. Under this lens, materiality is conceptualised as a rather passive presence waiting to be animated by the leader's actions and practices. The third research area, *leadership in-between leaders and followers*, adopts a post-heroic approach depicting leadership as a process that unfolds in-between leader-follower relations. However, this research area assumes that leadership is the product of human-human relations largely neglecting more-than-human materialities. Finally, the fourth research area, *humans and nonhumans co-producing leadership*, represents a small fraction of studies that acknowledge the doings of matter co-producing leadership at work. These studies render materiality as an active rather than a passive component. Moreover, in this research area I have illustrated the embryonic state in the field of leadership and affect depicting that, to date, research in this sub-field has adopted a human-centric approach and positive bias installing the notion of 'affective leadership' as a process concerned with nurturing positive or joyful affects; thus, falling short in explaining how human-material encounters produce intended and unintended directions at work.

4 New materialisms and affect theory

4.1 A posthuman and post-heroic approach to leadership

As I have shown throughout this review, the literature on the materiality of leadership represents a heterogeneous body of theories and approaches. In this thesis, I follow the assumption that leadership is something less heroic, less magical; and moreover, less human as it has been commonly characterised. Rather than locating leadership *within* heroic and disembodied individuals at the top of the organisational pyramid, *around* multiple and temporal leaders or heroic collectives dispersed across the organisation, or as something happening exclusively between *leader-follower* dyads, I argue that leadership is more mundane, local, emergent, and material (cf. Crevani, 2018; Hawkins, 2015; Mailhot et al., 2016; Munro and Thanem, 2018; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013; Pöyhönen, 2018; Ropo and Salovaara, 2019; Sergi, 2016; Vuojärvi and Korva, 2020; Wood and Ladkin, 2008). Therefore, I see leadership as "a continuous coming into being" (Wood and Ladkin, 2008, p.15), what I may call in Deleuzean-inspired terminology,

becoming-leadership: a passage that is never complete, never static, always in-the-making, a never-ending flux (Deleuze, 1998; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Whitehead, 1978), an ongoing production (Lundborg, 2009) or cascade of unfolding events encompassing relational networks or assemblages (Fox and Alldred, 2017). Under this lens, I follow Crevani's (2018) conceptualisation of leadership as the processual production of *direction*, as a day-to-day and mundane process (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a; Holmberg and Tyrstrup, 2010; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010) or "a series of interactions and relationships with unintended consequences" (Hawkins, 2015, p.953).

Taking into account the above, instead of focusing on individual leaders, their attributes, behaviours, traits, relationships, and how they *influence* creativity, for instance, through *play*; I focus my attention on the encounters of human and nonhuman bodies and the affective flows that emerge in such encounters; thus, revealing invisible relations unfolding in-between human-material encounters (Biehl, 2019; Knights, 2018a). Consequently, aiming to navigate a relatively unexplored territory within leadership studies and contribute to developing a *posthuman* leadership theorisation, in this research I explore my enquiries inspired by the tenets of new materialist theories (e.g. Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; DeLanda, 2006; Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012; Fox and Alldred, 2017; Latour, 2005) undertaking a Deleuzo-Spinozean approach to affect (e.g. Deleuze, 1978; Spinoza, 1996) acknowledging the contribution of hybrid materialities to leadership processes and practices.

4.2 What bodies can do?

Largely predicated upon the Cartesian mind/body dualism, organisation studies often ignore the materiality of leading and organising revealing the peculiar absence of sentient and non-sentient bodies at work (Hassard, Holliday and Willmott, 2000; Orlikowski, 2007, 2009; Bell and Vachhani, 2020). To address these shortcomings, scholars have begun to explore the materiality of organisations by examining, for instance, the emergent relationships between humans and animals (Knight and Sang, 2020), clothing and leaders (Ford et al., 2017), places and spaces (Ropo and Salovaara, 2019), and communication technologies (Arvedsen and Hassert, 2020), to name some but a few fields of enquiry. However, within management studies, the influence of new materialism theories has remained limited and rather under-explored (Allen, 2019; Bell and Vachhani, 2020). Consequently, even though research has produced numerous and valuable insights, findings have been "limited in large part because the field has

traditionally overlooked how organizing is bound up with the material forms and spaces through which humans act and interact” (Orlikowski, 2007, p.1435).

New materialism has been described as an umbrella term that conveys a myriad of theoretical developments that problematise and question anthropocentric assumptions ingrained in most humanist research (Connolly, 2013; Ferrando, 2013; Gamble, Hanan and Nail, 2019) such as heroic-centric leadership theories that privilege sets of predetermined and deterministic qualities, traits, and behaviours of individual leaders (e.g. Judge, Piccolo and Kosalka, 2009) or dyadic relationships happening exclusively between human leaders and followers (e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2006); thus, constraining the notion of leadership within *human-human* interactions (Salovaara and Ropo, 2018). New materialisms circumscribe a heterogeneous body of theoretical developments including, for instance, actor-network theory (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992), assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), affect theory (Deleuze, 1988; Massumi, 1995; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010) and vital materialism (Bennett, 2010). Thus, new materialisms are not a unified field, but an eclectic family of theoretical and philosophical perspectives that question the privilege of the ‘human’ over the ‘material’, anthropocentrism that relegates nonhuman matter to a second-class status (Monforte, 2018). Therefore, new materialisms decentre the autonomous, conscious, and intentional subject pointing towards a post-anthropocentric sensitivity (Ferrando, 2019).

The ‘turn to matter’ in organisation studies has opened new avenues to understand organisations’ material, relational, and emergent nature; therefore, processes that have been traditionally examined from disembodied and abstract perspectives have been rediscovered as material and embodied (Dale and Latham, 2015). Under this theoretical lens, materiality is understood as “excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (Coole and Frost, 2010, p.9). Hence, new materialisms understand materiality in a relational and emergent sense, as an ongoing process of materialization (Barad, 2007; Coole and Frost, 2010; Ferrando, 2013). These materialities include human bodies and non-human others, either organic, inorganic, animate or inanimate; spaces and forces such as gravity and time; as well as abstract concepts, human constructs, and by-products of the human mind such as imagination, memory and thoughts; all of which have the capacity to produce material effects (Fox and Alldred, 2017). Therefore, under the new materialist paradigm, bodies “can be anything; it can be animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity” (Deleuze, 1988, p.127), an ethology of forces (Braidotti, 2013).

The issue of what a body 'is', particularly the human one, however, has been debated in the management literature from multiple perspectives (see for instance, Styhre, 2004). The most common assumption understands the 'body-as-organism', a biological and passive container for the active mind, an organic shell that gets anatomised "into distinct constituent parts and systems, trying to understand it explicitly as a series of structures that perform definite functions" (Dale, 2001, p.9), an animate organisation of flesh, organs, nerves, and bones (Grosz, 1995). In relation to leadership studies, for instance, the body-as-organism has served as a physiological marker to determine, as illustrated in the literature review, whether height, weight, voice, hormonal composition, or facial complexion make individuals 'leader-like' or not (e.g. Lindqvist, 2012). As such, the human body is seen as a fixed and stable natural object ready for dissection. Similarly, the nonhuman body has been often understood as "the arrangement of an artefact's physical and/or digital materials into particular forms that endure across differences in place and time" (Leonardi, 2013, p.69). This view assumes the notion of matter as something inert, with a stable form, that exists prior to consciousness (Develennes and Dillet, 2018). Thus, both definitions understand 'materiality' as an arrangement of a body's physical and biological properties describing what a body *is*, as mere matter.

Human and nonhuman materialities such as those described above, however, are not asocial or ahistorical, there are 'specificities' attached to them, for bodies are circumscribed within historical, cultural, and social contexts, and as such, they can be 'known', constructed, and lived in multiple ways (Dale, 2001). Echoing Braidotti (1994, p.4), a body "is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological". Under this view, bodies are incomplete, indeterminate, "a series of uncoordinated potentialities that require social triggering" (Grosz, 1995, p.104). It is precisely when humans and nonhumans intertwine in particular ways along the flow of experience that they reveal their capacities for action, intensities, and their potential to affect and to be affected. As Leonardi (2013, p.70) describes, whilst "materiality refers to the property of the object, material agency refers to the way the object acts when humans provoke it". Such provocations are what this thesis aims to examine, the very entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies following the *figurations* they produce, that is, the processes in which hybrid agencies show observable accounts and traces of their actions and effects (Latour, 2005). In this thesis, therefore, I followed a bundle of qualitatively different bodies, their provocations, intensities, and potentialities, in the context of a UK-based, male-dominated, micro-business agency during the peak of a global pandemic. Thus, revealing the figurations and specificities of bodies in a masculine context.

Consequently, materiality needs to be studied not in terms of *what it is*, but in terms of *what it does* (Coole and Frost, 2010; Fox and Alldred, 2017). As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p.257, italics added for emphasis) describe,

we know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its *affects* are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other *affects*, with the *affects* of other bodies, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange *actions* and *passions* with it or to join in composing a more powerful body.

Within the new materialist approach, matter is therefore reformulated as something which is not inert, passive or dull, nor a fixed property of something or someone; instead, matter is understood as a *doing*, intra-active becoming, emergent, vibrant, and affective (Barad, 2003; Bennett, 2010) for all matter has the capacity to *affect* and to be *affected* (Bennett, 2010; Fox and Alldred, 2017; Massumi, 2002).

4.3 The Deleuzo-Spinozian route to affect

The turn to affect emerged during the mid-90s in the fields of humanities and social sciences (cf. Massumi, 1995; Sedgwick and Frank, 1995). However, in organisational studies, affect is just beginning to emerge (Fotaki, Kenny and Vachhani, 2017; Gherardi, 2019b; Hunter and Kivinen, 2023; Thanem and Wallenberg, 2015). As Fotaki, Kenny and Vachhani (2017, p.4) argue, “affect permeates organizations profoundly, influencing people’s motivation, their political behaviour, decision-making and relationships”; therefore, affect entails a promising opportunity to develop new theoretical approaches and insights for the study of organisations and its leadership processes (Fotaki, Kenny and Vachhani, 2017). Affect offers a theoretical lens to “understanding the ‘invisible’ as residing *in between* subject and object, mind and body, and leaders and followers” (Knights, 2018a, p.91). However, affective approaches to leadership studies remain embryonic and under-explored (Knights, 2018a; Sage, Vitry and Dainty, 2020).

Affect research in the field of organisation studies include, for instance, the exploration of technology (Sage, Vitry and Dainty, 2020), craftwork (Bell and Vachhani, 2020), creativity (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017), identity construction (Katila, Laine and Parkkari, 2019), gender (Pullen, Rhodes and Thanem, 2017), feminist movements (Baxter, 2021), music interventions (Michels and Steyaert, 2017), research methodologies (Gherardi, 2019b) and leadership (Munro and Thanem, 2018). For instance, Sage, Vitry and Dainty’s (2020) affective actor-network exploration suggests that the proliferation of technology in organisations is a socio-material process, lived encounters between

humans and nonhumans and the multiple agencies they exert. Other as Duff and Sumartojo (2017) have explored organisational creativity arguing that creativity is less about humans doing creativity and more about temporary assemblages between heterogeneous bodies and the affective capacities they produce. As they conclude, creativity unfolds as an emergent property of socio-material connections. In the field of leadership, scholars such as Munro and Thanem (2018) hold the view that rather than being led by individuals, employees are led by affective flows portraying leadership as a leaderless process that entails the cultivation of joyful affects. These studies, therefore, aim to render visible the often-invisible doings of bodies within socio-material networks at work.

Historically, affect has been examined from multiple and sometimes overlapping perspectives (Reckwitz, 2012; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010). As Thrift (2004, p.59) warns us, “[t]he problem that must be faced straight away is that there is no stable definition of affect. It can mean a lot of different things”. In this thesis, affect refers to an intensive force (Ott, 2017), a perspective inspired by Deleuze’s (1988, 1992b; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) readings on Spinoza’s (1996) philosophy of the body. In his ‘Notes on the Translation’ to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Massumi (in Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.xvi) describes affect as “an ability to affect and to be affected... a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act”. Consequently, affect is not a thing, a feeling, or a characteristic, rather, it is an effectuation of power (Deleuze, 1978). As Spinoza (1996, p.70) describes, “[b]y affect I understand affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time the ideas of these affections”. Affects are the transition between one state or condition to another (Nadler, 2006), the always-in-flux power to act and be acted upon. As Deleuze (1988, p.45) explains,

beings will be defined by their *capacity for being affected*, by the affections of which they are capable, the excitations to which they react, those by which they are unaffected, and those which exceed their capacity and make them ill or cause them to die. In this way, one will obtain a classification of beings by their power.

Taking into account the above, in a given encounter, when a body collides with another, their relations may add up forming a more powerful whole that includes the two bodies, leading to greater perfection, an increase of power; or contrarily, their relations will subtract destroying the union of its parts, leading to lesser perfection and ultimately to death, a decrease of power (Deleuze, 1988). This is what Deleuze (1988) describes as

the *composition* and *decomposition* of relations. Affects are, therefore, “passages, becomings, rises and falls, continuous variations of power [*puissance*] that pass from one state to another” (Deleuze, 1998, p.139). However, according to Deleuze (1988), we only apprehend the effects of these relations. These effects are what Spinoza (1996) conceptualises as *affectus* (affect) and *affectio* (affection), understanding the former as the continuous variation in the force of existing or power of acting, and the latter as the effects of these powers and forces (Deleuze, 1988; Nadler, 2006). An affection is the state of a body resulting from the action exerted by another body. As Deleuze (1978) argues, the *affectio* envelopes the *affectus*, the lived passage or duration from one state to another; hence, we can trace affect by the affections that bodies produce on other bodies. Thus, affect is the lived passage between bodily states, “durational processes of ‘going’ and ‘passing away’” (Pethick, 2015, p.36).

As Deleuze (1988) observes, power is exercised through the affects, a capacity that is always effectuated in the form of *actions* or *passions* (Deleuze, 1992b; Nadler, 2006; Spinoza, 1996). Spinoza (1996, p.70, italics added for emphasis) describes these effectuations as follows:

we *act* when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause... on the other hand, I say that we are *acted on* when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause.

Whereas *actions* always aim to increase a body’s power or force of existing, *passions* may either increase or decrease this power; thus, we experience *desire* and *joy* when we enter into relations of composition with other bodies, and *sorrow* when we enter into relations of decomposition that threaten the body’s existence (Deleuze, 1988; Spinoza, 1996). Desire, as Spinoza (1996) describes, is an expression of the *conatus*, a body’s strive for existence, always exercised aiming to achieve greater perfection. On the other hand, joy and sorrow are passions, passive affects through which bodies pass to greater or lesser perfection, to increased or decreased power (see Figure 11 below).

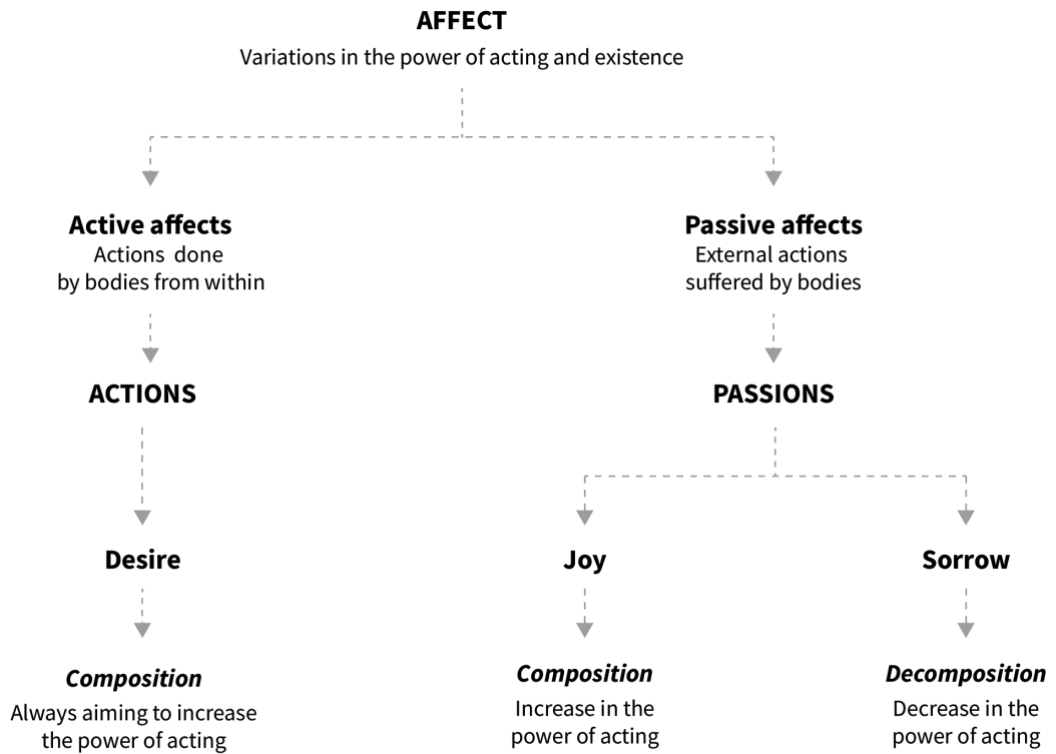


Figure 11: The anatomy of affect
 Source: Based on Deleuze (1988), Nadler (2006, p.202), and Spinoza (1996)

Considering the above, bodies can affect through actions (desire) and get affected through passions (joy and sorrow); thus, bodies can affect and be affected in multiple ways. As Deleuze (1992b, p.217) illustrates, “[a] horse, a fish, a man, or even two men compared one with the other, do not have the same capacity to be affected: they are not affected by the same things, or not affected by the same things in the same way”, these are passages that encompass compositions and decompositions, a circulation of affective flows. Under this lens, affect is therefore about *forces* and *intensities* in motion, continuous variation, lived transitions, or passages between degrees of power that bodies exercise when encountering each other (Deleuze, 1978). Tracing actions, passions, and desires –the Spinozean affects– constitute *maps of intensity* (Deleuze, 1998), the map that draws affective constellations, flows, or economies, as I further explore next.

4.4 Affective economies, assemblages, and territories

As I have shown so far, the Deleuzo-Spinozean anatomy of affect is about *relations of power* between bodies and their differential capacities to affect and to be affected, to act and be acted upon. Consequently, “[a]ffect marks a body’s *belonging* to a world of encounters” (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p.2); as such, affect does not belong to an

object or subject, rather, it circulates within economies (Ahmed, 2004). As part of an economy, affects “do not positively inhabit any-body as well as any-thing, meaning that “the subject” is simply one nodal point in the economy, rather than its origin and destination” (Ahmed, 2004, p.121). The notion of affective economies allows us to understand materiality in a broader and deeper sense, not by functions and shapes, but in terms of relations and circulations. Affects are therefore passages between bodily states (Deleuze, 1978). Affects circulate within relational encounters between bodies (Clough, 2007; Hardt, 2007; Bennett, 2010) giving “everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They are things that happen” (Stewart, 2007, p.2), material ‘nodes of becoming’ relocated within an extensive network of relations (Ferrando, 2013, p.32), networks that comprise a ‘living’ arrangement or assemblage (Buchanan, 2015).

The notion of *assemblage* (derived from the French word *agencement*) has a central stage within new materialist theories (Fox and Alldred, 2017). An assemblage does not convey a collection or aggregate of things, nor the essential state of those things, but an arrangement of heterogeneous connections, an *organisation of relations* (Buchanan, 2021). An assemblage is a multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), neither part nor whole (DeLanda, 2016) but ongoing-ness and connectivity (Kennedy et al., 2013). It is within assemblages, as Fox and Alldred (2013, p.773) contend, where “any relation or combination of relations may affect, or be affected by another element in the network... producing subsequent affective flows”. Assemblages; therefore, are productive and abstract machines with no concrete and physical form (Buchanan, 2021). The abstract machine is not just a metaphor, it does something, it works (Buchanan, 2021), being “inherently connective in nature: “and...” “and then...” This is because there is always a flow-producing machine, and another machine connected to it that interrupts or draws off parts of this flow” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.5).

The assemblage, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain, comprises two axes and four valences. On the horizontal axis, there are forms of content and forms of expression. Content involves bodies and their actions and passions, the affects that bodies produce and undertake (Deleuze, 1988; Spinoza, 1996). On the other hand, expression involves enunciation, acts, and statements. As Jackson and Mazzei (2016, p.100, italics added for emphasis) summarise, the notion of assemblage “includes multiple elements: discursive signs, utterances, bodies – all existing on different temporal and spatial scales that work together *to produce a territory*”. The territory has no specific location nor borders; rather, it is produced by the patterns of relations and affects that give the assemblage a minimum liveable order or rhythmic regularity (Grosz, 2008).

On the other hand, the vertical axis of the assemblage comprises two differential states of the territory, that of re-territorialization which holds the assemblage stable; and that of de-territorialization, filled with transformations or lines of flight (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017), how the territory breaks away and becomes unmade (Kennedy et al., 2013). The notion of territory, therefore, brings to the fore the shifting and ongoing nature of the assemblage, always combining and recombining connections (Buchanan, 2021), subjected to always-in-flux processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation (Jackson and Mazzei, 2016; Nail, 2017), to composition and decomposition (Deleuze, 1988). The territory is, therefore, passage and becoming, always adapting and flowing (Kennedy et al., 2013), permanent variation and rhythmic oscillation that open spaces for relations to unfold and emerge as the territory moves towards one side or the other (Message, 2010). Thus, the territory is never stable (Smith, 2016), it is rhizomatic, doing and undoing connections as it never ceases to morph (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

The rationale behind employing a new materialist lens inspired by the Deleuzo-Spinozian notion of affect is, therefore, to reveal connections, relations, and emergent capacities within bodily encounters; thus, nurturing a post-anthropocentric sensitivity (Ferrando, 2019). This approach is “concerned with what something does and how it works, rather than what it means” (Smith, 2016, p.37), moving from interpretation to ‘palpation’ (Masny, 2016). Consequently, it is through the articulation of encounters, relations, becomings, affects, assemblages, and territories that I aim to map the intensities produced within bodily encounters, the always-in-flux processes of de- and re-territorialisation immanent to those encounters, and how the affective flows and economies that emerge within these processes have the capacity to co-produce leadership in the context of creativity and play at work. This map of intensities, as Duff and Sumartojo (2017, p.426) describe, aims to trace “the *specific affects* (capacities to act, to affect and be affected by other bodies); *material effects*, relations and associations; and *spaces, contexts or territories* a given assemblage occupies and defines”.

To my view, a new materialist framework provides a rich philosophical toolbox that invites us to trace relational encounters capturing what bodies can do (McCoy, 2012); thus, facilitating our “open-ness to the affectivity of the non-human” (Fox and Alldred, 2021, p.1). Such posthuman sensitivity can challenge reductionist, competency-based, and leader-centric approaches contributing to developing instead an alternative and more balanced theorisation of how leadership works; thus, making visible the unseen forces and intensities that circulate between bodies, forces that, as I contend, can shape leadership processes in the context of creative and playful practices at work. In this way,

we can obtain further insights not only regarding *who* is leading creativity and play but on *what* (Sergi, 2016).

5 Conclusions

In this thesis, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how leadership emerges, unfolds, and entangles with creativity and play in the workplace. Accordingly, this literature review has examined the relationship between leadership, creativity and play in work organisations discussing mainstream and critical perspectives. First, I individually explored each one of these bodies of literature depicting three fundamental assumptions: (1) the issue of performativity, (2) heroism, (3) and anthropocentrism. Second, I examined the interrelations between creativity and play, leadership and creativity, as well as leadership and play, portraying how the above assumptions are further transported and reproduced along these intersectional bodies. Third, I mapped out an in-depth discussion on the physical, corporeal, and embodied aspects of leadership highlighting four research domains. As I conclude, even though these material domains acknowledge the presence of human bodies and other nonhuman entities, a vast majority of research in this field still depicts the assumptions described above. And fourth, to tackle these assumptions, I presented the theoretical approach I aim to employ to articulate a non-performative, post-heroic, and posthuman articulation of leadership outlining new materialist and affect theories.

5.1 The performative assumption

The effectiveness of leadership has received much attention in the literature on creativity and play. From this perspective, this review has shown that leadership is often pinpointed as the solution to collective performance. Thus, it is often argued that either individual or collective leaders hold a pivotal role in the success of creative activities by prescribing multiple roles and strategies to increase employees' creative performance and production (Amabile and Khaire, 2008; Brown, 2016) including, for instance, how play can motivate and increase productivity (West, Hoff and Carlsson, 2016). This body of literature is largely influenced by market-oriented ideologies (Jeanes, 2006). This rhetoric often emphasises the functional and instrumental aspects of creativity and play (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006) positioning leadership as a key factor to create the adequate conditions to instrumentalise play for the sake of creative production.

Moreover, when examining the material, corporeal, and embodied aspects of leadership, research tends to focus on how leaders can convey a sense of effectiveness, ability,

influence, and charisma through their physiobiological attributes (e.g. Little, 2014; DeGroot et al., 2011) and other material artefacts (e.g. Ford et al., 2017; Maran et al., 2021), or how they can use their bodily performances to motivate and influence followers (e.g. Maran et al., 2019; Talley and Temple, 2015; Trichas et al., 2017). Consequently, mainstream research tends to produce and focus on instrumental knowledge underpinned by means-ends calculations in search of efficiency and control (Adler, Forbes and Willmott, 2007).

5.2 The heroic assumption

Leadership research has traditionally focused on a myriad of disembodied traits, styles and behaviours of individual leaders and their unquestioned influence in fostering or hindering creativity. Often conceptualised as a management ability (Barker, 1997), leadership is seen as “the product of individual leaders who possess certain skills and are *solely* responsible for inspiration, influence and organizational performance” (Sutherland, Land and Böhm, 2014, p.761); thus, perpetuating the competency paradigm (Bolden and Gosling, 2006). Under this lens, it is assumed that the leader, often a glamorised manager (Pearce and Manz, 2005), by applying a set of deterministic abilities will enable, direct, facilitate, and nurture employees’ creative behaviours (Dess and Picken, 2000; Mainemelis, Kark and Epitropaki, 2015) setting up the necessary conditions, visions, and strategies to exploit creative production (Shalley and Gilson, 2004) finding in play, for instance, a powerful managerial resource to increase the much desired creative behaviour (Kark, 2011).

Moreover, when leadership gets de-centralised, it is assumed that multiple leaders distributed along organisational levels can influence and motivate each other promoting positive conditions for creativity to flourish (Hooker and Csíkszentmihályi, 2003); thus, transferring individual heroism toward collective leadership theories (Collinson, Smolović Jones and Grint, 2018). Furthermore, the heroic assumption is additionally reproduced across multiple strands of research around the corporeal and embodied aspects of leadership focusing on how the leader’s physiobiological traits (e.g. Blaker et al., 2013; DeGroot et al., 2011; Geys, 2014), bodily performances (e.g. Ladkin, 2008; Talley and Temple, 2015; Trichas et al., 2017), and mastery over the material (e.g. Arvedsen and Hassert, 2020; Ford et al., 2017; Wellton, Jonsson and Svingstedt, 2019) can explain leadership phenomena. Consequently, research often embodies leadership within the leader’s body and its corporeal performances perpetuating the heroic paradigm.

5.3 The anthropocentric assumption

Finally, throughout this review I have shown that leadership is often treated as an ability (Barker, 1997), property (Knights, 2018a), or competency (Bolden and Gosling, 2006) that belongs exclusively to human beings, or as a process that emerges and unfolds in-between leader-followers dyads (e.g. Biehl, 2019; Fisher and Robbins, 2015; Koivunen and Wennes, 2011; Ladkin, 2008). The humanist assumption, as Gherardi and Laasch (2021, p.3) suggest, “starts from human beings as the main source of agency”. In the context of leadership and its relationships with creativity and play, researchers often highlight what human beings can do, what abilities they have, what techniques they can apply, or what practices they enact to conduct creative work. Thus, the research enquiry often revolves around the sovereign human, taking for granted, for instance, material entanglements and bodily encounters between human and non-human actants, their flows of affect, and what material effects these flows produce.

Even though a small and growing body of research has started to acknowledge the doings of all kinds of bodies and how they co-produce leadership (e.g. Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021; Hawkins, 2015; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013; Ropo and Salovaara, 2019; Sergi, 2016), little is known on how human and nonhuman bodies play an active and affective role co-producing leadership in the context of creativity and play at work. Furthermore, although an embryonic field of research has begun to examine how leadership emerge as a property of relations and affects (cf. Knights, 2018a, 2018b; Munro and Thanem, 2020, 2018), this body of research still concentrates on the ‘positive’ affects produced by human bodies whilst largely excluding its nonhuman counterparts and the negative consequences that human-material encounters can produce.

5.4 Research opportunity

Considering the assumptions I have previously uncovered and discussed, in this thesis I aim to contribute to organisational leadership theory by building a non-performative, posthuman, and post-heroic understanding of leadership and its entanglement with creativity and play in work organisations, a rather under-explored area in the literature (see Figure 12 below).

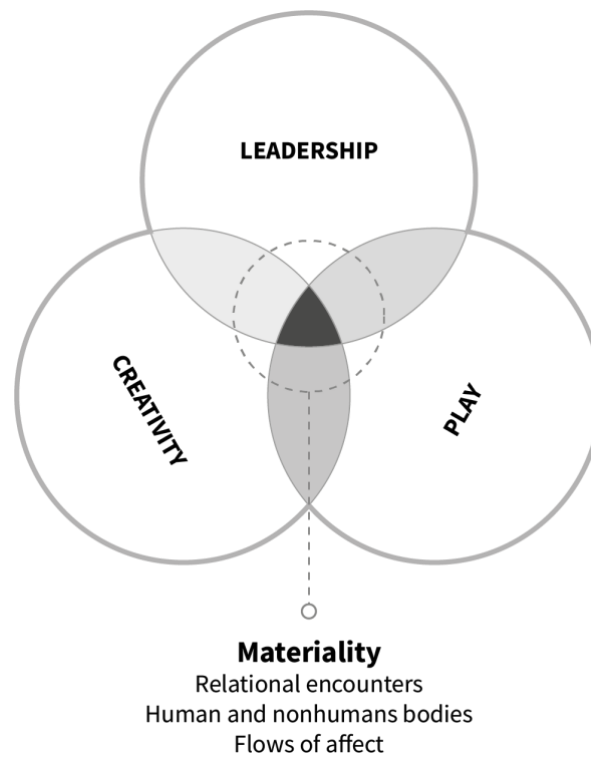


Figure 12: Research emphasis

By studying the materiality of leadership in the context of organisational creativity and play, this thesis will *render visible* the often silenced but highly affective presence of materiality, depicting the doings of human and nonhuman bodies at work and the leaderful effects they produce when encountering each other. As I have shown throughout this review, mainstream research on leadership and its relationship with creativity and play often places leadership as a competency embodied in the figure of heroized managers; thus, rendering materiality as something passive that leaders can manipulate and mobilise at will. In doing so, mainstream researchers restrict our understanding of organisational life (Orlikowski, 2007) and its leadership processes (Hawkins, 2015). The problem, as Dale (2005, p.652) observes, is that “humans are part of the material world, not transcendent gods or magicians able to manipulate the material without being incorporated or changed by it”; thus, matter is not innocent; rather, it is productive (Fox and Alldred, 2017) and pushes back (McCoy, 2012). Thus, materiality has vitality, a capacity of its own (Bennett, 2010); a fluctuating power or capacity to affect and to be affected (Deleuze, 1988).

Materiality in work organisations is much more than the passive, discrete, secondary, and complementary background for leaders to better enact leadership functions and practices, it is the very “media through which leadership is created, experienced, and understood” (Falkman, 2013, p.85). Thus, by neglecting matter, mainstream research

ignores, hides, and forgets agencies that play an important and active role in building leadership, on how humans and nonhumans stimulate, animate and drive collective and organised action (Clifton and Mueni, 2021; Sergi, 2016), enable productive relations (Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013), or even how nonhumans can substitute human leaders (Ropo, Sauer and Salovaara, 2013). Matter makes a difference (Hawkins, 2015). Therefore, by exploring the doings of human-nonhuman encounters, this thesis recognises the active participation of hybrid forces and influences revealing how bodily relations produce leaderful effects whilst providing insights on how affect and power operate and circulate between bodies (Deleuze, 1988; Orlikowski and Scott, 2015). Consequently, this research aims to address the following questions:

- **Research question 1** (RQ1): How does leadership emerge, unfold, and entangle with creativity and play in the workplace?
- **Research question 2** (RQ2): How do human and nonhuman bodies co-produce leadership in the context of creativity and play?
- **Research question 3** (RQ3): What are the flows of affect and the material effects produced within human-nonhuman encounters in such contexts?

Therefore, aiming to provide a better understanding of the materiality of leadership and its entanglement with creativity and play in the workplace, I will therefore focus on relational encounters, flows of affect, intensities, and the directional effects produced by human and nonhuman bodies alike.

6 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented a thorough review of the literature surrounding leadership, creativity, play and its interrelations highlighting the assumptions that these bodies of research underpin. Furthermore, this chapter has presented an overview of the materiality of leadership identifying four research territories as well as the problems and shortcomings of each one. Subsequently, to frame this research, this chapter has also depicted new materialist and affect theories and how these theoretical approaches can inform a posthuman and post-heroic leadership examination. Finally, this chapter has presented the conclusions, opportunities, and questions this research aims to answer. In the following chapter, I discuss the methodological choices I have selected to examine my research enquiries.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Inspired by new materialists (e.g. Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012; Fox and Alldred, 2017) and affect theories (e.g. Deleuze, 1988; Spinoza, 1996), the study was designed to uncover the leaderful qualities of human-material encounters within creative and playful practices capturing the multiple ways in which such encounters produce 'direction' at work (Crevani, 2018). To fulfil the objectives of this research, a 34-week-long affective (Gherardi, 2019b) and virtual (Hine, 2008) ethnography was carried out in a UK-based design and digital agency I have given the pseudonym 'Digital Co.'.

In the following chapter, I offer the reader a detailed account of the methodological approaches and choices I adopted to conduct this study. The order of this chapter unfolds as follows: Section 1 outlines the posthuman paradigm that underpins this research. Section 2 introduces the ethnographic approach including the rationale for the inclusion of my ethnographic case. Section 3 depicts the methods for data collection I considered to conduct this study. Section 4 describes the theoretical approaches I followed to analyse and present my corpus of data. Section 5 briefly discusses the ethical considerations behind this thesis. And finally, section 6 provides a summary of the chapter.

1 Philosophical assumptions about the social world

In studying the social world, scholars frame research within a set of more or less implicit or explicit assumptions concerning the nature of truth and knowledge (Sandberg, 2005). Based on our beliefs about what constitutes reality and how to study it, these assumptions affect how we design and conduct research (Creswell, 2007; Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Shepherd and Challenger, 2013). From this perspective, as researchers, we place ourselves according to our underlying beliefs about the nature of what is being studied, *ontology*; what can be known about it, *epistemology*; and how what is to be known can be known, *methodology* (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). These sets of assumptions constitute the notion of *paradigm* (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), "a general perspective or way of thinking that reflects fundamental beliefs and assumptions about the nature of organizations" (Gioia and Pitre, 1990, p.585). Paradigms are basic belief systems (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), frames of reference that underpin every piece of research (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Shepherd and Challenger, 2013).

1.1 The dominant paradigms in leadership research

Like any other field of enquiry, organisational research is “paradigmatically anchored” (Gioia and Pitre, 1990, p.585). The paradigm debate in organisation studies has been strongly influenced by Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) seminal work, ‘Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis’ (e.g. Deetz, 1996; Hassard and Cox, 2013; Shepherd and Challenger, 2013; Willmott, 1993). Burrell and Morgan (1979) argue that all theories of organisation are based on a philosophy of science and a theory of society suggesting that organisational theory can be framed within four distinct and mutually exclusive paradigms: (1) *radical humanist*, (2) *radical structuralist*, (3) *interpretive*, and (4) *functionalist* (see Burrell and Morgan, 1979, pp.21–37), providing a framework to study often incompatible views about the nature of organisations (Deetz, 1996; Jackson and Carter, 1991).

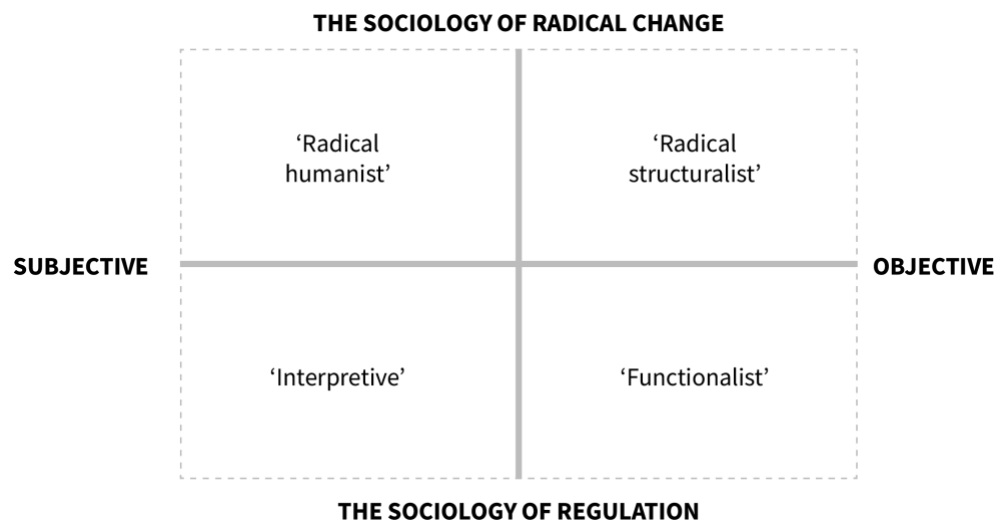


Figure 13: Four paradigms for the analysis of organisations
Source: Burrell and Morgan (1979, p.22)

Based on the above framework, leadership research has been traditionally underpinned by the assumptions of functionalism (Alvesson, 1996; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Avolio, Walumbwa and Weber, 2009; Collinson and Grint, 2005; Klenke, 2008; Parry et al., 2014; Sutherland, 2018) favouring nomothetic methods such as questionnaires and surveys (Lowe and Gardner, 2000; Parry et al., 2014). Functionalism pursues to provide rational explanations and relationships employing deductive tools proper to the natural sciences assuming that the social world can be scientifically verified, measured and quantified (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The functionalist paradigm conceptualises leadership as an objective, static, well-defined, and stable phenomenon defined by a set of universal and standardised variables, dimensions, and correlations

(Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Conger, 1998; Conger and Toegel, 2002). As Alvesson and Spicer (2012, p.371) illustrate, these studies “assume that leadership is something with an independent existence out there in the world”. This paradigm, however, perpetuates a number of rarely questioned assumptions about those individuals we call ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’, the situations and contexts where leadership is believed to happen, and the processes of leadership in itself (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014; Hunter, Bedell-Avers and Mumford, 2007).

However, functionalism has been often questioned and criticised due to its lack of explanatory power (Alvesson, 1996; Conger, 1998; Klenke, 2008; Yukl, 1989). Functionalist studies often ignore the issue of meaning, process, interaction, and context (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014). Consequently, researchers have turned towards competing paradigms –such as interpretivism– arguing in favour of ideographic methods including, but not limited to, interviews and observation (Bryman, 2004). Interpretivism assumes that the social world is an emergent phenomenon constructed by the social actors at the level of subjective experience. Interpretivism is concerned with the everyday world and shared meaning (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Proponents of this paradigm argue that interpretivism contributes to a better understanding of the deeper structures of leadership processes, contexts, actors, and relationships (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010; Gordon and Yukl, 2004; Klenke, 2008; Korukonda and Hunt, 1991; Parry et al., 2014; Uhl-Bien, 2006). As Conger and Toegel (2002, p.182) argue, “[t]he nature of the topic demands a methodology that is sensitive to the dynamism and rich contextual character of leadership phenomena”. Under this lens, leadership has no a priori and objective status; instead, it is seen as a socially constructed phenomenon (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010; Smircich and Morgan, 1982).

1.2 Leadership and the paradigm orthodoxy

Most leadership research falls under the paradigm orthodoxy (Collinson, 2011). The problem, however, is that most studies assume that leadership is either something *objective*, measurable, quantifiable and independent or a *subjective*, human-centred, meaning-laden construction (Spoelstra, 2013). This dualist mentality, as Lewis and Grimes (1999, p.672) argue, “simultaneously proliferates *and* polarizes perspectives, often inhibiting discourse across paradigms, biasing theorists against opposing explanations”. Consequently, this orthodoxy narrows leadership research as irremediably objectivist or subjectivist (Deetz, 1996; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Spoelstra, 2013; Willmott, 1993). In either case, it is often assumed the ‘proprietary’ view

of leadership, that is, leadership as a skill or ability possessed and practiced by human leaders and their so-called followers within human-to-human relations.

Attempting to resist the paradigm orthodoxy, organisational theories have experimented with transformation and intellectual volatility shifting the lens from orthodox agreement to pluralistic variety (Reed, 1992) influenced, for instance, by the emergence of the posts: post-structuralism, postmodernism and posthumanism (cf. Bryant and Cox, 2014; Hassard and Cox, 2013; Monteiro and Nicolini, 2015; Orlikowski, 2007; Willmott, 1998). These 'posts' fundamentally "interrogate the ontological and epistemological order of things in Enlightenment humanism" (St. Pierre, 2013, pp.646–647) inviting us to revisit the 'normal' assumptions of science (Kuhn, 1970) questioning issues of representation, truth, language, subjectivity, power, and agency (cf. Calás and Smircich, 1999; Chia, 1995; Davies and Riach, 2018; Deetz, 1996; Jones, 2011; Hassard, 1993; Hassard and Cox, 2013; Shepherd and Challenger, 2013). For instance, scholars such as Deetz (1996) propose to replace the notion of paradigms for that of discourses including four research approaches/discourses: *normative*, *interpretive*, *critical*, and *postmodern*. In a similar vein, influenced by actor-network theories (e.g. Callon, 1999; Latour, 2005), Hassard and Cox (2013) suggest a retrospective visit to Burrell and Morgan's (1979) framework offering three 'updated' paradigms: *structural*, *anti-structural* and *post-structural*. Thus, as Lewis and Kelemen (2002, p.252) illustrate, "[a]s the paradigm debate continues, the social sciences appear increasingly fragmented and reflexive".

1.3 A posthuman lens

Moving beyond the paradigm orthodoxy that underpins most of the mainstream leadership research, to position myself within the paradigm bricolage I argue for a *posthuman* philosophy of organisations (e.g. Duff and Sumartojo, 2017; Gherardi, 2019a; Huopainen, 2020; Harding, Gilmore and Ford, 2022; Hawkins, 2015; Knight and Sang, 2020; Monteiro and Nicolini, 2015) inspired by a new materialist approach (e.g. Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012; Fox and Alldred, 2017). The posthuman turn in organisation studies represents an intricate web of theoretical lenses to articulate *human/nonhuman* relations (Ergene, Calás and Smircich, 2018) acknowledging the dynamic, processual, and performative nature of materiality (Barad, 2007; Coole and Frost, 2010) including objects, bodies, and actions; as well as discourses and texts, "but not in ways that treat these as "brute" or inherently distinct from humans as users and designers... [nor] in ways that focus on linguistic, intertextual and cultural circulations" (Fenwick, 2010, p.104). Embracing posthumanism implies acknowledging the affective capacities of nonhumans to actively contribute to social

processes while simultaneously bearing in mind the limitations of human action and intention (Hawkins, 2015; Monteiro and Nicolini, 2015). As Gherardi (2019a, p.43, italics added for emphasis) explains, the posthuman project aims to

displace the human subject as the centre seat of agency, the one in control of the world, the one from whom intentional actions emanate... the project is not to deny humans but to position them in *relations to* other non-humans, more-than-humans, the non-living world and all the 'missing masses'.

Posthumanism encourages us to trace *relational encounters* (McCoy, 2012; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013) between human and nonhuman bodies and the affective flows they produce (Bell and Vachhani, 2020; Gherardi et al., 2019) aiming to render visible, for instance, the leaderful qualities of matter at work (cf. Hawkins, 2015; Vuojärvi and Korva, 2020; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013; Sergi, 2016). Thus, decentering the 'subject' from the locus of meaning and understanding, in this study I position myself from a *relational* ontology (e.g. Chia, 1995; Nayak and Chia, 2011; Wood and Dibben, 2015; Wood and Ladkin, 2008), that is, an ontology of *becoming* (Bardon and Josserand, 2010; Jing and Van de Ven, 2016; Wood and Dibben, 2015). Under this lens, leadership is not understood as something that shows itself either in objective or subjective terms, but as a phenomenon that emerges and unfolds amid endless *encounters* and *relationships* (Wood and Dibben, 2015) between humans and nonhumans and the affective flows they produce (Knights, 2018b).

1.3.1 *A relational ontology of becoming*

New materialist theories privilege a *monist* ontology (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012; Fox and Alldred, 2017; Haynes, 2014) delineating the nature of reality as "a flat ontological plane populated by different but mutually affecting material and semiotic entities" (Feely, 2020, p.177). Therefore, new materialist ontologies invite us to examine and explore relational networks and material-discursive assemblages (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017; Feely, 2020; Huopalainen, 2020). A relational ontology does not understand matter and bodies, such as people and artefacts, as self-contained, fixed, and static entities immersed in a cause-effect interplay (Barad, 2007; DeLanda, 2006); rather, it sees materiality as an ongoing, relational, and iterative process (Gamble, Hanan and Nail, 2019), as nodes within an always-in-flux network of relations (Latour, 2005; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). This ontology embraces a process approach conceptualising the world as "pure action and ongoingness" (Cooper, 2007, p.1547), an unfolding process of 'world-making' (Chia, 2003) without beginning or end, but always in-between (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). As Whitehead (1978) explains, the world is a

process and the process is *becoming*; thus, “*how* an actual entity *becomes* constitutes *what* that actual entity *is*... Its ‘being’ is constituted by its ‘becoming’” (Whitehead, 1978, p.23).

An ontology of becoming shifts the focus from static representations toward “intensities, capacities and forces; rhythms, cycles, encounters, events, movements and flows; instincts, affects, atmospheres and auras; relations, knots and assemblages” (Beyes and Steyaert, 2011, p.47) recognising materiality not for what it *is* but for what it *does* (Fox and Alldred, 2017), for its *actions* upon *actions* (Bardon and Josserand, 2010), by its capacities to *affect* and to be *affected* (Deleuze, 1988; Spinoza, 1996). As Duff (2016, p.19) suggests, it is necessary therefore to remove the human subject as the unit of analysis and replace it with “a logic of relations, affects and materials, and the assemblages in which they form and circulate” focusing on relationships and clusters of events (Nayak and Chia, 2011), revealing movement and transitivity in a flow of never-ending dis/connections (Cooper, 2005). Under this lens, there are no underlying systems, mechanisms or structures, but instead, there are endless cascades of ‘events’ (Fox and Alldred, 2017). The event, as Deleuze and Parnet (1977, p.67) observe, “is always produced by bodies which collide, lacerate each other or interpenetrate, the flesh and the sword”. The event, therefore, is becoming, an ongoing passage, a rhizomatic process always in flux and change (Badiou, 2007; Beck and Gleyzon, 2016) emerging in-between subjects and objects (Colwell, 1997) that “highlight not instrumental plans, blueprints for action, and a priori scripts and conditions but rather the possibility of alternative futures, the failures of representations, the contingencies of interventions, and the effervescence with which things actually take place” (Vannini, 2015, p.7).

To summarise, an ontology of becoming suggests turning our attention toward constitutive relations, enactments, and transitive elements within events as they occur (Wood and Ladkin, 2008) explaining the nature of reality as the never-ending unfolding of relational networks/assemblages, material encounters, and flows of affect. In this way, the nature of reality, or realities, are “produced, and have a life, in relations” (Law, 2004, p.59), for bodies, entities, and materialities are never detachable from their relations with the world (Deleuze, 1988).

1.3.2 *The onto-epistemological collapse and the research-assemblage*

New materialists have traditionally questioned the ontology/epistemology divide (McCoy, 2012), for being and knowing, thinking and living, cannot be isolated; rather, they are irremediably intertwined (Law, 2004; St. Pierre, 2013). Barad’s (2007) work has been highly influential in breaking out the ontology/epistemology, knower/known binaries

(Ringrose and Renold, 2014) arguing that “[w]e don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world” (Barad, 2007, p.185), we become with it (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). Therefore, *what* we research is entangled with *how* we research (Law, 2004). This onto-epistemological collapse assumes that knowledge is material, relational, and emergent, a product of the context in which this knowledge is created (Fox and Alldred, 2017; Hassard and Cox, 2013). Consequently, the researcher is not a separate entity from her or his research apparatus, for research is co-enacted by a myriad of bodies (Schadler, 2019). Researchers are not mere bystanders in the field, they entangle and emerge with it, affecting each other, for fieldwork is a “joint ‘becoming-with-data’ in the intra-action of what can be lived and felt by researchers” (Gherardi, 2019b, p.743). This research/researched entanglement is known as the *research-assemblage* (Fox and Alldred, 2015b; Law, 2004; Ringrose and Renold, 2014).

The research-assemblage is “a multiplicity of affective relations in the research process” (Fox and Alldred, 2015a, p.125) including relations between the researcher, the researched event, research methods and techniques, technologies for data collection and analysis, data, theories, physical spaces where the research is conducted, human participants, and so on (Fox and Alldred, 2015a; Thompson and Adams, 2013). Hence, the research-assemblage is not a thing, but a process of *plugging in* and *plugging out* knowledge-making bodies (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013; Ringrose and Renold, 2014) forming “machines that link affects together [and] produce or do something” (Fox and Alldred, 2015a, p.125), a research-producing machine.

From a new materialist perspective, the composite of research tools, methods and techniques that often attend to human action, experiences and interactions, need instead to be used as a gateway to disclose relationships and assemblages between human and nonhuman bodies, aiming to trace, reveal, and identify *relationships*, *assemblages* and *affects* (Davies and Riach, 2018; Fox and Alldred, 2015b). Knowledge, therefore, is produced amid relations and flows of affects within the research-assemblage, in the ongoing relationships and entanglements between bodies and processes of data collection, analysis, and writing (Thompson and Adams, 2013; Visser and Davies, 2021).

2 The ethnographic approach

Rooted within the anthropological tradition (Hammersley, 2006; Van Maanen, 1979), ethnography aims to understand “the culture(s) which locate(s) ‘experience’” (Willis and Trondman, 2000, p.6) by describing and interpreting a social group or system (Klenke,

2008) including its cultures, norms, values, and activities (Watson, 2011). Ethnography relies on thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973), rich, contextualised narratives of everyday events (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007), “micro interactions in the field, captured through a blend of methods” (Cunliffe, 2010, p.231) and a set of interrelated practices namely fieldwork, headwork, and textwork (Bate, 1997; Van Maanen, 2011a).

Often, scholars illustrate what ethnography is by describing what ethnographers do. For instance, Atkinson and Hammersley (2007, p.3) argue that ethnography

usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of enquiry.

Consequently, scholars provide notions of what ethnographers do without necessarily prescribing how the work should be done (Van Maanen, 2006) drawing on a family of methods to examine life as unfolds (O’Reilly, 2012). Ethnography is more improvisational than procedural (Van Maanen, 2015) allowing field workers to “learn, invent, develop, and adjust their method as they are collecting data in a specific context” (Bajc, 2012, p.73). This adaptability has contributed to generating methodological innovations and new ways to conduct socio-material fieldwork including, for instance, affective (Gherardi, 2019b), assemblage (Ghoddousi and Page, 2020), multi-species (Wels, 2020), materialist (Schadler, 2019) and more-than-human (Lugosi and Quinton, 2018) ethnographies.

2.1 Ethnography in organisation and leadership studies

In the field of management studies, organisational ethnography lacks an agreed definition (Ciuk, Koning and Kostera, 2018). Yet, most of what has been written for organisational ethnography seems valid for any other type of ethnography (Eberle and Maeder, 2021). Ethnography in organisations involves sustained observation and participation within a particular organisational setting (a business, branch, project, team, group of employees) engaging with issues of how these groups operate (Neyland, 2008) and how organisational members “manage to do things together in observable and repeated ways” (Van Maanen, 1979, p.539), grasping the complexities, intricacies, mundanities, and the subtleties of organisational life, practices, cultures, and processes (Ciuk, Koning and Kostera, 2018; Cunliffe, 2010). Arguably, the main difference between the traditional socio-anthropological and organisational ethnography is that, in the latter,

ethnographers remain less time in the field as the organisational setting tends to be less immersive, for people often go back and forth between home and work (Ciuk, Koning and Kostera, 2018).

Ethnographic work in the field of leadership studies has been regarded as an under-utilised approach (Bryman, 2004, 2011a; Conger, 1998; Gardner et al., 2020; Klenke, 2008; Sutherland, 2018). Bryman (2004) argues that since researchers need to get involved and immerse themselves in the field for a long time, ethnographic work is *time-consuming*. This issue implies that researchers need to invest more time than they usually have. Moreover, time constraints not only limit researchers but also limit *access* to the field (Bryman, 2004; Watson, 2011). Another obstacle researchers may encounter when conducting ethnographic studies is the issue of ‘what’ the researcher is supposed to observe as they need to ‘see’ the phenomenon under study (Sutherland, 2018) and leadership tends to *disappear* (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b). One thing, as Bryman (2011b, p.20) puts it, is “to observe leaders; [and] it is quite another to observe leadership... In some instances, it may be obvious, but in others it may not be clear whether what is being witnessed is leadership”.

Scholars suggest that ethnography represents a valuable opportunity to better understand leadership’s inherent complexities (Gardner et al., 2020; Sutherland, 2018) providing rich contextual data (Ybema et al., 2009). As Sutherland (2018, p.281) suggests, “it is clear to see that the aims of ethnographic investigations allow researchers to generate a nuanced picture of leadership activity”. Moreover, ethnography contributes to uncovering data that may be either inaccessible or otherwise distorted by other methods such as interviews and questionnaires (Conger, 1998; Bryman, 2011a). Ethnography facilitates revealing the complexities, challenges, tensions, and intricacies of leadership (Sutherland, 2018) recording daily, mundane, and ordinary situations (Sergi, 2016).

2.2 Decentring the human: Tracing bodily encounters, attuning to affective flows

Ethnography is often described as the study of *people* (e.g. Brewer, 2000; Cunliffe, 2010) taking for granted the affective presence of nonhuman others (Dale and Burrell, 2008; Hamilton and Taylor, 2017). The problem, however, is that even though organisations are full of ‘stuff’ (Orlikowski, 2007), materiality remains anecdotic and somewhat marginal (Davies and Riach, 2018), for ethnographers often look for what objects, artefacts, technologies, and animals *mean* to us privileging *human* cultures, actions,

meanings, languages, and symbolisms rather than pursuing to understand instead how humans and nonhumans 'co-constitute' the world (Hamilton and Taylor, 2017). Humans do not just do things, they do 'things' with things (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007) while simultaneously 'things' do things to them (Latour, 2005).

When doing fieldwork, ethnographers inevitably experience encounters with bodies of all kinds, human and not. For this reason, new materialists maintain that we need to put into exile any notion of human 'superiority' attuning ourselves to see, hear, and better understand nonhuman others (Wels, 2020) and thus "witness the multiple, messy processes that constitute culture and identity while also giving epistemic permission to study the various artefacts, materials and objects that play a role in their creation" (Hamilton and Taylor, 2017, p.25). Ethnographies sensitive to human/nonhuman encounters have been conceptualised as 'affective ethnographies'; that is, "a style of research practice that acknowledges that all elements – texts, actors, materialities, language, agencies – are already entangled in complex ways" (Gherardi, 2019b, p.742). An ethnography concerned with materiality takes into consideration research methods that contribute to tracing human/nonhuman connections and relationships (Davies and Riach, 2018) inviting us to uncover socio-material entanglements and flows of affect (Schubert and Röhl, 2019). As Stewart (in Fannin et al., 2010, p.930) argues, ethnography attuned to affects is

a form of haptically mapping what's happening. A vague and inarticulate analytical work... a sustained, sensory practice of attending to the material and affective emergence of things that come together as shared sensibilities or fall apart, perhaps leaving traces or dormant trajectories.

Adopting a new materialist approach to ethnography allows researchers to capture the multiple ways in which humans and nonhumans entangle in the workplace and the affective flows they produce (Gherardi, 2019b). In doing so, we can give organisational actors, humans and not, the chance to speak (Humphries and Smith, 2014; Jørgensen, Henriksen and Dembek, 2015; Wels, 2020), rendering visible the role that nonhumans play in organisations (Schubert and Röhl, 2019) emphasising the circulation of objects, practices, meanings, and identities (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek and Cabantous, 2015).

2.3 Covid-19 and the technological 'big bang': Plugging in online ethnography

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak and the lockdown measures enforced by governments around the world, the pandemic radically transformed the way employees operate in the

workplace (Dwivedi et al., 2020). Organisations had to adapt the way people work shifting from traditional face-to-face interaction towards online and remote work in geographically dispersed and computer-assisted environments (e.g. Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020) experiencing a technological 'big-bang' (Carroll and Conboy, 2020). Moreover, Covid-19 not only disrupted organisations but research and fieldwork alike (Howlett, 2022). Consequently, organisations began to shut down migrating to remote/online environments and negotiating access became harder for people became reluctant to engage in research activities. Unsurprisingly, as the virus began to spread my research was not immune to its effects. Covid-19 decreased my capacity to act deterritorialising my research-assemblage. How could I collect data under such adverse conditions?

The issue of access refers to the "process that facilitates our gathering of empirical data" (Chawla-Duggan, 2007, p.186), a negotiation or 'bargain' process researchers undertake for entering, continuing, and exiting the research site (Bondy, 2012). From this perspective, the pandemic forced me to rethink my research design and access having to shift from face-to-face to *internet-based* and *socially distanced* data collection (e.g. Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020). To do so, I had to abandon the idea of a multiple-case study in co-located workspaces (my pre-pandemic plan) concentrating instead on finding at least one organisation willing to provide me with some kind of access during the peak of the pandemic. Consequently, I had to undertake a socially distanced single-case study.

Immersing myself within a single organisation meant that I had to allocate more time in this individual setting leading me to adopt an ethnographic lens, an approach that requires longer immersion in the field (Van Maanen, 2011a). Thus, under the unique circumstances triggered by the pandemic, I turned my attention towards online modalities to conduct ethnographic work. Virtual ethnography (Hine, 2008) represents a set of practices that "adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets, 2002, p.62) developing 'thick' descriptions of networked individuals and cultures (Klenke, 2008). From this perspective, Markham (2016) holds the view that ethnographers can approach digital enquiry by considering the internet as (1) a tool or medium for networked connectivity; (2) a place or virtual world; or (3) as a way of being. Under this lens, Markham's first approach became relevant to my research due to the increased use of ICTs and computer-mediated communications since the pandemic began (Blanchard, 2021) dispersing the research environment from physical to online localities (Postill and

Pink, 2012) where day-to-day work practices are mediated to some extent by the capacities of internet-based tools (Markham, 2016).

A virtual/online approach to ethnography allowed me to adapt to the contingencies of Covid-19 whilst observing the traditional ethnographic principles for data collection (Hine, 2008). Consequently, observing the social distancing and isolation rules of the moment, my pandemic-adapted research design encompassed online and offline practices, being the online setting the dominant source of data collection. Even though shifting from co-located workplaces to an online approach was a direct effect of the Covid-19 on my research, scholars as Postill (2016, p.67) suggest that “there is nothing inherently inferior or illegitimate about researching local issues remotely”, for technologically-mediated methods can contribute to obtaining meaningful insights into participants’ lives. Moreover, scholars such as Akemu and Abdelnur (2020) argue that when entangling with digital technologies, ethnographers can intensify their co-presence in the field by accessing often ignored and wider sources of data; thus, strengthening the research’s authenticity and multivocality.

2.4 Selecting the ethnographic case

Ethnographic studies tend to be small in scale (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003) including a single or reduced number of cases/participants (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1998). This study draws on a single case of study: a UK-based digital and creative micro-firm. In this regard, an inherent challenge for conducting case studies refers to the identification and selection of cases (Creswell, 2007). Even though there is no straightforward answer to these issues, Curtis et al. (2000, p.1002) argue that case selection “needs to be addressed rigorously and it is fundamental to our understanding of the validity of qualitative research”. The following section presents the rationale for the selection and inclusion of my ethnographic case.

2.4.1 Recruitment and case selection criteria

To define my ethnographic case, I followed a *purposeful* approach (Patton, 2002). This strategy does not aim to establish a representative sample but to identify and select cases that provide rich information data (Emmel, 2013). The selection process involves identifying individuals, units, or cases according to specific inclusion/exclusion parameters encouraging researchers to “use their judgement in making sampling choices” (Emmel, 2013, p.43). My case selection followed *homogeneous* and *typical* strategies (Patton, 2002). The homogeneous strategy aims to select a small and uniform sample to describe a certain subgroup in-depth as well as to reduce variation, simplify

the analysis, and facilitate data collection (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). On the other hand, the typical strategy aims to select cases that illustrate what is typical to audiences not familiarised with the case avoiding the generalisation of assumptions regarding participants' experiences (Patton, 2002).

Following the above strategies, I considered two main criteria for case inclusion: organisation size and industry. On the one hand, as ethnographic research is often focused on small numbers of participants rather than larger probabilistic samples (Small, 2009), this study targeted a single micro-business (0-10 employees) in the creative industry sector. 90% of creative businesses have less than 5 employees (Bazalgette, 2017) being a sector particularly characterised by a significant number of self-employed individuals and microbusinesses (Davies and Sigthorsson, 2013). Moreover, even though *creative labour* can take place in any type of workplace, sites belonging to the creative industries are privileged sites to understand creativity in work organisations (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008). Creative industries is an umbrella term employed to categorise a wide range of economic products, services, or experiences that use creativity as a primary thrust (Davies and Sigthorsson, 2013) including organisations in advertising, marketing, architecture, crafts, design, film, TV, video, radio, photography, IT, software, computer services, museum, galleries, libraries, music, performing and visual arts, and publishing (Department of Culture Media & Sport, 2016).

Based on the above rationale, I focused my recruitment process on micro-firms belonging to the creative industries. Recruitment of participants was carried out by the researcher within the UK via email, phone calls, and in-person visits. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, finding a field site resulted to be challenging as most organisations shifted from co-located to online and remote work modalities. Moreover, organisations were reluctant to take part in my study. However, after two months of negotiating access, I was able to recruit a single micro-firm (4 employees), a digital agency, specialised in web design and software development; thus, fulfilling my criteria for inclusion.

2.4.2 *Selected case, timeline, and participants*

Between August 2020 to April 2021, I immersed myself in a UK-based creative digital agency I have given the pseudonym 'Digital Co.' (see [chapter four, section 1](#) for further details). Access to this field site was granted by the company owner. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this organisation used the internet as a tool to mediate day-to-day work (Markham, 2016) employing ICT tools such as Slack and Zoom. Overall, the study included 11 human participants: 4 employees (main participants) and 7 clients (secondary participants).

Table 2: Human participants

Name (pseudonyms)	Type	Gender	Age	Role
James	Employee	Male	39	Director / Designer
John	Employee	Male	50	Software developer
Richard	Employee	Male	49	Software developer
Peter	Employee	Male	32	Frontend developer
Theresa	Client	Female	39	Web management
Phillip	Client	Male	47	Management
Mathew	Client	Male	43	Coordinator
Michael	Client	Male	35	CEO
Claudia	Client	Female	38	Marketing
Cesar	Client	Male	53	Directive
Cristian	Client	Male	48	Business Ownership

This field site contributed with rich flows of affects generated within human/nonhuman assemblages allowing me to collect a wealthy base of empirical data. The next section provides details on how my corpus of data was collected and created.

3 Methods for data collection

In this research, I considered a combination of ideographic methods and techniques. Ideographic methods have been regarded as fundamental for gaining a deeper understanding of hidden and profound processes at individual, team or organisational levels (Bluhm et al., 2011). However, as Conger and Toegel (2002) warn us, relying on a single method to study leadership poses the risk to fall under the trap of functionalist studies which fundamentally depend on single questionnaires as the sole source of data. Thus, the authors recommend employing more than one method not just to ensure triangulation of data, but to study leadership from multiple perspectives. Following this advice, this research included (1) field observation, (2) semi-structured interviews, (3) projective techniques, and (4) participatory workshops.

3.1 Selected methods and techniques

3.1.1 Field observation

Observational methods are at the heart of the ethnographic approach (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007; Kostera, 2021). Observation involves first-hand data collection through *looking* and *noting* (Lancaster, 2005) what has been seen, heard and done in a particular setting (Hammersley, 2007). Researchers such as Cook and Meyer (2017) have noted that observational methods contribute to a better understanding of how leadership processes emerge and unfold, allowing researchers to capture and document actions and doings between individuals and groups, as well as the contexts, settings, processes, objects, environments, and spaces where people work (Mulhall, 2003). Practicing observation, however, not only includes details about what humans do, look like, or the rituals and routines they engage with; it additionally requires acknowledging the affective presence of the many non-humans entangled with them (Ciesielska, Boström and Öhlander, 2018). As Latour (2005, p.75) explains, “the continuity of any course of action will rarely consist of human-to-human connections... or of object-to-object connections, but will probably zigzag from one to the other”.

Observational methods range from *non-participant* to *participant* roles (Gummesson, 2007; Hammersley, 2007; Kostera, 2021; Lancaster, 2005). This distinction refers to the researcher’s degree of involvement in the observed setting (Spradley, 1980). However, this dualistic taxonomy implies that the researcher either plays an active role in the field or does not play a role at all, when in practice, observation is much more nuanced and less polarised (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1998). Researchers not only can adopt one role over the other but fluctuate in-between or practice them simultaneously (Kostera, 2021). Spradley (1980), for instance, proposes five types of participation including (1) nonparticipation, (2) passive participation, (3) moderate participation, (4) active participation, and (5) complete participation (see Spradley, 1980, pp.58–62 for further details). These levels are complementary as the researcher can adopt multiple roles as the data collection process unfolds (Kostera, 2021).

When conducting my fieldwork, I undertook a *hybrid* approach to observation (Kostera, 2021). As Hine (2008) suggests, some degree of participation helps fieldworkers to obtain a deeper understanding of participants’ experience when acting as players/observers. Thus, my observational practice ranged from *passive* to *active* forms of participation (Spradley, 1980). Most of the time, however, I adopted a passive role. I was present at the scene of action, silently placed in my ‘observation post’. This ‘post’ entailed my rather partial access to Slack channels (x7), the main digital/online platform

the company was using during the pandemic to conduct daily work (for further details see [chapter four, section 2](#)). Most of the time, I remained silent, with my webcam turned off, observing, and taking notes over what unfolded on Slack. However, I was not always a mere bystander. Occasionally, I would step up into a moderate role, balancing my outsider/insider status. From time to time, I took part in Slack conversations, asked questions about the topics and projects at hand, or contributed with my thoughts and design expertise. My insider status was additionally strengthened by the fact that I also adopted an active role in conducting Lego workshops with the team. My role, therefore, was never static, always fluctuating between passive, moderate, and active participation.

To document and record what I witnessed and experienced, I wrote down extensive fieldnotes, the core source of data within the ethnographic record (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). Fieldnotes contain “multiple aspects of the author’s experience and so are richer than simply what people said” (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek and Lê, 2014, p.276). Thus, following Spradley’s (1980) observational dimensions, I documented human and nonhuman actors, places, events, and activities directing my attention to the entanglements of bodies, tracing encounters, affects, and relations. My research diary contained observations, reflections, and several screenshots of dialogues, projects, and meetings. These materials were collected with the participants’ consent.

3.1.2 *Semi-structured interviews*

Observation is seldom employed in absence of additional methods and techniques for data collection. As Elliot and Jankel-Elliott (2003, p.217) argue, “[a]sking people why they are doing what they are doing is a necessary component in developing an understanding of their situated behaviour”. Thus, the interview serves as a gateway to disclose daily routines and life stories (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003) to get a picture of the world from the point of view of the social actors and the meanings they assign to their experiences (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). From a new materialist point of view, the interview has the capacity to render visible material contexts by listening to multiple human/nonhuman voices (Hultin, 2019). For instance, scholars such as Nordstrom (2013), Abildgaard (2018), and Hultin (2019) have employed material artefacts as elicitation devices to uncover socio-material practices during the interview process. Others as Kuntz and Presnall (2012) have proposed the notion of *intraview* to challenge and displace the humanist subject attending instead to human/nonhuman relations and thus “flesh out the material, discursive and affective complexity of the topic under study” (Warfield, 2017, p.68). These methodological developments illustrate how scholars have attempted to bridge human/nonhuman entanglements through interviewing techniques to bring to the surface multiple voices (Kuntz and Presnall, 2012).

Overall, four types of interviews have been broadly identified in the literature: (1) structured, (2) unstructured, (3) semi-structured, and (4) group interview (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Qu and Dumay, 2011). In this thesis, I considered the semi-structured approach. As Adams (2015, p.493) describes, the semi-structured interview “employs a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up *why* or *how* questions”. Hence, this type of interview is focused on specific themes, being neither a highly structured questionnaire nor a free conversation (Kvale, 1983). Thanks to the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews, the researcher is free to improvise, provide instructions, ask for clarification, and to ask the interviewee to further elaborate if necessary (Corbetta, 2003) contributing to reaching a deeper level of understanding. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to modify the pace, structure, and style of the interview to explore and disclose hidden aspects of organisations and their members (Qu and Dumay, 2011).

In total, I conducted 16 digitally recorded, semi-structured interviews with single respondents: 10 with employees and 6 with clients, lasting between 18 and 156 minutes each. Recordings were transcribed verbatim for posterior analysis. Observing Covid-19 regulations, interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online via Zoom (for further details see Table 3 below).

Table 3: Interviews

Participant	Type	Modality	Length	Date
Richard	Formal	Face-to-face	156 minutes	03/09/2020
John	Formal	Face-to-face	148 minutes	04/09/2020
James	Formal	Face-to-face	132 minutes	08/09/2020
James	Informal	Face-to-face	103 minutes	08/10/2020
Theresa	Formal	Online	35 minutes	05/11/2020
Phillip/Mathew	Formal	Online	50 minutes	06/11/2020
Michael	Formal	Online	56 minutes	13/11/2020
Claudia	Formal	Online	52 minutes	26/11/2020
Cesar	Formal	Online	35 minutes	30/11/2020
Cristian	Formal	Online	18 minutes	07/01/2021
James	Informal	Online	42 minutes	11/03/2021
Peter	Formal	Online	97 minutes	06/04/2021
James	Formal	Online	58 minutes	10/04/2021
Peter	Formal	Online	40 minutes	15/04/2021
Richard	Formal	Online	58 minutes	16/04/2021
John	Formal	Online	77 minutes	16/04/2021

Considering that interviewing often involves a *stranger* asking questions to another *stranger* (Myers and Newman, 2007) raising issues about whether the interviewer can be trusted or not, I carried out observation for two weeks prior to the first round of interviews to decrease stranger bias. As Spradley (1980) suggests, leaving the 'stranger status' offers further opportunities to conduct interviews facilitating the data collection process.

The structure of the interviews was developed around several topics including organisational roles, practices, hierarchies, power relations, material objects and artefacts, tools to develop work, as well as issues related to creativity, play, and leadership in the workplace. I aimed to invite materiality into my interviews (Hultin, 2019). Therefore, in designing the interview process I considered two stages. The first round of interviews with employees were conducted mostly during the first month of data

collection. In these interviews, I considered two parts. First, I followed Nicolini's (2009) 'interview to the double' due to its potential to articulate practices including discursive and material activities. As Nicolini (2009, p.196) describes, this technique

requires interviewees to imagine they have a double who will have to replace them at their job the next day. The informant is then asked to provide the necessary detailed instructions which will ensure that the ploy is not unveiled and the double is not unmasked.

Throughout this stage, participants described in rich detail their everyday routines including what they used to do on a normal day of work, how they did it, and what tools and resources they employed to do so. Thus, they revealed their daily practices as well as the many human and non-human actors that entangled with them when conducting work. Employing the 'interview to the double' approach, I was able to identify the multiple roles, dynamics, and relations between multiple actors, human and not, grasping in-depth details on their doings and capacities. In the second part, considering the flexibility of semi-structured interviews, researchers can combine the interview with art-based and other elicitation methods (e.g. Abildgaard, 2018; Johnson and Weller, 2001; King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019; Taylor and Ladkin, 2009) contributing to add authenticity and depth to data (Gaskell, 2000). From this perspective, I applied projective techniques employing Lego bricks to elicit further responses and trace bodies and encounters at work, as I further explain in [section 3.1.3](#) below. Finally, I also conducted a closing round of interviews with employees at the end of my fieldwork to obtain further insights into my research enquiries asking further details regarding the doings and leaderful effects of materiality in the workplace.

On the other hand, interviews with clients were conducted throughout my nine months of immersion in the field. For contact and recruitment, I was able to obtain James' (the business owner) support, who invited his clients to participate in my research project. Overall, seven human clients agreed to participate. Interviews were carried out via Zoom and followed a semi-structured format. The aim was to uncover the affective role that clients played at Digital Co. and its projects. Throughout the process, I was able to uncover the power dynamics and affective flows within the business-client relationship. From this perspective, clients shared rich accounts of how they perceived themselves, their role in co-leading the company's projects, and how they believed they affected its development. Interviewing clients contributed to widening my access to the field whilst grasping the doings and affects of human bodies outside the organisational boundaries.

3.1.3 Projective techniques: Re-mattering bodies and encounters at work

Projective techniques contribute to deepening interviewees' accounts revealing content that is often hidden, unconscious, or difficult to express through conventional methods (Boddy, 2007; Pich and Dean, 2015; Porr et al., 2011; Taylor and Ladkin, 2009). The Association for Qualitative Research (AQR, 2020) defines projective techniques as

A wide range of tasks and games in which respondents can be asked to participate during an interview or group, designed to facilitate, extend or enhance the nature of the discussion... they enable participants to say more about the research subject than they can say spontaneously, accessing thoughts, feeling or meanings which are not immediately available.

Projective techniques have been classified according to the type of response the technique elicits. Overall, five categories are often identified within the literature: (1) associative, (2) completion, (3) constructive, (4) choice/ordering, and (5) expressive (cf. Hofstede et al., 2007; Lindzey, 1959; Pich and Dean, 2015). In organisation studies, projective techniques have been applied for marketing communication (Alan, 2002) and brand image (Hussey and Duncombe, 1999), strategy (Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004), consumer and market research (Pettigrew and Charters, 2008), and leadership (Yost, 2013), employing a wide range of materials and artefacts such as photography, handcrafts, Lego bricks, drawings, collages/mood-boards, and poetry (see Taylor and Ladkin, 2009 for a review).

Projective techniques are easy to administer requiring no previous knowledge of the method (Pich and Dean, 2015). The technique allows participants to feel less inhibited, threatened, or embarrassed when exploring sensitive or private topics due to the de-personalisation of answers through images or artefacts (Boddy, 2007; Catterall and Ibbotson, 2000). Thus, projective techniques enable a *non-discursive representation* of participants' embodied knowledge and experiences (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009). Participant-produced methodologies contribute to opening up the complexities of the phenomenon under study broadening the access to data, while at the same time, fostering and empowering participation from individuals (Guillemin and Drew, 2010).

Considering the above, in this research, I employed a *constructive* technique (see for instance Seppänen, Pässilä and Kianto, 2019). In this approach, participants are asked to build a story, sculpture, model, drawing, or painting developing a product considered meaningful or personally relevant (see for example Yost, 2013, on dollmaking); thus, the focus is on the outcome or built artefact (Lindzey, 1959). To do so, I employed Lego

bricks (plastic interlocking toys) asking participants to build 3-D models around specific topics related to my research. This choice was informed by the following reasons: (1) Lego bricks are easy to use, durable, and affordable; (2) do not require fine motor skills or previous knowledge to be able to build models; (3) offer rich variations through multiple pieces, sizes and colours; (4) are targeted to all people; (5) represent a playful and well-known toy used around the world; and (6) in contrast to other materials and techniques as modelling clay or drawing, participants do not have to worry whether they do not know how to draw or to get their hands dirty (Al-Jayyousi and Durugbo, 2020; Cantoni, Marchiori and Faré, 2009; Hadida, 2013; Kristiansen and Rasmussen, 2014).



Image 1: A participant building Lego models during an interview

Throughout the interviews, participants were asked to build Lego models to illustrate their understanding and experiences of leadership, creativity, and play in the workplace. As interviewees presented and explained the models, further questions were asked regarding specific bits and parts of the model to obtain further data. Through these artefacts, I aimed to uncover relationships, capacities and affects in the workplace. With participants' consent, images of models were captured and compiled in a photoset, and explanations were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interestingly, it did not take me long to appreciate that participants not only constructed models to convey meaning to project what was 'hidden' or 'unconscious' at the level of the mind, "the innermost thoughts and feelings of a person" (Donoghue, 2000, p.48), as most research on the topic suggests (cf. Boddy, 2007; Donoghue, 2000; Hofstede et al., 2007; Hussey and Duncombe, 1999; Pettigrew and Charters, 2008; Pich and Dean, 2015; Porr et al., 2011; Taylor and Ladkin, 2009). Instead, the models also began to *re-*

materialise what was outside the mind, revealing human and nonhuman bodies and their affective capacities at work. The numerous Lego models that participants built revealed the doings of humans: team members, clients, and users; as well as that of nonhumans: software bugs, tools, computers, and so on. Thus, through Lego, bodies, affects, and relations began to unfold ‘through making’ (Hickey-Moody, 2020). The brick transformed itself into a research device “sensitive to new types of connections” (Latour, 2005, p.235) uncovering relational networks between human and nonhuman bodies at work.

For instance, the Lego model below (see Image 2) illustrates a participant’s understanding of how leadership and creativity unfolded in his workplace. In this model, the interviewee explained that each human member of the team used their tools (each Minifigure holds a tool) and had their creativity (the flowers). Besides the team, the rocket re-materialised the design and software projects this team used to work with. At the top of this rocket, it was placed the client, for they were a pivotal part of the project.

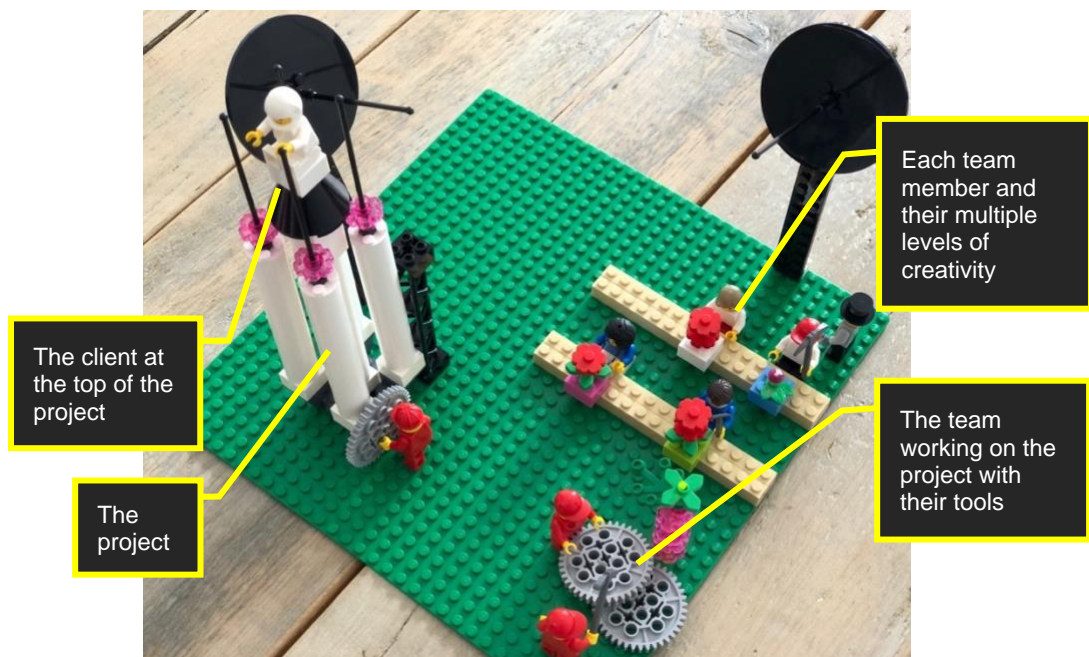


Image 2: A Lego model built to explain how creativity and play emerge at work

This model allowed me to better understand and materially visualise some of the humans and nonhumans entangled with this organisation opening opportunities to deepen my enquiries. As each participant explained the Lego models, I was able to ask further questions about the capacities and doings of the bodies these models began to reveal. In this way, the Lego model became “a physical analog of the topic being discussed” (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009, p.65).

Projective techniques, however, are not free from concerns. As described earlier, this method can potentially disclose participants' hidden and unconscious knowledge, an aspect that raises ethical questions. As Day (1989, p.7, italics added for emphasis) describes, this kind of technique has

the advantage of allowing the researcher “get below the surface” and to overcome several barriers of communication. Not only might subjects be unaware of underlying motivations or unable to express themselves, but they also may be *unwilling to disclose* certain feelings.

Consequently, projective techniques have the potential to reveal participants' deep-seated emotions, feelings, beliefs, and embodied experiences bringing into question the choices made by researchers regarding the kind of information they want to access when employing these techniques. Thus, as researchers, we must ensure participants' welfare when employing methods that deal with emotions and feelings, a process that needs empathy, consideration, and care from our part (Ward and Shortt, 2020). However, as Ward and Shortt (2020) point out, these methods are not invasive and are not designed to force participants to reveal insights against their will. On the contrary, they offer an opportunity to see differently, to expand the prerogatives of the field making researchers sensitive toward the entanglement of “bodies and things in their doings” (Bramming et al., 2012, p.57); thus, bringing materiality into the research process.

When employed as a projective technique, Lego has the potential to ‘re-perform’ histories (Hickey-Moody, 2020) revealing participants' situated and discursive-material realities, for “practices of knowing cannot be fully claimed as human practices, not simply because we use nonhuman elements in our practices but because knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part” (Barad, 2003, p.829). Consequently, Lego intra-act (Barad, 2007) with participants in the process of world-making, emerging as a research collaborator that prompts us to “remember experiences, to modify materials in certain ways rather than in others, and to have emotional, sensory, intellectual, and memory-based responses that are quite specific to the material assemblages of making practices” (Hickey-Moody, 2020, p.725). Thus, Lego does not describe participants' worlds, it enacts them (Law and Urry, 2004), a process of intra-action in which the researcher, the research apparatus, and the object of research, are inextricably entangled enabling “*the happening* of the social world – its ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness – to be investigated” (Lury and Wakefold, 2012, p.2)

3.1.4 Participatory workshops

Extending the use of projective techniques, I additionally conducted a series of participatory workshops. As Ørngreen and Levinsen (2017, p.71) describe, a workshop is “an arrangement whereby a group of people learn, acquire new knowledge, perform creative problem-solving, or innovate concerning a domain-specific issue”. Workshops are facilitated settings that allow participants to share individual views regarding a topic, reflect on the resemblances and disparities of those views, develop new connections to learn how these perspectives affect each other, assess causes and consequences, and expand individual and collective knowledge (Shaw, 2006). The use of workshops provides the opportunity to render visible employees’ tacit knowledge (Kortegast et al., 2019; Seppänen, Pässilä and Kianto, 2019; Storvang, Mortensen and Clarke, 2018), the kind of knowledge that is difficult to pin down and put into words (Ambrosini and Bowman, 2001). Therefore, workshops facilitate access to knowledge acquired in the flow of experiences, practices, and actions (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) employing generative tools (Storvang, Mortensen and Clarke, 2018).

A workshop, as Graham et al. (2015) suggest, denotes a ‘place’ and a ‘process’ of encounters. As a place, workshops unfold as specially arranged events circumscribed within a specific time frame (Ørngreen and Karin, 2017), “a temporary place to meet to investigate or solve specific problems” (Storvang, Mortensen and Clarke, 2018, p.158). As a process, workshops have a series of developmental phases that often unfold in sequence: (1) *diagnosis*, the definition of the problem or challenge to explore and solve; (2) *planning*, the definition and selection of the workshop space, structure, content, materials, and exercises; (3) *facilitation*, the real-time unfolding of the experience guided by a facilitator who supports participants to achieve the workshop’s goals; and (4) *analysis*, the evaluation process to determine whether new connections and patterns were found (Storvang, Mortensen and Clarke, 2018).

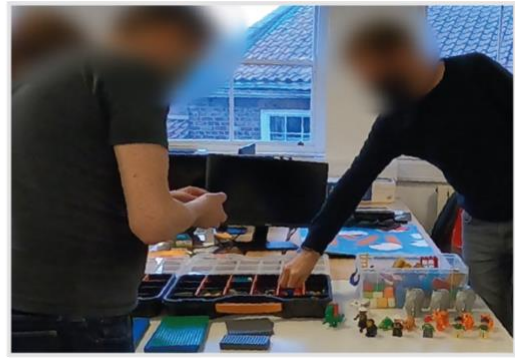
Even though the use of workshops for research has been understudied (Storvang, Mortensen and Clarke, 2018), scholars such as Ørngreen and Karin (2017) hold the view that workshops as an enquiry method address two purposes. On the one hand, the workshops are authentic; thus, the experience is designed to explore and solve specific topics of interest for the organisation or group. On the other hand, the workshop is also specially designed to address the research’s objectives and purposes. In this way, the workshop functions as a gateway “to create contexts through which to delve into questions that will reveal what matters to those people in the context of what the researcher is seeking to find out” (Pink and Morgan, 2013, p.352).

As Storvang, Mortensen and Clarke (2018) suggest, when workshops are used as a research method, three roles unfold: (1) *the researcher*, who designs the purpose and content of the workshop; (2) *the facilitator*, who supports the process motivating and directing participants; and (3) *the participant*, who takes part of the workshop enacting the planned exercises and activities. As the authors explain, these roles are not mutually exclusive as the researcher can take part in a workshop either as a facilitator or as a participant. Consequently, the use of workshops as a data collection method facilitates the interaction between a group of people to discuss specific situations (Graham et al., 2015) contributing to open spaces for constructive dialogue and reflection (Inns, 2013) democratising the process of knowledge production (Graham et al., 2015). In this way, the participant becomes part of the “data-producing apparatus” (Ørngreen and Karin, 2017, p.73).

In this research, I conducted a series of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) workshops (e.g. Kristiansen and Rasmussen, 2014; Blair and Rillo, 2016) to explore topics of interest for the organisation and its members, as well as to deepen my research enquiries around leadership, creativity, and play. LSP is a type of projective and constructive technique (Lindzey, 1959) that involves building 3-D models employing Lego bricks as a medium to uncover gut-felt knowledge (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009). Overall, this approach includes four steps: (1) posing the question, (2) building the model, (3) sharing, and (4) reflecting (Kristiansen and Rasmussen, 2014, p.51). Image 3 below illustrates this process in action.



(1) Posing the question



(2) Building the model



(3) Sharing



(4) Reflecting

Image 3: The four Lego Serious Play steps in situ

In step one, the facilitator asks participants a question or poses a challenge, for instance: *using your Lego bricks, build a model that represents how creativity happens in your workplace*. Subsequently, participants are given 15 to 20 minutes to build an answer with the bricks. After the building stage, each participant shares the meanings and ideas behind the Lego model. In this part, participants can ask further questions regarding the models and their parts. Finally, participants reflect on the multiple answers on the table aiming to find connections and further insights into the challenge.

Overall, LSP has been employed in the management field in a number of contexts including strategy-making (Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004), corporate training (Wheeler, Passmore and Gold, 2020), innovation and creativity development (Zenk, Primus and Sonnenburg, 2022), tourism management (Wengel, McIntosh and Cockburn-Wooten, 2016), and management education (Geithner and Menzel, 2016). However, as discussed in the literature review, the use of play as a management technology often depicts a ‘performative intent’ (Lyotard, 1984). Consequently, this body of research tends to illustrate how these facilitated workshops can improve several organisational processes thanks to their ‘playful’ and ‘fun’ nature. As such, LSP is used as a tool that creates ‘liminal spaces’ for change interventions, or a “highly ambiguous, creative, reflexive and change-inducing in-between space, where normal organizational routines and structures are momentarily ceased” (Piironen, 2022, p.40), spaces that are built to

promote the discussion of organisational issues and thus ‘playfully’ harvest employees’ insights. Under this lens, LSP disguises work with the manipulation of toys as a projective artefact that accelerates the obtention of meaningful and useful resources for the organisation, all of it whilst employees ‘have fun’ in doing so.

In this thesis, however, I did not assume that participants would ‘play’ or have ‘fun’ just because they would manipulate Lego bricks nor attempt to use the method due to its performative power in harvesting employees’ insights around work tasks. The main objective, therefore, was to create research contexts where I could assess the emergence of leadership in a potentially playful and creative space; thus, aiming to reveal further insights regarding my research enquiries to “probe and intervene in such a way that the “invisible” and unspoken elements of everyday life emerge as research knowledge” (Pink and Morgan, 2013, p.353). However, to negotiate my access to the field, I had to design the workshops in such a way that they would also benefit the organisation discussing topics of interest for the team members. Therefore, there was a trade-off between my interests as a researcher, my critical stance, and the performative nature of the method. Likewise, it is important to note that the main difference between the use of projective techniques in the context of the interview and the workshop, is that in the former, the technique is administered individually whilst in the latter the application occurs in group settings addressing a dual purpose: (1) that of providing the organisation with a valuable and authentic experience; and (2) that of obtaining meaningful data as a researcher (Ørngreen and Karin, 2017).

In total, between September 2020 and April 2021, I conducted 12 Lego workshops (6 face-to-face and 6 online) ranging between 120 and 194 minutes each. Lego models and explanations were digitally recorded and verbatim transcribed. In addition, pictures and still images were collected with participants’ consent. During these workshops, I fulfilled the role of researcher and facilitator (see Storvang, Mortensen and Clarke, 2018) planning the workshops, providing the Lego materials, facilitating the activities, and collecting data. During the *diagnosis* stage, I used to meet James –the company owner– every month to discuss possible topics to work with during the Lego sessions. Thus, each session focused on a theme picked by the team members (mostly James, the owner), and I would design the workshop’s activities to fit that theme (see Figure 14 below for further details).

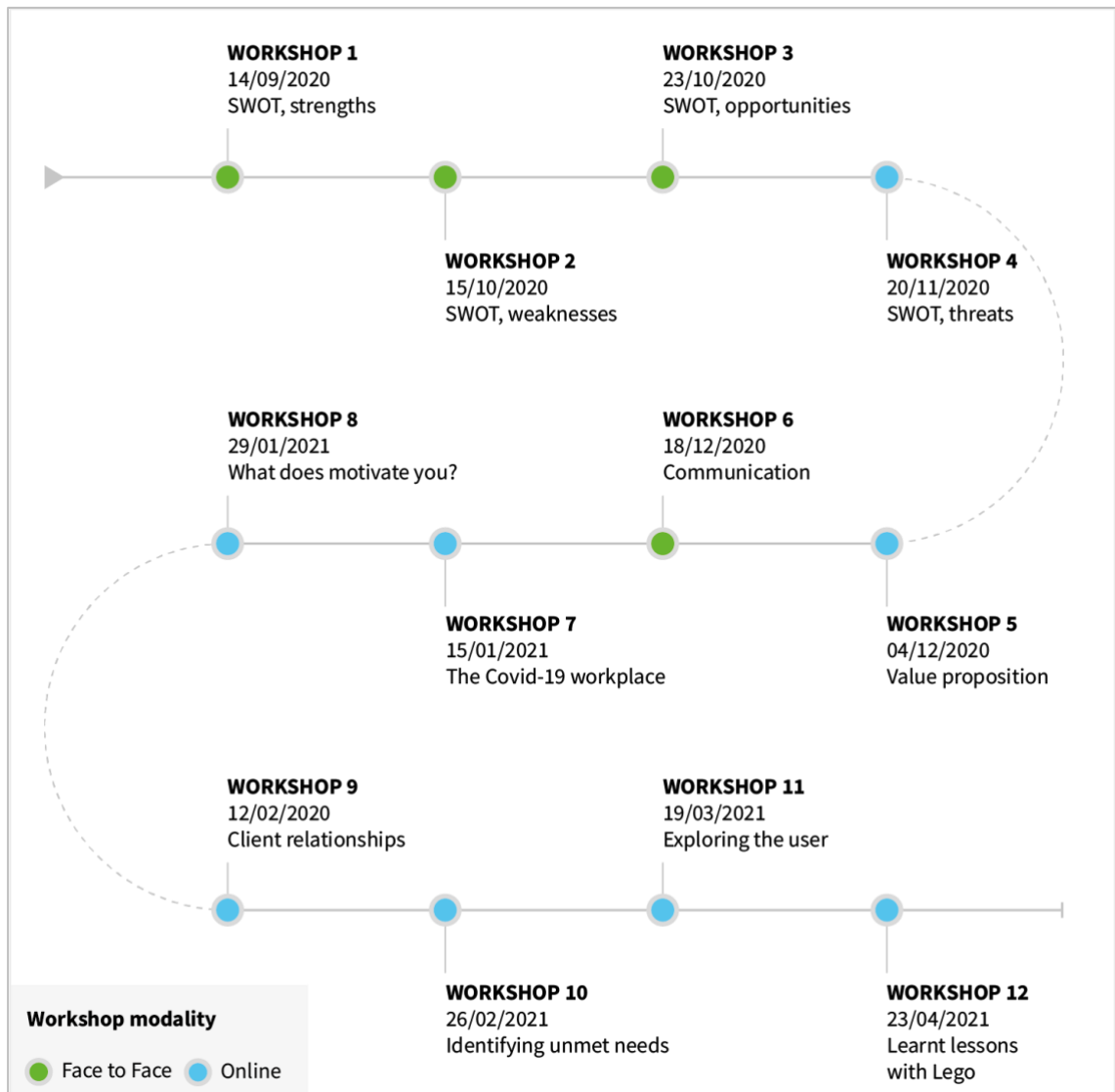


Figure 14: Lego workshops roadmap

For the *planning* stage, depending on the Covid-19 regulations, I set up the workshop in the physical office or online via Zoom. For the face-to-face sessions, I used to arrive at Digital Co.'s office 45 minutes before the schedule to prepare the room, place the Lego materials, and prepare my data collection devices. For the online sessions, I sent each participant a Lego box and configured the Zoom sessions by emailing invitation links for the team to join in. During the *facilitation* stage, I undertook a dual role as researcher/facilitator moderating the activities, motivating participants, and guiding the workshop whilst collecting data and asking further questions. Finally, during the *analysis* stage, after each workshop, the participants and I reflected on the insights uncovered during the session.

LSP not only contributed to obtaining insightful outcomes for the organisation, but I was also able to witness further manifestations of play, creativity, and leadership in the workplace; thus, the workshops served as an interventional method to create new

contexts that revealed further insights related to my research (Pink and Morgan, 2013) opening a space for discussion and reflection on the organisation, its human and nonhuman actors, and its practices. Thus, when employing LSP workshops, “research *makes* things rather than simply documenting them” (Tarr, Gonzalez-Polledo and Cornish, 2018, p.37).

3.2 Empirical materials

Based on the above methods and techniques, the study produced 1.453 pages of field notes and verbatim transcriptions, and a large photoset of workshops, Lego models, Slack screenshots, and other visual materials. In total, this research generated 16 semi-structured interviews (10 with employees, 6 with clients), 12 participatory Lego workshops (6 face-to-face, 6 online), and 34 weeks of field notes (see further details in Table 4 below).

Table 4: Collected data

Method	Detail	Nº	Output
Field observation	Research diary	134 working days	455 pages of notes including pictures and screenshots
Semi-structured Interviews	Employees	10 interviews	195 pages of transcriptions including pictures of Lego models
Semi-structured Interviews	Clients	6 interviews	82 pages of transcriptions
Semi-structured Interviews	Informal interviews	2 interviews	47 pages of transcriptions
Lego workshops	Face-to-face	6 sessions	356 pages of transcriptions including pictures of Lego models and sessions
Lego workshops	Online	6 sessions	318 pages of transcriptions including pictures of Lego models and sessions

4 Data analysis and presentation

4.1 Analytical approach: An abductive grounded theory

Data analysis consisted of several iterative steps employing grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 2006) and abductive reasoning (Mueller, 2018; Richardson and Kramer, 2006; Earl Rinehart, 2021) employing a new materialist approach to coding (Fox and Alldred, 2021). As Glaser and Strauss (2006, p.2) describe, grounded theory (GT) is “the discovery of theory from data”. GT aims to build theories and concepts ‘grounded’ in data developing codes and categorisations to make analytical interpretations (Charmaz, 2006), an “integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study” (Corbin and Strauss, 1990, p.5).

GT has been regarded as an analytical approach that fits the ethnographic tradition (Spradley, 1980) and leadership research (Kempster and Parry, 2011) being particularly useful during the first stages of analysis. GT contributes to highlighting what aspects of the field may deserve further attention, organising empirical materials, and obtaining deep familiarity with data (Timmermans and Tavory, 2007). Moreover, GT contributes to focusing the analysis around processes, actions, interactions, and conditions (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) finding *emerging patterns* ingrained within data (Walsh et al., 2015). Finally, the GT process, as Walsh et al. (2015) suggest, is not bounded to any specific paradigm; thus, being compatible with multiple research philosophies (e.g. Holton and Walsh, 2017; Walsh, 2015). As Glaser and Strauss (2006, p.18) argue, “the process of generating theory is independent of the kind of data used”. Therefore, GT is an ontologically and epistemologically flexible approach (Holton, 2007; Walsh et al., 2015).

On the other hand, abductive reasoning is a “double story: one part empirical observations of a social world, the other part a set of theoretical propositions” (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014, p.2). Thus, whereas *induction* is data-driven and *deduction* theory-driven, *abduction* is driven by mystery and astonishment (Brinkmann, 2014), a conversation between theory and data (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). As Peirce (1998, p.106) –the father of abduction– argues, this kind of inferential reasoning “makes its start from the facts, without, at the outset, having any particular theory in view, though it is motivated by the feeling that theory is needed to explain the surprising facts”. Therefore, abduction uncovers an unexplained anomaly moving toward plausible explanations to better understand the anomaly (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021). As Thornberg (2012, p.247) explains, abduction is

about discovering new concepts, ideas or explanations by finding surprising events, which cannot be routinely explained by pre-existing knowledge. Thus, by abduction, the researcher goes beyond data as well as the pre-existing theory or theories. It is an innovative process because every new insight is a result of modifying and elaborating prior knowledge or putting old ideas together in new ways as the research explores and tries to explain the new data.

Even though it is often argued that a GT emerged as an inductive approach (Walsh et al., 2015), researchers seldomly enter the field as a blank canvas (Goulding, 2005; Thornberg, 2012). Theory generation never depends just on empirical materials as researchers are already entangled with a manifold of theories, concepts, literature, and experiences (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Therefore, abduction has been defined as the kind of inference that characterises grounded theory (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Richardson and Kramer, 2006; Reichertz, 2007; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Under this inferential lens, theories can be used as 'heuristic tools' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) integrating previous pieces of knowledge with new empirical experiences (Kelle, 2007). Consequently, abductive research constantly navigates back and forth between data and theory (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). Thus, as I read and re-read my empirical materials, I remained aware of my theoretical toolbox using it as a source of inspiration to widen my analytical sensitivity whilst staying open and perceptive to what empirical data was revealing to me (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Thornberg, 2012), being sensitive to the materiality of the field and the affective capacities of bodies (Childers, 2014; Fox and Alldred, 2021). To sum up, throughout my analysis I developed ideas and concepts grounded in data whilst letting myself get inspired by existing theories to enrich my analysis process.

4.2 New materialist coding: Tracing bodily encounters, relations, and affects

For data analysis, I followed a new materialist approach to coding (Fox and Alldred, 2021). Coding, as Charmaz (2006, p.43) describes, "means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data". Coding aims to identify patterns or themes grounded in data that resonate with the research enquiry (Braun and Clarke, 2006). From a grounded theory perspective, scholars such as Corbin and Strauss (1990, pp.12–14) have identified three non-linear coding processes: (1) *open coding*, the process of breaking down data to identify emergent themes; (2) *axial coding*, the process of grouping open codes to create thematic categories; and (3) *selective coding*, the unification of axial codes around a core category to explain the phenomenon under study (see also Williams and Moser, 2019).

Even though coding has been regarded as ‘offensive’ or ‘antithetical’ within the posthuman paradigm (cf. Brinkmann, 2014; Childers, 2014; MacLure, 2013a; St. Pierre and Jackson, 2014), when managing big volumes of qualitative data some degree of coding seems inevitable (Harding, Ford and Lee, 2017). Moreover, MacLure (2013a, p.181) holds the view that coding should not get entirely discarded; rather, it should be seen as an open-ended experiment “with order and disorder, in which provisional and partial taxonomies are formed, but are always subject to change and metamorphosis, as new connections spark among words, bodies, objects and ideas”. Therefore, throughout the data analysis process, I also followed a Spinozo-Deleuzean framework to coding described as *ethological* analysis (Fox and Alldred, 2021).

Ethology is the study of relations, of capacities to affect and to be affected that characterise all bodies and how these affects enter into relations of composition or decomposition (Deleuze, 1988), or as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe, the processes of de- and re- territorialisation immanent to those relations (see [chapter two, section 4](#) for further details). Under this lens, an ethological analysis aims to uncover bodily capacities, encounters, entanglements, and flows of affect within clusters of events, as well as the productive consequences of such encounters (Fox and Alldred, 2021). As Duff (2010, p.629) observes, ethology “suggests that affects and relations constitute the basic mechanisms by which capacities and orientations are exchanged or transmitted in encounters between bodies”. Consequently, throughout my coding process, I became sensitive to all types of material encounters aiming to attend to “what happens when things get knotted up with other things” (Jackson and Mazzei, 2016, p.94), paying particular attention to the ‘doings’ of bodies (Jackson, 2013). Consequently, rather than coding what people said, I aimed to articulate a coding framework based on affects, relations, capacities, and encounters (MacLure, 2013b; McCoy, 2012; Fox and Alldred, 2021; Ringrose and Renold, 2014).

Before beginning with my analysis, for the sake of data manageability and organisation, my first step was to compile data indexing my paper-based and digital materials (interviews, transcripts, fieldnotes, and photosets). Digital materials were indexed through computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) employing NVivo (QSR International). The first stages of analysis were carried out on paper copies to familiarise myself with the materials and uncover nascent themes. After the first rounds of paper-based analysis and exploration, I employed NVivo to manage, visualise, and code data.

As the amount of data produced by non-probabilistic studies is often voluminous (Conger, 1998), first I had to make sense of the whole corpus of empirical materials by selecting, abstracting, and extracting portions of data and disassembling it into smaller components (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). In doing so, I adopted *open* coding techniques experimenting with order and disorder (MacLure, 2013a) as I began to uncover and develop my first nodes. In this stage, I conducted my analysis on paper copies, highlighting portions of data with markers and colours, assigning and writing labels on the margins (see Image 4 below), and developing rhizomatic connections and diagrams across my emergent codes (see Image 5 below) to make sense of nascent themes and data clusters my empirical materials began to reveal.

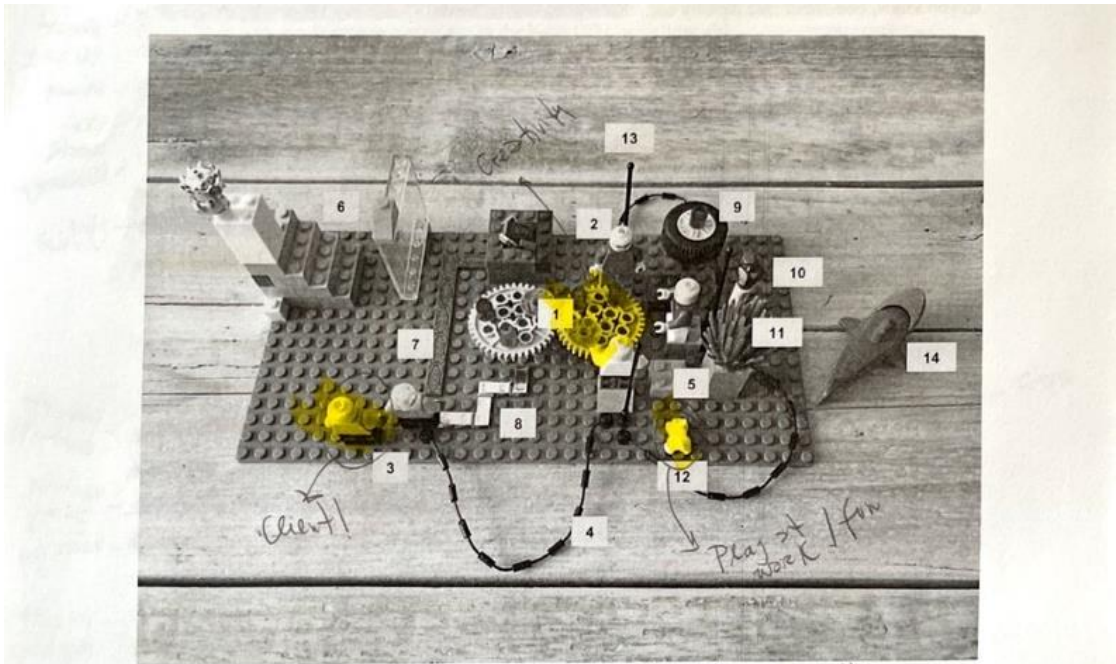


Image 10: P3's model on the company strengths

P3: Cool, right... So, I've got similar sort of waking thing at the centre line [1] ((two incomprehensible words)) representing the work that we're doing is, is the centre of our strengths. I think [ahm] the way that we [2] contribute our ideas to the work, and to sort of make a, what the client [3] wants this is, this is the kind of ((incomprehensible word)) generally the quiet sort of open minded... but is dressed in dark clothes cause' can be a pain in the ass [we all laugh]... I think you're a big... a big strength of ours [2], as you've alluded to, as well is this sort of communication, teamwork between us [4]. And we, we bring our client into that team as well. But, you know, the, the, the team is really us focusing on the

Remot.
- The work

- Client partner

- The Client

- Commu

Client plug-in

P2: Browsing Lego, I'm looking for ideas. And so- so it's- it's a case of having a notion of what, I can't remember exactly what it was I was trying to build that, but it was always a notion of having an idea, the- the central idea, and then [looking for bit that guide that] it's not like I'm looking for a specific piece, that's not the case at all, I'm looking for ideas in that box. Sometimes, I am looking for a specific piece to be fair. But that's usually towards the end. And you sort of go, oh what could that be? What could I use this piece for? How can I express this idea? Or you see a piece and it speaks to you and it goes well, I'm that thing, I can be that thing that you want. So, think, clearly on that day, I can see that I'm picking lots of transplant pieces. So, that was sort of part of the aesthetic there. So, it would have been quite keen to grab um, those sorts of bits. That might be me worried, P3's gonna take something there. Get away from my box!

Lead by the brick

- Browsing Lego

Idea + Lego + Box

- Browsing

Idea

The call of the brick

Collecting pieces.

- Box

Image 4: Examples of first data analysis iterations conducted on paper copies

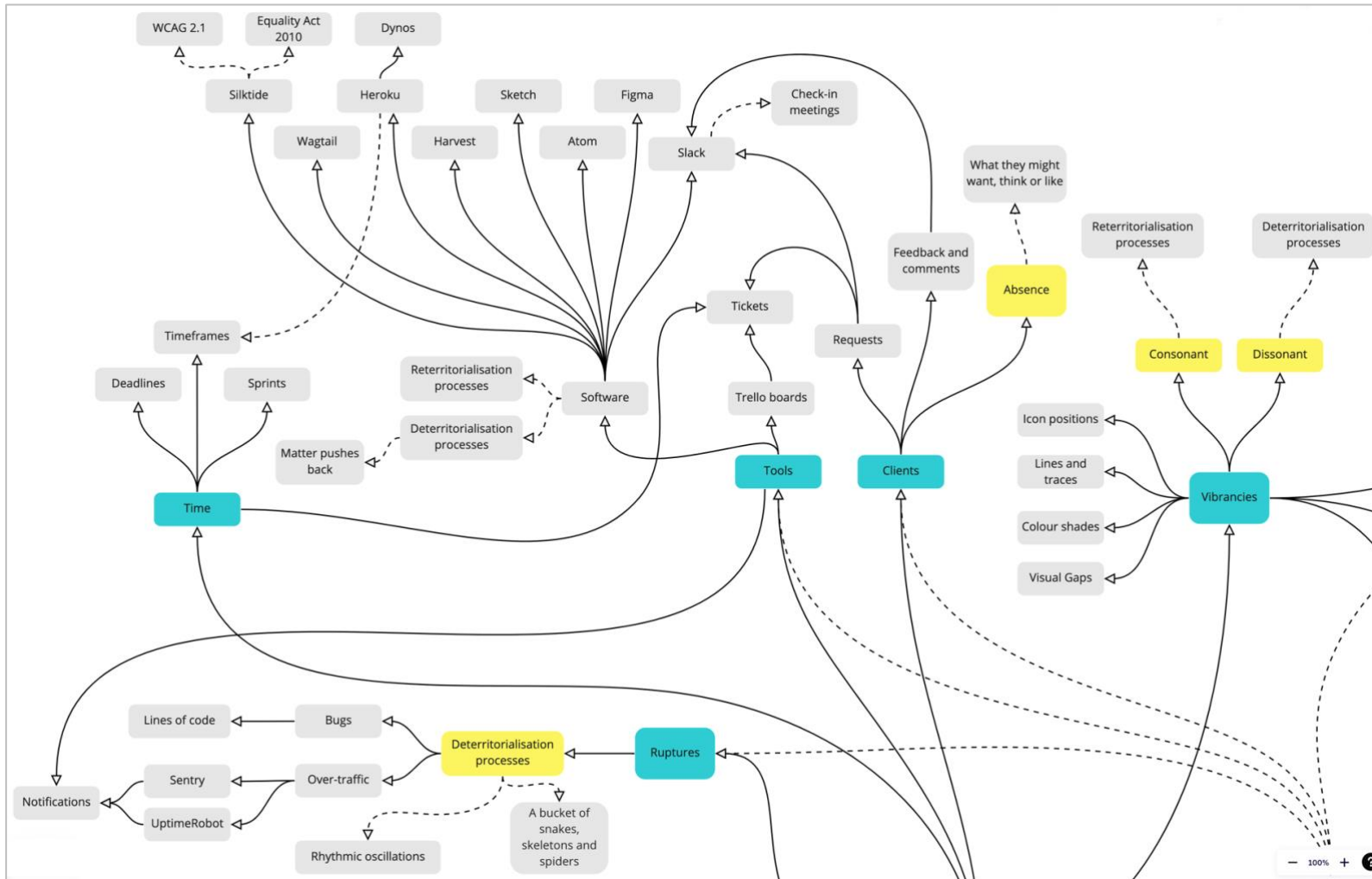


Image 5: Screenshot of rhizomatic connections and emergent themes

Thus, in the first iteration of the analysis, I developed *open* codes identifying several thematic clusters (e.g. Ford et al., 2017; Harding, Ford and Lee, 2017) revealing human-nonhuman actors, entanglements, flows of affect, and intensities. Subsequently, as I began to uncover further relational encounters, I considered theory-inspired and data-driven codes including, but not limited to, led by software, affective ruptures, leading absences, vibrancies, the spell of Lego bricks, and so on. As numerous codes began to emerge, in the second stage of analysis I reassembled my open codes into broader themes developing *axial* labels such as ‘encounters with software’ (see Image 6) to cluster open codes including, for instance, ‘deterritorialising clients’ (see Image 7). In this stage, I began to focus on encounters and flows of affect produced within human and nonhuman relations. This stage of analysis was conducted with NVivo.

- Encounters with clients
 - Absent clients
 - Affective residues
 - Client approval
 - Client feedback
 - Client requests
 - Deterritorialising clients
 - Meetings with clients
 - Presenting work to clients

Image 6: Example of coding process on NVivo

Reference 5: 0.03% coverage

■■■ notes that the audience was ‘not the easiest today’. ■■■ echoes the comment. The tension was present during the meeting. I was an observer and felt it. The silent pause, the serious voice. ■■■ says to the guys that he will check the project proposal as he is sure that mobile application was not covered by the contract.

Reference 6: 0.02% coverage

In the meantime, I write to ■■■. Just as he said before to the team, he replies me that the meeting didn’t go as well as he expected. I ask ■■■ whether he thought the meeting was tense. He agrees. ■■■ replies that he ‘senses’ ■■■ ‘vibe’, a vibe of dissatisfaction.

Image 7: Data extracts from ‘client’ codes, NVivo screenshot

Thereafter several rounds of analysis uncovering and experimenting with several open and axial codes, I finalised the analysis process with *selective* coding unifying all the themes and subthemes under a core category: the leaderful qualities of matterly encounters (selective code), uncovering five of these qualities (axial codes) as I further develop in [chapter four](#) and [chapter five](#). Image 8 below depicts the process of synthesis I conducted with my open and axial codes.

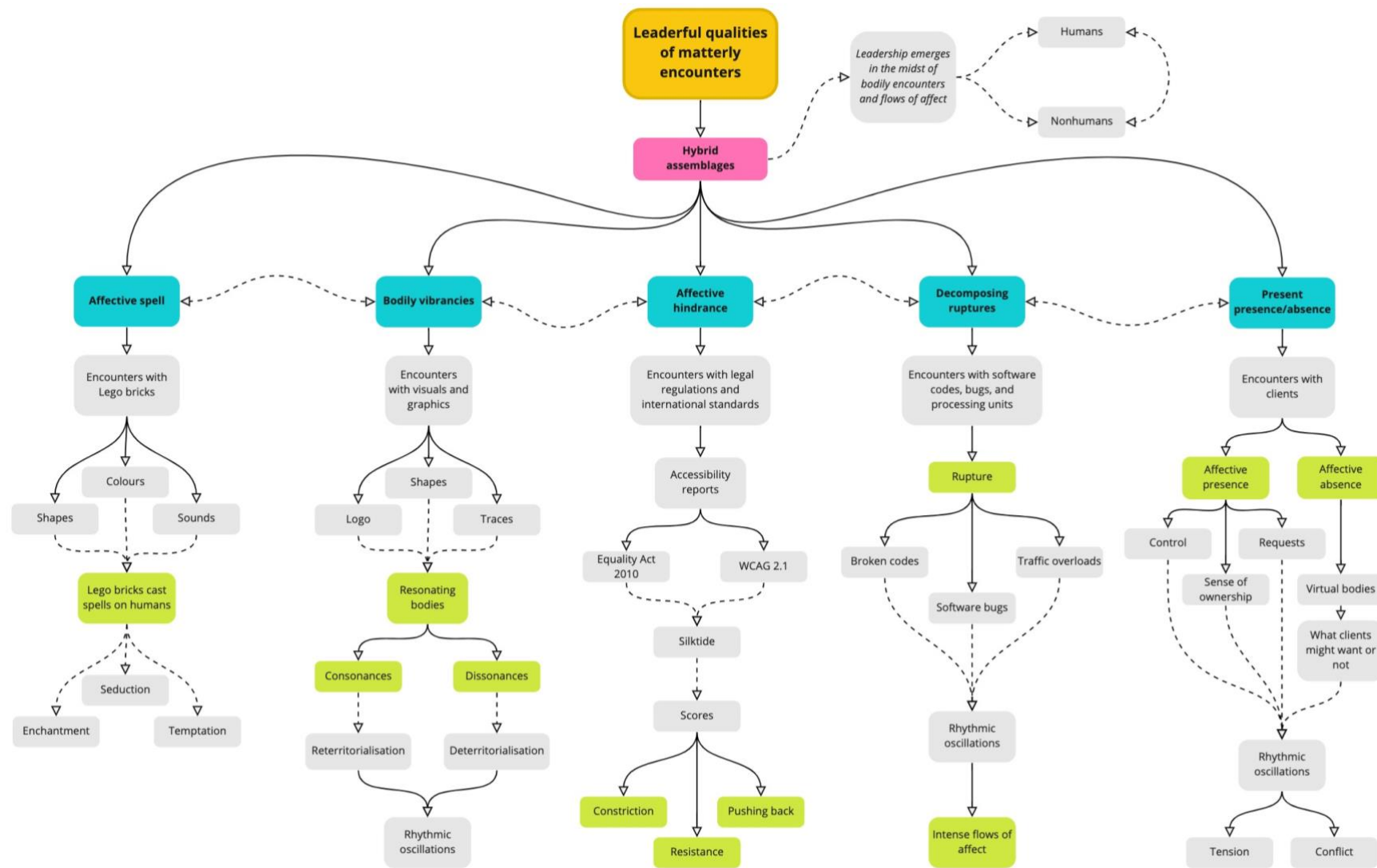


Image 8: The leaderful qualities of matterly encounters, selective and axial codes

However, as I began to uncover leaderful qualities of matterly encounters, I also realised that these qualities used to overlap and repeat across multiple encounters. Therefore, to present my data in a coherent and compelling way, I organised my empirical findings and themes in the shape of stories and antenarratives (Boje, 2001; Strand, 2014) arranged in a set of *acts* and *scenes* that describe the doings of matter and how bodies co-produce direction at work, as further explained below.

4.3 Writing ethnographic tales: Material storytelling

Ethnography involves several choices concerned with how to present ethnographic data (Van Maanen, 2011a). Scholars such as Jarzabkowski, Bednarek and Lê (2014) hold the view that researchers can present ethnographical accounts by transforming raw data into vignettes, composite narratives, and process stories. Others as Van Maanen (2011b) discuss three narrative conventions: realist, confessional, and impressionist. Either employing one convention or another, writing ethnography should always aim to portray a culture in a way that is engaging, accessible and believable, a balancing act between literary voice and validity (Madden, 2017). Thus, writing ethnography involves *storytelling* (Jørgensen, 2011) supported by solid data (Madden, 2017).

My approach to presenting my 'tales of the field' (Van Maanen, 2011b) follows the notion of 'story', "an account or recital of an event or a series of events or incidents" (Yolles, 2007, p.74) I arrange in *acts* and *scenes* (see for example Eghenter, 2018). Stories of work practices contribute to a better understanding of the inherent complexities and relationships that unfold in organisations (Bechky, 2006). Stories, as opposed to narratives, do not require a beginning, middle or end (Boje, 1995); thus, whereas narratives involve coherence, plot, chronological order, sense of time, and self-containment, stories can be incoherent, unplotted, unordered, fragmented, un-patterned, and non-linear (Barge, 2004; Boje, 2001; Yolles, 2007). Stories are not static, nor complete, but are always in-flux, in becoming (Humphreys, Ucbasaran and Lockett, 2011; Svane, 2019). Thus, emphasising stories rather than narratives implies acknowledging the incomplete and open nature of experience (Jørgensen and Boje, 2009). Consequently, stories unfold before or 'ante' narrative (Boje, 2001; Yolles, 2007). As "[o]rganizations cannot be registered as one story, but instead are a multiplicity, a plurality of stories and story interpretations in struggle with one another" (Boje, 1995, p.1001), antenarrative involves working with a multiplicity of pasts, presents, and futures (Jørgensen, 2011).

Materiality is inherent to storytelling (Boje, 2014; Strand, 2014; Svane, 2019). As Ingold (2012, p.434) remarks, understanding materiality is telling “what they do and what happens to them when treated in particular ways – in the very practice of working with them”, materiality is therefore ongoing historicity (Barad, 2003). Strand (2014) coins the term ‘material storytelling’ to illustrate that stories emerge from manifolds of space, time, and matter. From this perspective, she argues that material storytelling involves the entanglement of three story modes: (1) *stories of space*, the physical, spatial, and material surroundings of organisations; (2) *stories of bodies*, human, physical and present bodies; and (3) *stories of artefacts*, objects and things (Strand, 2014, p.76). Material storytelling renders visible material-discursive entanglements emerging within intra-playing stories of space, bodies, and artefacts (Jørgensen and Strand, 2014). Thus, as Law and Mol (1995, p.291) observe, relational materialism is a way to tell “[e]ndless stories about the kaleidoscope of materialities”.

Based on the above, the acts and scenes I deploy in the empirical section of this thesis portray several stories of human-nonhuman encounters at work and how within these encounters, leadership emerged and unfolded in the context of creativity and play, which I conceptualised during the ethological coding process as the ‘*leaderful quality of matterly encounters*’.

4.4 On the messiness and humanness of the research process

This methodological chapter has presented a very curated and highly polished view of how this research came about. However, it is important to note that, in practice, the research process is much more messy and much less structured than our written accounts make it look, for the social world can be a chaotic place, sometimes diffuse, complex, never static, and always in motion. As I have mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, as a researcher, I was deeply affected by the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of this, I had to change my research approach being forced to rethink how to carry out my empirical work. As organisations began to shut down and work from home, I closely followed the news wondering how I would be able to carry on with my project. I began to feel the stress of the unknown. Unsurprisingly, the recruiting process proved to be a complex, challenging, and even disheartening process. What to do when no one answers your emails and phone calls? What to do when no one is being responsive to you for weeks? I spend more than two months trying to find participants; however, I was utterly unsuccessful. I began to feel the pressure, to see the shadow of failure, the dark prospect of not being able to conduct my research. I began to feel the weight of uncertainty.

It was on one of those days when I felt desperate that I decided to go, in a manner of speaking, 'old school' and knock on some doors. That day I walked around the city for hours with the hope of finding at least one person in one of the organisations I was targeting for. I remember it very well, I visited more than ten design, marketing, and branding agencies, but no one was there, I only found empty offices, what to do now? What place to visit? I often thought. Suddenly, at Digital Co., I found James, who used to work at his office during the peak of the pandemic. I talked to him about my project, and he seemed interested. A ray of hope! He asked me to send him more information and said that he would give me an answer during the week. The answer did not arrive though. A week later, I wrote to him, he had been busy, replying that the whole team was on board with the project. My recruitment process was the lucky product of James being at his office the very day I decided to knock on some doors, for he did not use to work there daily. After months of uncertainty, I was finally able to start with the empirical stage of my project. I felt a deep sense of relief knowing that I solved one of the most challenging aspects of my research during the pandemic.

With the recruitment process finally sorted out, it was time to collect data. However, my access to participants was highly restricted due to the technical barriers of information and communication technologies. Because of Covid-19, I had to learn how to use Slack and connect to the internet every morning; thus, being in front of my laptop for long hours, forced to collect digitally mediated data, confined at home. In the beginning, I was not even sure what to pay attention to. In an ideal world, I would have had face-to-face contact, observing people, artefacts, and practices in an office, and not in front of a computer. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of uncertainty, not knowing how to act, what to look at, or what to do. I felt disoriented. Thus, I began my data collection process writing down everything I was able to observe. I had to navigate a certain 'darkness' in the research process, not knowing where to go, or what to ask. As my access to Slack channels was restricted, in trying to get more clues regarding the daily work of this team, I attempted to make my way by asking questions and permission to observe meetings between the team members, or between the team and their clients, this is how I was able to obtain further access after a few months of immersion in the company. It was a constant process of negotiation. Interestingly, as I started to notice certain bodies instead of others, I would begin to closely follow specific events, flashes of intensities, and material vibrancies that would catch my attention. I began to find a sense of direction.

The data collection process; however, was not always smooth. When organising the Lego workshops, for instance, I always hoped for the team to be able to participate, and more importantly, for them not to cancel the scheduled activities. However, I did experience cancellations and disruptions because of the workload or a suspected Covid infection. What I planned for my research not always was what I was able to accomplish in practice. Thus, I experienced multiple ups and downs. At times, I felt the frustrations of developing my

research project in the middle of a 'once in a century' pandemic, wondering whether I would be able to accomplish my purpose or not. Sometimes, I felt the monotony of being every day in the same and often cold spot of my apartment, just waiting for things to happen. I would describe the process of conducting research in such conditions as an emotional rollercoaster, feeling frustrated, excited, tired, happy, and so on.

Likewise, when conducting the analysis process, I experienced multiple difficulties when selecting what to include or exclude from my findings. Due to the rich variety of bodies and events I was able to capture, I often felt overwhelmed by the more than a thousand pages of data I was able to create. How to start with such a daunting task? Interestingly, as I began my analysis, certain events would begin to vibrate or 'glow' (MacLure, 2010), deviating my attention toward specific materialities and encounters. I have chosen MacLure's notion of 'glow' as it explains in a very compelling way what happened to me during the analysis process. This glow, as she contends, describes when

some detail – a fieldnote or video image – starts to glimmer, gathering our attention. Things both slow down and speed up at this point... the detail arrests the listless traverse of our attention across the surface of the screen or page that holds the data, intensifying our gaze and making us pause to burrow inside it, mining it for meaning (MacLure, 2010, p.282).

It was within this process that I began to find meaningful connections, relations, and leaderful effects. The data that glows reveals the affective connections I developed with my empirical materials, and what I felt at the bodily level. I was led and enchanted by such glimmers. It was when I encountered such a glow when time seemed to stop, for I used to get deeply immersed in the analysis process. I began to entangle myself with my data. The analysis stage, however, was not always an easy and smooth process. Often, I used to put themes and codes together just to break them apart shortly after, especially when I felt I had reached a sort of dead end with such direction, when I did not feel convinced by my claims. It was an iterative process in which I closely related to my data, allowing it to speak to me, show me its glow, looking for a clue that would inspire me.

The events and embodied experiences I went through during the development of my project, as those described above, reveal at the same time some of the challenges and discrepancies of conducting a piece of 'posthuman' research, where inevitably some human aspect will leak into the realm of the nonhuman. This thesis is the result of my embodied and very human experience as a researcher, of the fears, worries, insecurities, excitements, and glows I experienced at the bodily level throughout the process. The 'I' played a pivotal role, for it was my entanglement in this research setting, my affective relations with data and participants, and my choices that have given this research a shape. It was I, the human researcher, who

decided what to observe or not. I decided to follow certain materialities instead of others, it was a human selecting what nonhumans would get recorded into my research diary, how they would get codified in the analysis, and how they would get organised and presented in my thesis. We cannot escape the grasp of humans even when we are trying to bring the nonhuman in. However, the aim was not to eradicate the human aspect, but to place humans in a web of relations with other human and nonhuman entities, to show that organisational life flows amid a plethora of encounters and relations between actors and their affective capacities within a specific historical, social, and cultural context.

5 Ethical considerations

As Edmonds and Kennedy (2017, p.xiv) argue, “concerns about research ethics and potential harm inflicted on human subjects put severe limits on what is feasible, requiring social scientists to have at their disposal a plethora of possible approaches to apply to given problems”. Thus, aligned with the institutional regulations of the University of York, this research was subjected to ethical approval complying with the University’s codes of practice and ethical guidelines. In this regard, participants were previously informed regarding the research objectives, data collection and data processing procedures, data storage and security, and the risks associated to participate in the study as well as the strategies to mitigate such risks. Under this basis, participants provided informed consent.

One of the main ethical issues I had to consider was that of observing people (Grove and Fisk, 1992; Hammersley, 2007). Observational methods can be conducted with the prior knowledge of participants or in covert/concealed mode. The latter entails major ethical problems due to its deceitful nature (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007); however, this research did not consider any form of covert data collection. Moreover, potential risks to participants included breach of confidentiality and privacy. Therefore, to protect participants’ identities, names, faces, and other visible identifiers were concealed and anonymised both in-text and on visual materials employing pseudonyms and image processing software. Likewise, edited images, screenshots, and extracts from Slack conversations and other projects were obtained and shared in this thesis with the participants’ consent. Access to un-edited data was restricted to the researcher and his supervisors.

Finally, in line with Covid-19 regulations, to protect my health and that of participants, I conducted most of my fieldwork employing socially distanced methods. Only when (1) legally allowed, (2) with participants’ agreement, and (3) with no suspicion of infection, I

conducted limited face-to-face data collection, always using face masks, sanitiser gel, and ensuring natural ventilation.

6 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the philosophical foundation of this thesis. Grounded on posthumanism (Gherardi, 2019a) and new materialisms (Fox and Alldred, 2017), this study follows a relational onto-epistemology of becoming acknowledging the open, dynamic, relational, processual, and performative nature of matter. To conduct this research, I have argued for an affective (Gherardi, 2019b) and virtual (Hine, 2008) ethnography immersing myself for 34 weeks in a creative and digital design agency I have given the pseudonym 'Digital Co.'. Data was collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, projective techniques, and participatory workshops. For data analysis, I followed an abductive approach to grounded theory (Richardson and Kramer, 2006) employing a new materialist coding framework (Fox and Alldred, 2021). To present data, I have outlined the rationale for the inclusion of acts and scenes presenting material stories of the field (Strand, 2014). Finally, I have presented a brief outline of the ethical considerations of this research.

The following chapters comprise the empirical sections and findings of this thesis. [Chapter four](#) introduces the research site providing details of team members, clients, spaces, and how creativity, as well as play, used to emerge in this field site. Then, [chapter five](#) will provide a series of stories organised around *acts* and *scenes* to illustrate the leaderful qualities of matterly encounters this thesis uncovers.

CHAPTER FOUR: ENTANGLING WITH THE RESEARCH SITE

The next chapter depicts the organisational context I entangled with throughout my nine months of data collection. The objective is to introduce the *situatedness* (Gherardi, 2000) of this study, that is, the emergent and provisional context fabricated through moment-by-moment situations and relations (Fox, 1997) within ongoing systems of activity and practice (Lave, 2009). Following Spradley's (1980) nine observational dimensions of social situations, I provide descriptive observations of three key situational aspects: actors, activities, and spaces. Moreover, throughout the chapter I discuss how creativity and play emerged in this organisation, revealing a close interrelation between both constructs, which often entangled, emerged, and unfolded within mundane and daily flows of work activities.

1 Introducing Digital Co.

Digital Co. is the pseudonym I have given to a *design* and *software development* agency located in North Yorkshire, United Kingdom. Digital Co. was a micro-firm with four full-time employees. The organisational structure consisted of two levels: a top management level occupied by James, the creative director, and a bottom technical level including three software and web developers: Richard, John, and Peter (see Figure 15 below).

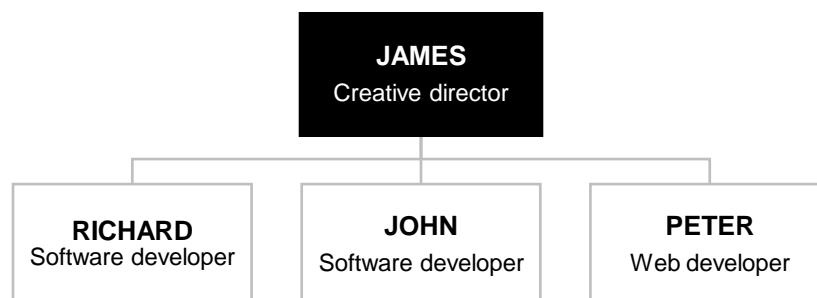


Figure 15: Digital Co.'s organisational structure

1.1 Team members

James was a 40-year-old male with a multimedia design background. As the company owner, he had to wear many hats, for he managed the business, projects, clients, and relationships. James had to report both, his work and the company's work, to clients, ensuring they felt happy and satisfied with the projects and their development. As James recalls, however, his most pressing responsibility was keeping the flow of money coming into the organisation. As he remarked, "I have to think about the team, the client, the business, the money" (interview). As one of the developers mentioned, James had to

orchestrate the 'cohesive whole' for the company to have a steady stream of clients and revenues.

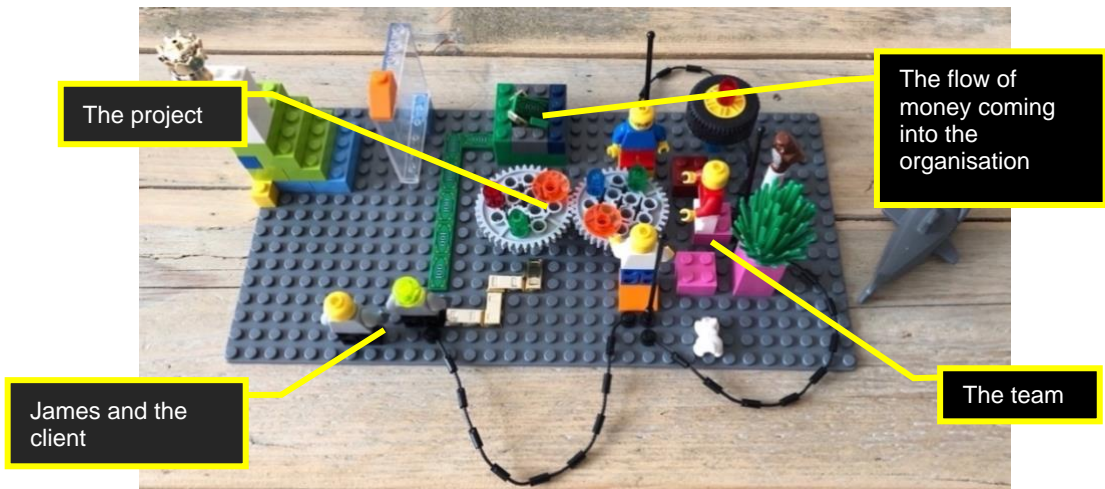


Image 9: James, the client and keeping the flow of money

Besides his management role, as the creative director, James created and communicated visual concepts and ideas including graphic design pieces such as web mock-ups, user interfaces (UI), infographics, and other design-related tasks and materials. He was the only designer in the team, although, he was planning to open a new designer position to cover his role allowing him to focus on managing the organisation and finding new projects.

James described himself as an open-minded person, as an individual capable of adapting and changing his thinking and being receptive to new ideas and inputs. Certainly, his open-minded nature allowed him to appreciate the potential of introducing the Lego workshops into his organisation. Initially, I negotiated my access to Digital Co. through him, James was the *gatekeeper* (Klenke, 2008), the human who provided, granted or limited access to me.

The second member of this team was *John*. He was a senior software developer, a 50-year-old male who joined the organisation in 2017. As John described, his role was that of a technical lead as well as a software developer. He was responsible for most of the technical decisions in terms of internal and external software architecture issues. His main task, nevertheless, was to write new software systems. Overall, John portrayed himself as a diligent and focused person, taking pride in the level of care and craftsmanship he felt he brought into the company.

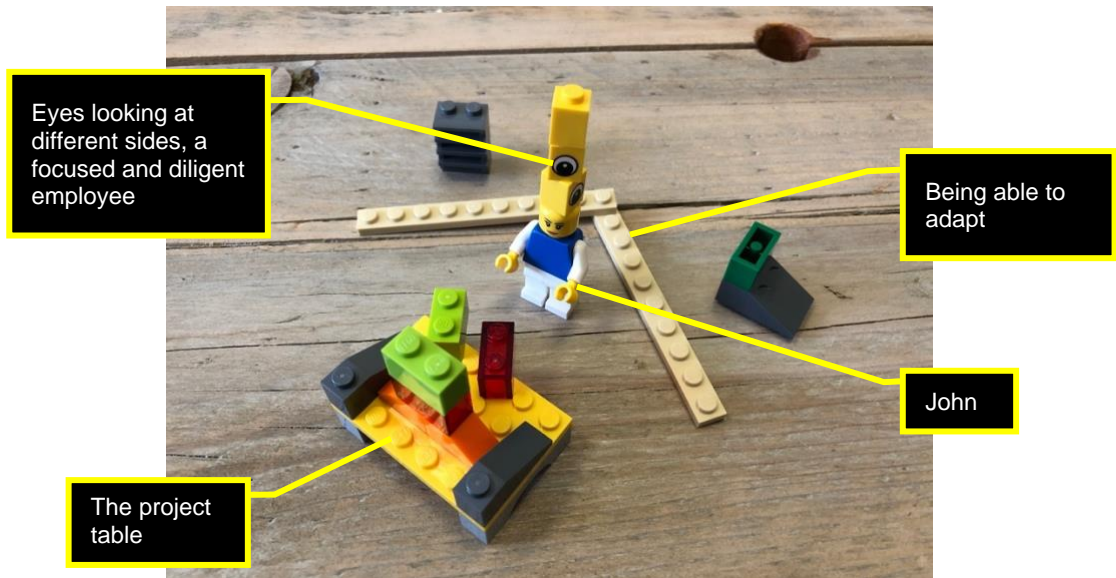


Image 10: John re-materialised with Lego

The third member of the team was *Richard*, a senior software developer. Richard was a 49-year-old male who joined the company in 2019. His role was to develop software code for websites and other web-based products. He was also responsible for liaising with clients, capturing requirements and needs, and translating those needs into web-based software solutions. Richard described himself as a 'hard worker', which as he mentioned, made him happy. For this reason, he claimed to spend plenty of his time doing his job, even outside his daily work schedule.

"I tend to work hard; I probably work too hard sometimes. But, you know, and I'll carry work outside of work, but it's, but generally, if the family can tolerate it ((laughs)). I enjoy it so I do it, you know what I mean?" (Richard, Workshop 2)

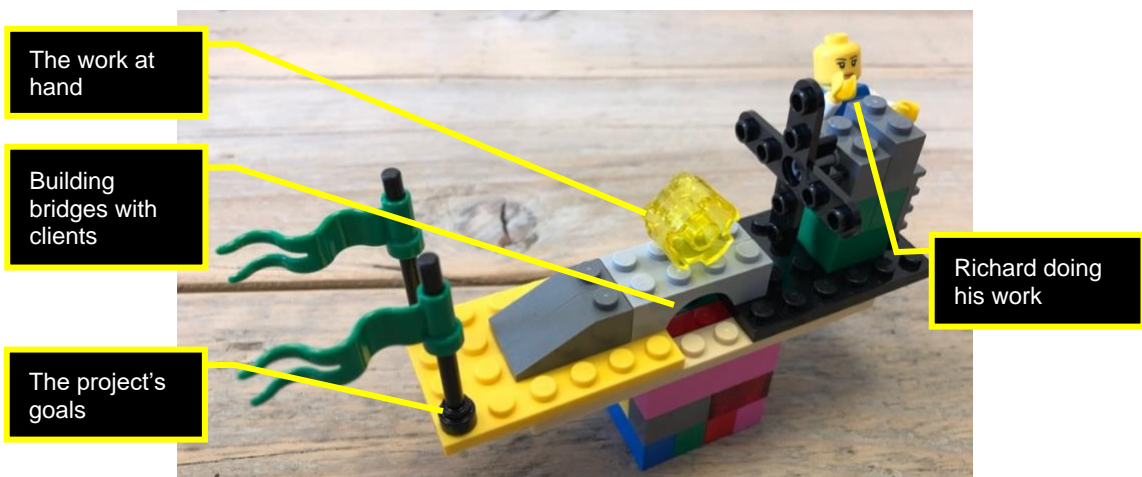


Image 11: A Lego model of Richard doing his work

The fourth team member was *Peter*, the newest employee. He was a 32-year-old male who joined the company in late 2020, a few months after I began my data collection. He was hired as a web developer to handle frontend issues translating designs, visuals, and graphic mock-ups into working web-based software code. As he remarked, his work was to make “things look nice” (interview). He worked closely with James, who would provide him with graphic and visual pieces for him to code. Peter described himself as a whimsical individual. As he was the newest member of the team, for the first couple of months he often remained observative and silent. However, the more time he spent at the company, the more expressive and talkative he would become.

Overall, the three developers reported directly to James. Even though the team members felt the organisation had an ‘easy and flat’ hierarchy, it was still an *asymmetrical* one where policies, objectives, and tasks would be usually assigned by James. Although the latter would respectfully consider advice and feedback given by his team members, he was the one who had the final saying on the projects’ development. He gave the green or red light to ‘crack on with work’, as he liked to say.

Interestingly, throughout my data collection process, the team members would frequently emerge and re-materialise on the Lego models holding tools and artefacts in their hands, revealing not only the presence of human bodies but the many nonhuman bodies they used to entangle with.

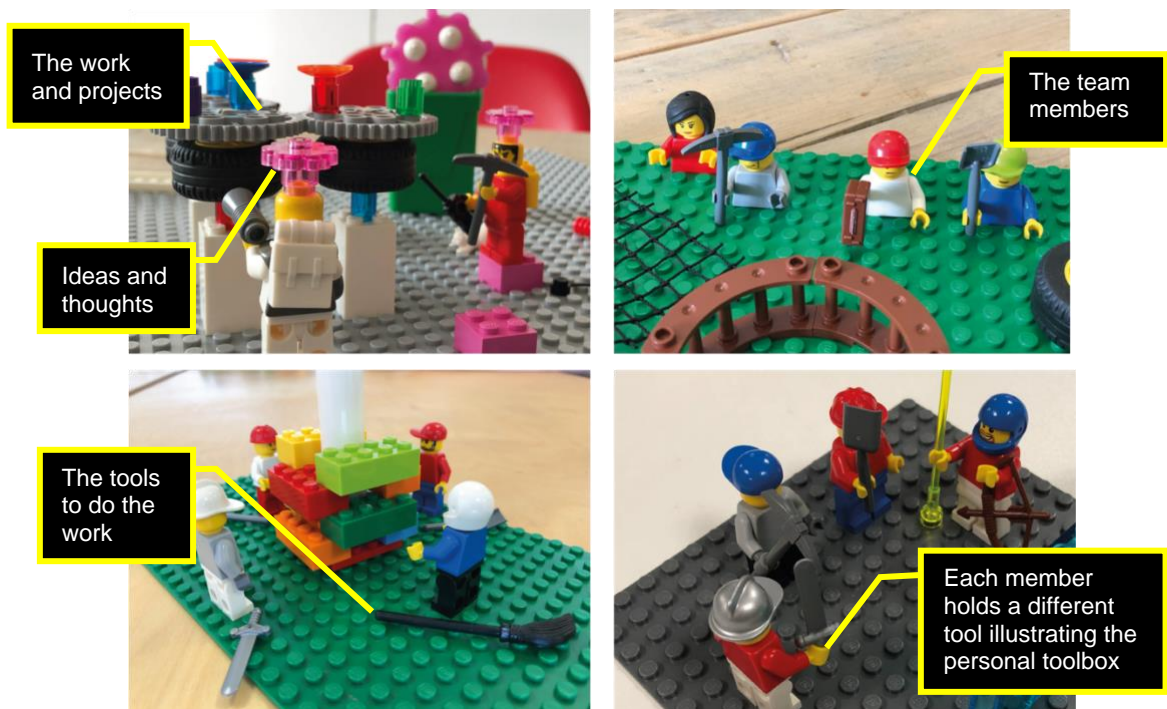


Image 12: The team and its tools to do the job

As Image 12 illustrates above, team members often emerged as Lego people (Minifigures), sometimes with flowers or lights over their heads illustrating ideas and creativity, and usually, holding different tools in their hands. These Lego tools re-materialised the many software, apps, and other web-based technologies they entangled with daily: Slack, Heroku, Silktide, Sentry, Wagtail, Django, Python, Sketch, Safari, Chrome, Firefox, and so on. Without these tools, as the team members reflected, nothing could happen, these tools were deemed as an essential component of this organisation and its creative work.

“I think in terms of software, we have preferred tools. And *we can't do our jobs without those tools.*” (Richard, interview, italics added for emphasis)

“I couldn't do anything. That's- it's all I have... it's kind of essential to how I work throughout the day... It's because we make stuff. Creative- the creative process needs- *you need tools to make things.*” (Peter, interview, italics added for emphasis)

1.2 Digital Co.'s history

The timeline below provides an overview of Digital Co.'s history, events, activities, and milestones since its foundation. This account of events emerged during an interview I had with James. Interestingly, even though James portrayed a very human-centric narrative based on the employees, partners, and clients the company has had throughout time, I was soon able to identify the presence of multiple nonhuman bodies affecting the organisation, contributing to co-produce the company's history and current direction.

1.2.1 A brief chronology of events and activities

Originally founded in 2007, this creative agency started as a one-person entrepreneurial venture. In 2008, James included his first business partner, Isaac. Six years after, in 2013, as Digital Co.'s client portfolio began to grow, the company hired its first employee and included a new business partner, Alex. By 2013, Digital Co. had three owners and one employee. However, due to several problems originating from a complex client, in 2015 the partnership was dissolved, James bought all the company shares and let all the employees go. As the sole owner, in 2016, he hired a new employee, Mark, who quit a year later due to conflicts with other members of the staff. By late 2017, the current team makeup began to emerge when James hired John. Subsequently, as the client portfolio began to grow again, in 2019 and 2020 respectively, the company also hired

Richard and Peter. Consequently, throughout its 13-year history, Digital Co. has experienced multiple shifts of staff and ownership (see Figure 16 below for further details).

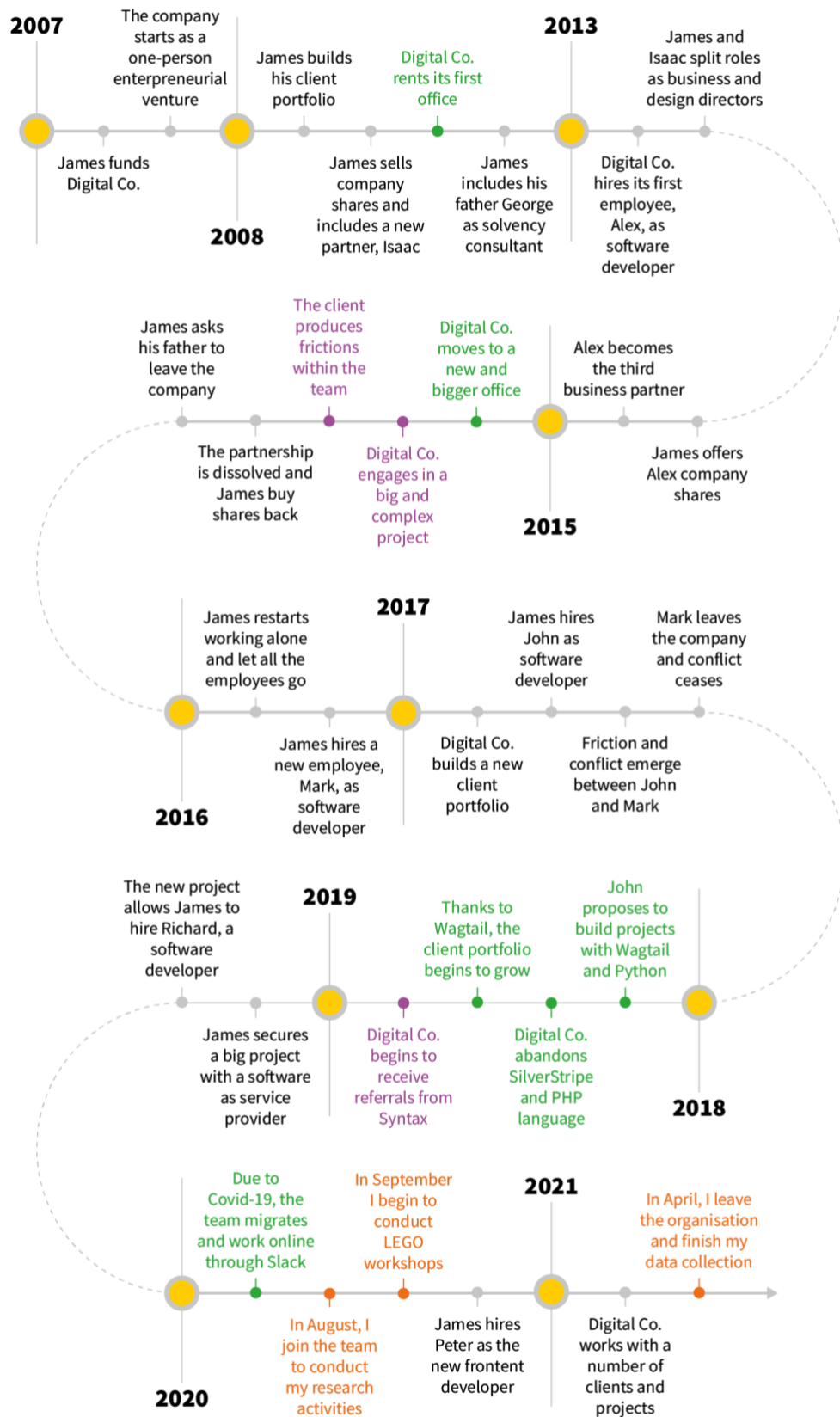


Figure 16: Digital Co.'s timeline, events, and milestones

By the time I joined the company, in 2020, Digital Co.'s business model focused on software/web development and design offering web-based *digital products* including web applications, web design, software development and maintenance, web hosting, as well as branding and graphic design services. To do so, Digital Co. employed a wide range of tools, software languages, apps, and technologies such as Wagtail, Python, Django, D3, Plotly, Heroku, and Silktide, to name some but a few. Overall, the main load of work consisted of developing incremental improvements to already-made websites including maintenance, blog pages, news pages, cookie banners, navigation menus, landing pages, and data visualisations (see for instance Image 13 below).

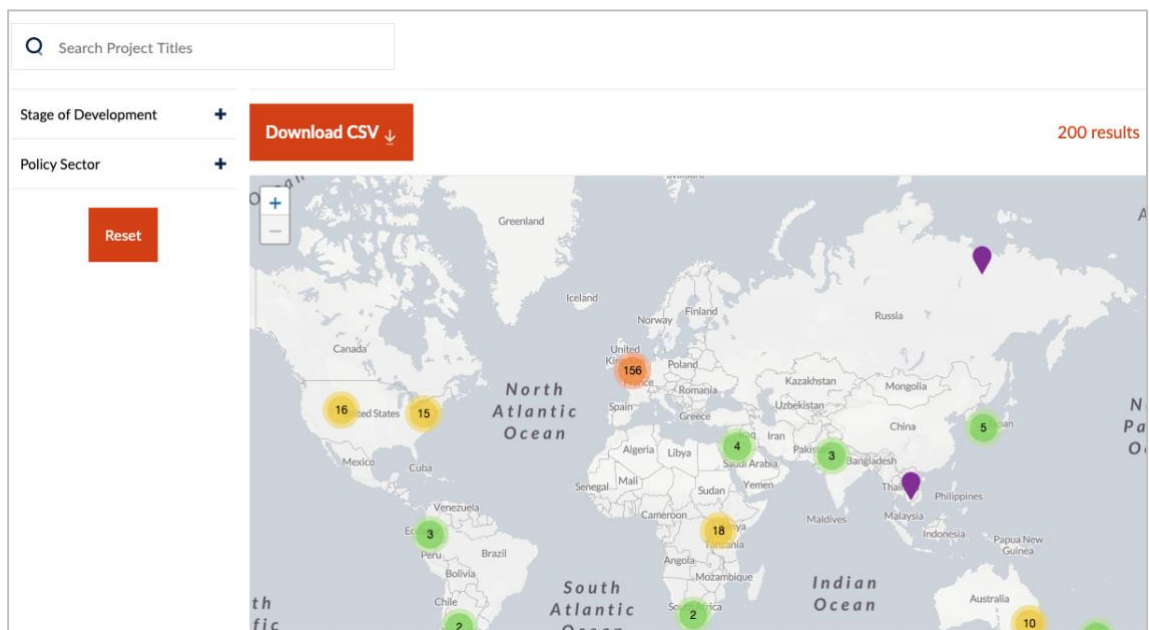


Image 13: An example of a data visualisation product developed by the team

However, even though Digital Co. offered a wide range of web and design products and services, this product portfolio was frequently translated into *time*, for in doing what it did, this organisation sold *chronological time*. As James describes,

“So, *we sell time*... when we quote jobs up, we'll talk about *how many days* it will take to do a piece of work. And that- that number of days will be multiplied by a *day rate*.” (James, interview, italics added for emphasis)

Consequently, Digital Co. offered clients a fixed amount of time per week/month to carry on specific design and web activities organised and packaged around sprints and deadlines. A ‘sprint’ was a fixed number of tasks and activities to deliver in a project. Often, I was able to witness how the team used to organise projects around time, evaluating how many hours or days to spend on each task, and setting specific timeframes. Consequently, in developing digital products and services, Digital Co.

measured work time with an app called [Harvest](#). This app allowed the team to track the amount of time spent on each task and project to invoice clients afterwards.

1.2.2 *Humans and nonhumans co-producing history*

The company's history, however, was not only defined by the multiple humans that entered and left the team throughout its 13 years of existence. Since its foundation, as James narrates, Digital Co. has implemented/discontinued a wide range of tools, apps, software, and technologies that have shaped the current situation of the company (see for example the green landmarks in Figure 16 above). Arguably, one of the most important milestones in Digital Co.'s history occurred in 2018, when James hired John. Before this, Digital Co. built web products using an open scripting code language called PHP and a 'content management system' (CMS²) called [SilverStripe](#). However, when John joined the company, he had a preference for using [Python](#), a more mature programming language. As he describes,

“Python is the language, and the language is Python. And if you want to do things with the CMS, you use Python to do it. You don't build a graphical frontend with lots of checkboxes to be able to modify and install components like WordPress, and you don't do it like that. You use Python, and you keep it simple. And you use the- it's a developer thing.” (John, workshop 10)

John felt that because of Silverstripe and PHP, the organisation was missing valuable work opportunities. Even though these two web technologies increased the team's capacities in the past, after a few years these became two decomposing forces, bodies that limited what the organisation could do or not, decreasing its capacities to develop projects and find new clients, slowing down its growth and positioning. Python, on the other hand, represented a grown-up technology to develop new and more sophisticated projects. For this reason, in 2018, the team decided to build for the first time a web project employing Python and [Wagtail](#). The latter, as James remarks, would become a “total game-changer” (interview) for the company.

Wagtail is an open-source, industry-leading CMS. Interestingly, whenever someone uses this content manager, the software sends an alert back to its creator, Syntax (pseudonym), a web development agency. As James narrates,

² A CMS is a web-based software that allows users to create, manage, and modify content on a website without needing specialised knowledge in software or any other programming language.

“...we've had this amazing opportunity with um, with a- with a company, who are, like a- like a really big digital agency, working for really big clients on really big projects. And we, they have basically outgrown their clients and started to sort of say to their clients, 'we're too big for you. We can no longer service you, you need to go and see Digital Co.'. And that's been, that's been amazing... Finding clients is difficult, building trust with clients so that they buy from us is really difficult. I mean, it- it's not insurmountable, obviously. But when- when you get a recommendation from a client's existing agency, and they say, go and work with these guys, the trust is immediately built.” (James, interview)

Syntax recommending Digital Co. meant that the negotiation process with new clients was faster, “an easy sell”, as James describes; thus, allowing the team to develop more projects with bigger budgets. The relevance of Syntax would emerge re-materialised in a Lego model as a big and benevolent elephant.

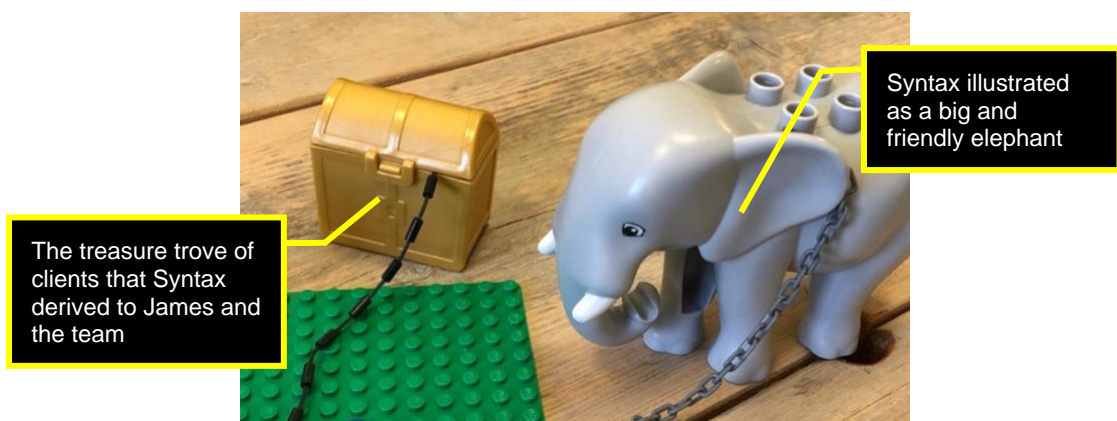


Image 14: Syntax, the benevolent company

Thanks to Wagtail, Syntax would generate new business opportunities at Digital Co. deriving a fresh and steady flow of projects and clients. Syntax became a strong composite force strengthening the company and its client portfolio. Even though inheriting already-made websites was not the ideal scenario for James, who always preferred to build websites from 'scratch', the main load of work and projects at Digital Co. nevertheless originated from websites and clients inherited from this 'benevolent elephant'.

1.3 Clients and projects

By the time I joined the team, Digital Co. was working with several clients. These clients came from different business and organisational sectors including IT, legal, education, and non-profit. Most of these clients were derived by Syntax. The following table provides a brief context on some of the main clients and projects the company was working with by the time I joined the team. To protect clients' identities, pseudonyms and broad descriptive terms are employed.

Table 5: Clients and projects

Client	Contact	Field	Description	Project/s
University	Andrew	Education	Centre of academic research in a UK-based university.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Incremental website development, maintenance, optimisation, and technical support.• Data visualisation development for a shared data project.
Drawing School	Claudia	Education	Observational drawing courses for children and adults, and postgraduate programmes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Incremental website development, maintenance, optimisation, and technical support.
College	Max	Education	Undergraduate and postgraduate educational entity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Incremental website development, maintenance, optimisation, and technical support.
Recruitment agency	Michael	IT	Software as a service provider (SaaS) focused on education and recruitment markets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Software codebase upgrading, maintenance, and technical support.• Building a new video-recording software for a recruitment and selection process digital product.
Lawyers	Phillip	Legal	An association of lawyers specialised in litigation and dispute working under a collective brand.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Incremental website development, maintenance, optimisation, and technical support.
Guides and Scouts association	Theresa	Non-profit	Supporting organisation for guides and scouts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Incremental website development, maintenance, optimisation, and technical support.

2 Workspaces: Fluctuating between face-to-face and online

This section provides details of the face-to-face and remote environments Digital Co. employed to conduct work. To begin with, I depict details of the physical space, layout, and practices carried out in each office area. Subsequently, I introduce the online office, Slack and Zoom, the virtual spaces the team migrated to due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.1 The physical office

Digital Co. had a somewhat big office in contrast to the team size, a place that could easily fit at least 15 employees inside. This was the physical space the team used to work in before the pandemic. Overall, this space had five main sections: (1) kitchen, (2) lounge area, (3) meeting room, (4) common table, and (5) desk space (see the Image 15 below for further details and layout). However, as the pandemic produced a series of restrictions, the office remained mostly empty since the outbreak began. Depending on the Covid-19 regulations, in this place I was able to conduct a few interviews and six Lego workshops.



Image 15: The office plan

When entering the office, the first point of contact was with the *kitchen*, on the right-hand side. In there, some cupboards and cabinets for storage, a fridge, a kettle, coffee and tea, the sink, extinguishers, the rubbish can, and paper tissues to dry your hands out. The kitchen was filled with objects and appliances that one can commonly expect in a working space. This was the place used by the employees to prepare coffee and tea.



Image 16: The kitchen

Next to the kitchen, there was the *lounge area* with two 3-seater sofas opposite each other, as well as a large wooden coffee table in-between. At that table, we often used to have coffees or lunch (when possible), have a conversation, some rest, as well as place design drafts for feedback.

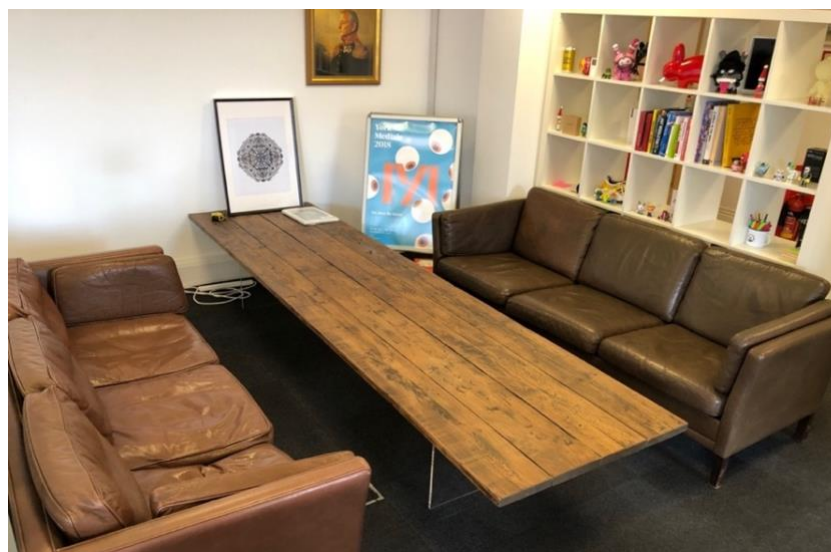


Image 17: The lounge area

The meeting room was located opposite the lounge area. This room was a medium-sized space with a wooden table placed right at the centre, five chairs around it, and a flat TV

screen. In the meeting room, James would commonly have reunions with the team or clients. It was also the place where he and I would talk about some of the projects, where I would conduct my interviews with the team, and where we would experience our first three face-to-face Lego sessions.



Image 18: A Lego workshop in the meeting room

We used the meeting room until Peter joined the team. After this, we moved our Lego sessions towards the *common table* located in the main area of the office. That place provided better conditions to comply with the Covid-19 restrictions. The common table area was spacious and ventilated, a big piece of furniture with enough room for six to eight people to sit around.



Image 19: The common table during a Lego workshop

Finally, surrounding the common table, 12 desks adjoining the office walls. This was an open space without cubicles or partitions. This is where James and the team, as well as other tenants, used to work, for James used to rent desk spaces to other small agencies to reduce rent expenses. Each desk contained one or two screens, keyboards, mice,

and accessories to connect computer peripherals and devices. However, due to Covid-19, the only members visiting the office were James and one of his tenants.



Image 20: Desk spaces

Interestingly, in one of our Lego workshops, the team discussed whether to keep or return the office, or whether to find a smaller and cheaper place to work. That workshop showed me the pivotal position the office had at the organisation, it was not just a dull and inert space, it was a place of contact, creativity, and spontaneity. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the team members missed being there, having face-to-face contact with their colleagues, having multiple presences around and, as Peter described, 'peering over the shoulder' (workshop 7).

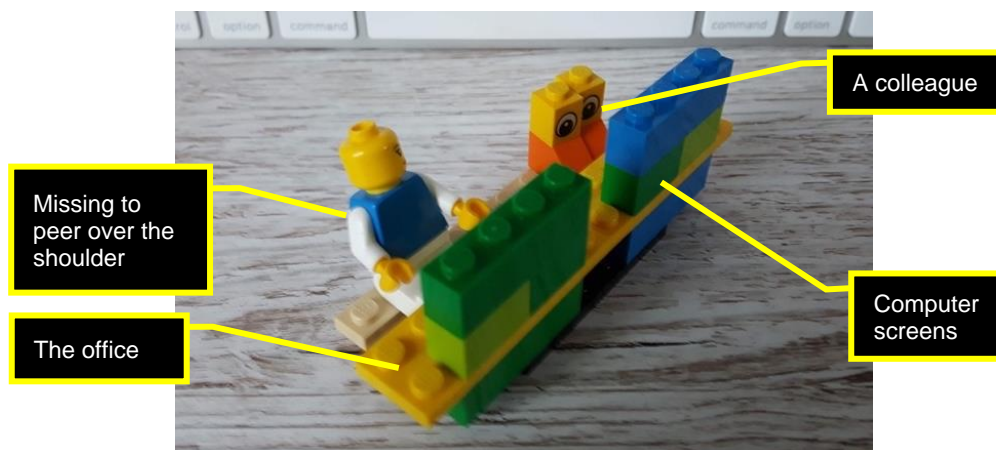


Image 21: What Peter missed the most in the workplace

Similarly, James argued that he missed sitting around and chatting with the team, and how he believed that creativity and fun emerged from those gatherings, moments where they could talk about work or personal interests having the opportunity to get together without the 'technical barrier' of video or chat messaging service.

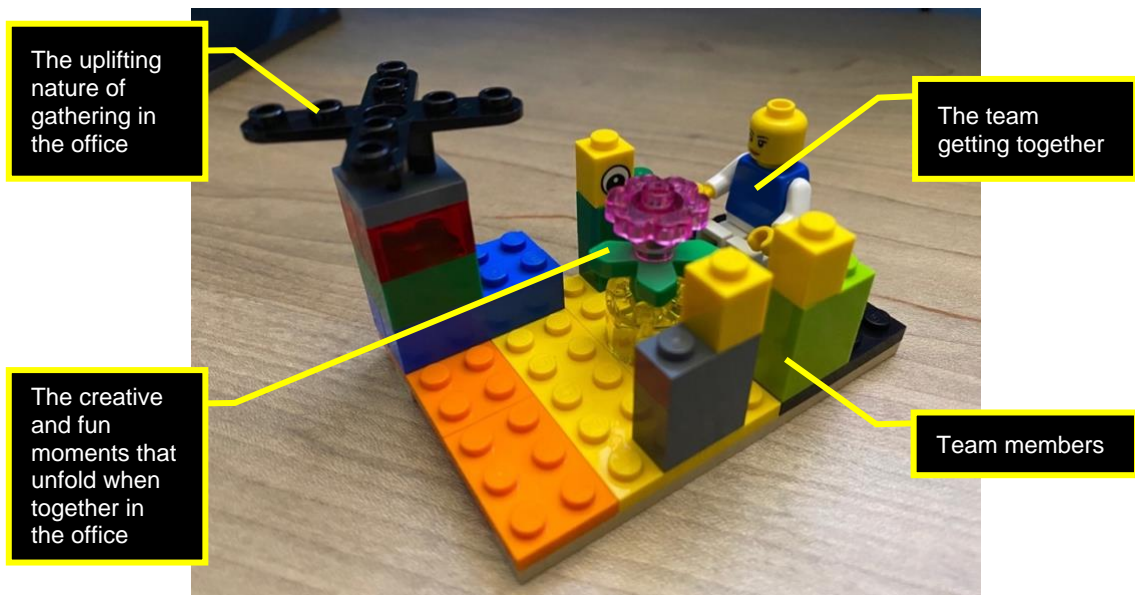


Image 22: What James missed the most in the co-located workplace

As John added, some of the work spontaneity had gone with Covid-19. It had changed the workplace.

“...it's not that like Covid-19 situation has- has evaporated that. It's changed it. And it's not the same. And the spontaneity is gone... I think it happens less with remote working and there's less- because the sponta- the opportunity for spontaneous conversations is less, it's not gone, but it's less.” (John, workshop 7)

The office, as James described, was the “base where us all come together” (workshop 7). James felt that they needed to keep the office as it increased the team’s affective capacities, it was more than a mere container of practice. Having a space was felt as ‘the right thing’.

“If we like the space, we can do a bit more to improve it and, you know, make it a better space for us, then, you know, that would be awesome. Um, but, you know, I certainly think having a space for us is- is the right thing.” (James, workshop 7)

The Lego models revealed to me how Covid-19 was affecting this workplace, producing a myriad of material effects, decreasing the team’s capacities to act, reducing the team members’ chances to meet in person, develop ideas for projects and solutions, be spontaneous, and have face-to-face peer support.

2.2 The online office: Connecting to Slack and Zoom

By the time I joined the team, due to the Covid-19 outbreak, Digital Co. conducted most of its work remotely employing information and communication technologies (ICTs). The main tool to accomplish this task was [Slack](#), a web-based messaging and working app, one of the main sources for data collection I employed throughout this research. Even though James and the team used Slack sporadically before the pandemic, they decided to migrate from the physical office to work remotely a little before the first wave of infections.

Slack was described as a *bedrock* for this organisation, as James once remarked (workshop 6), highlighting the pivotal role this app began to play due to the pandemic. As Richard narrates,

“Slack has been THE tool for us, you know, and we, we used it anyway in the office for various bits and pieces, but only really for, for chat, and to drop information for one of- the one, that people want about, but we didn't use it that much... in lockdown, we've used it loads.” (Richard, interview)

The platform provided the team with several features to carry on with its operations. Slack allowed humans to connect and communicate, share messages and files, conduct video and voice calls, share screens, showcase work, create channels, and organise their day-to-day work. Slack transformed itself into an online office, a virtual space for the organisation to carry on with work throughout the pandemic.

Slack was introduced to me the very day I began my fieldwork. As Image 23 below illustrates, the user interface was rather simple. A column on the left-hand side with a list of *channels*, and dedicated chat rooms to organise projects and work topics. My access to those channels was rather restricted. As James explained to me, they shared confidential and sensitive information about clients. Fortunately, as time passed by, James granted me access to a few more channels for me to observe and follow. The main channel from which I collected data was named *#team*, the place where the company centralised all its communications, shared files, links, comments, and organised daily work.

Immediately below the channel list was the list of team members, a feature that allowed users direct contact between each other. Adjacent to this column, to the right-hand side, it was the chat area, a dominant window including the chat log and the chat box. The chat log showed the history of messages and files shared by the team. Below the log,

there was the chat box, the space to type-in messages in and share links and documents with the team.

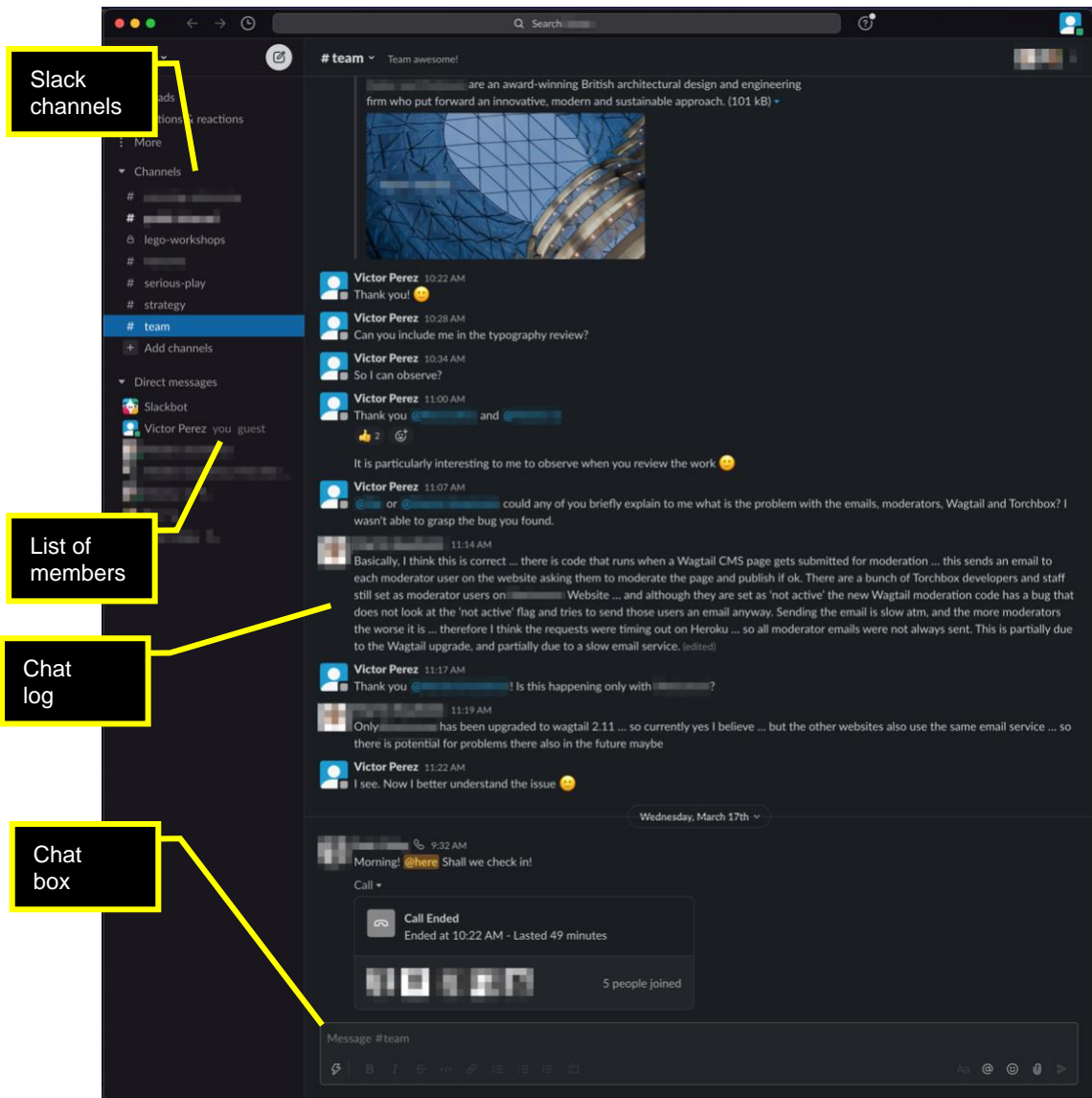


Image 23: A screenshot of Slack, the remote office

Most of the encounters I registered took place in this place, the #team channel, a zone of 'online' entanglements. In this place, I experienced the Covid-19 organisation and recorded the day-to-day flow of events. Slack transformed itself into a powerful nonhuman presence within the team, a composite force that increased their capacity to act.

Occasionally, when Slack was not available to use, like when the app suffered a global outage³, or when someone had a faulty internet connection, the team would alternatively use [Zoom](#), a video-conference and messaging application, another technological-

³ The Guardian report on [Slack's global outage](#). Accessed on December 21, 2021.

winning solution during the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, I would use Zoom with the team to conduct and experience six online Lego workshops when face-to-face contact was restricted by the Covid-19 regulations.



Image 24: A Zoom call during a Lego workshop

Thus, on our Lego days, the team and I would disconnect from Slack and move into Zoom. This video app allowed us to have smooth and consistent workshops. Through this platform, participants shared Lego models, and I streamed background music and recorded the sessions for posterior transcription and analysis. In summary, the co-located office, Slack, and Zoom were the three zones of encounters and admixture where the team members and I developed our activities. These were the contextual places and spaces where all the events and actions I recorded took place.

3 Life and work at Digital Co.

3.1 The daily work routine

A usual day of work at Digital Co., would typically begin around 08:30 to 9:00 A.M. in Slack (see Figure 17 below).

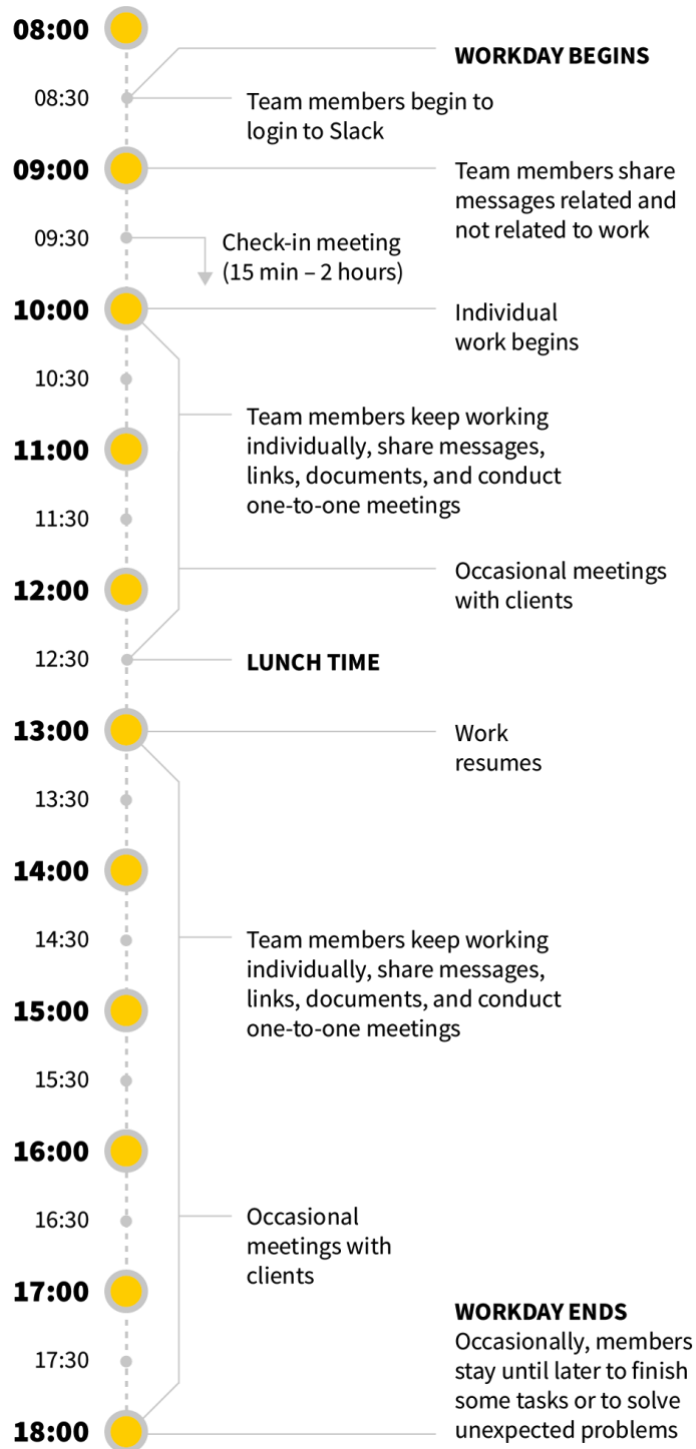


Figure 17: Digital Co.'s daily schedule

Every day, the team members would begin the work routine by connecting to Slack. Thus, early in the morning, a team member would often write a salutation, comment, or message to inform about some tasks in the making. Shortly after, often between 9:30 and 10:00 A.M., James would ask whether the team was ready for the daily *check-in* meeting.

The check-in meeting was the time-space moment to organise work, solve problems, and develop ideas for the projects at hand. These meetings could last as few as 15 minutes or extend for one or two hours, depending on the workload. During these check-ins, James often set the topic for discussion, communicated the organisational priorities, and asked the team what they were planning to develop during the day, jumping in and out between projects and tasks. As James describes, he did not overly prepare for these meetings and many times he used to go along as ideas popped out of his head. As John illustrates, the check-in meeting had a pivotal position, a “sort of central pillar around how we build our day these days” (workshop 6), as he described. Through Lego, the check-in meeting would emerge re-materialised as a central column to which every member was connected, a pillar with a flower at the top to signify how creative work used to flourish during these meetings.

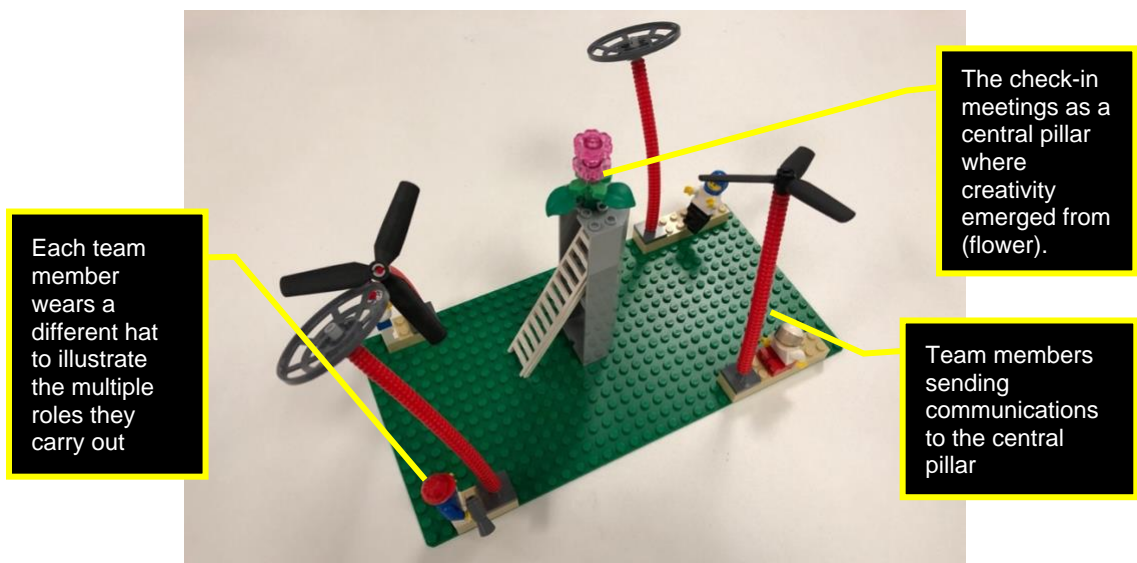


Image 25: John's Lego model illustrating check-in meetings and Slack

The check-in was a daily ritual, a performing event that legitimised James' role and authority within the team, for he was the one who orchestrated the content, pace, and rhythm of these encounters. During these meetings, the team members would talk about the projects, negotiate tasks, share screens to showcase work, develop ideas, and get feedback.



Image 26: A Slack check-in meeting screenshot

As each member explained personal tasks, plans, and progress; throughout the meeting they would also entangle with [Trello](#), a web-based project manager, creating tickets to materialise tasks and responsibilities, track progress for each project, and organise weekly work.

In Trello, work was organised in four columns: backlog, to-do, doing, and done (see Image 27 below). Each column contained manifold tickets, a compendium of tasks to accomplish during the week by each member of the team. These tickets provided an overview of what was happening with each project, tickets that the team members used to drag and drop around the board. As Peter described, these tickets would co-produce direction, leading each member throughout the week.

“So, the thing that James introduced a while ago, is the daily Trello tickets, um board. That's been really useful, especially for me, *giving me direction on stuff*. Like to the point where I sometimes, we have checklists of things within the tickets that I can work on. That's a really good *producer of direction* when I'm not entirely sure on what I'm going to be doing, it's been really, really helpful. And it's a good way of keeping track of what other people are doing... it's um, it's so much like a to-do list kind of thing. And it's a good way of seeing what work is in the backlog, what work is upcoming or has been done.” (Peter, interview, italics added for emphasis)

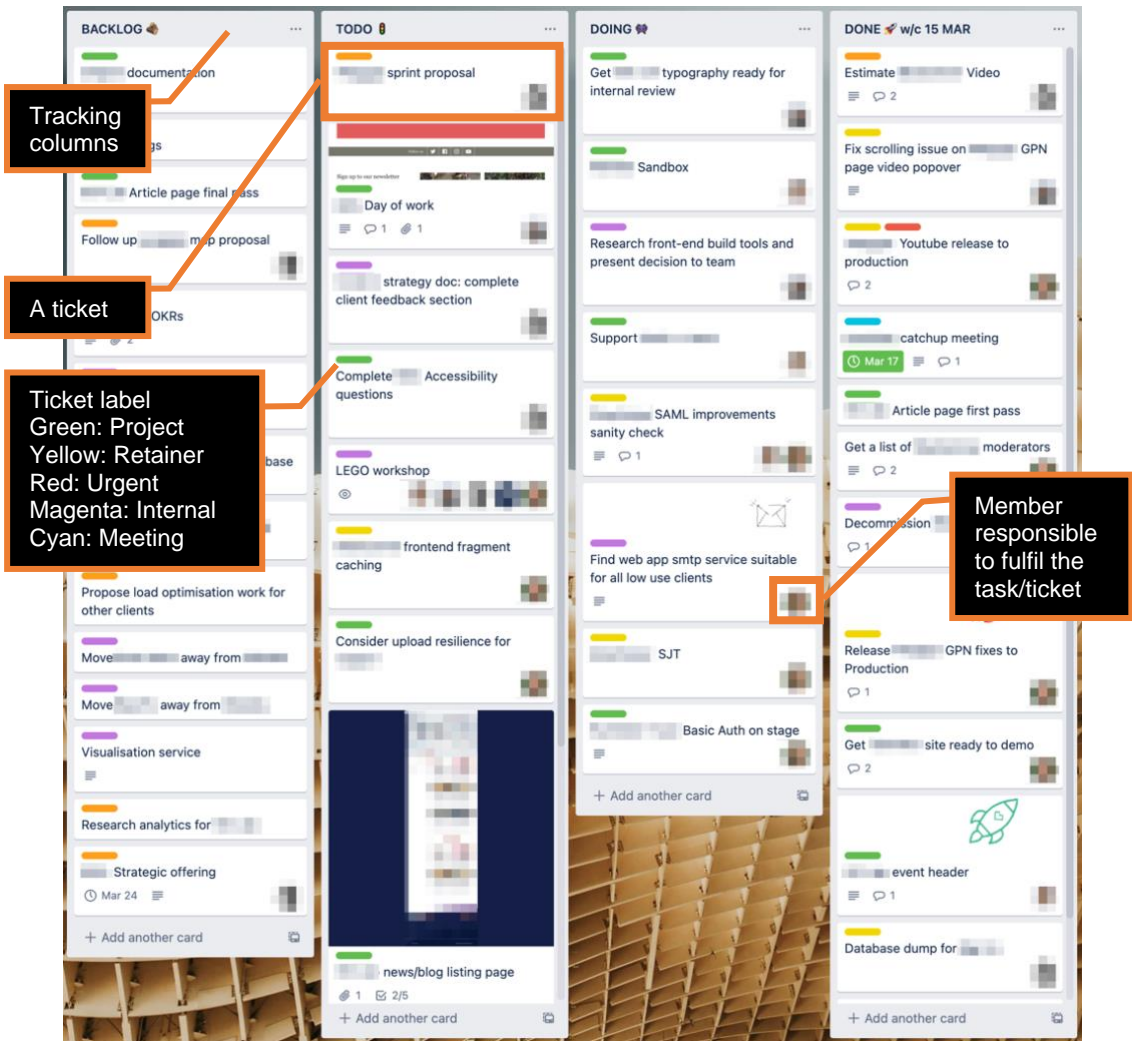


Image 27: Trello board and tickets

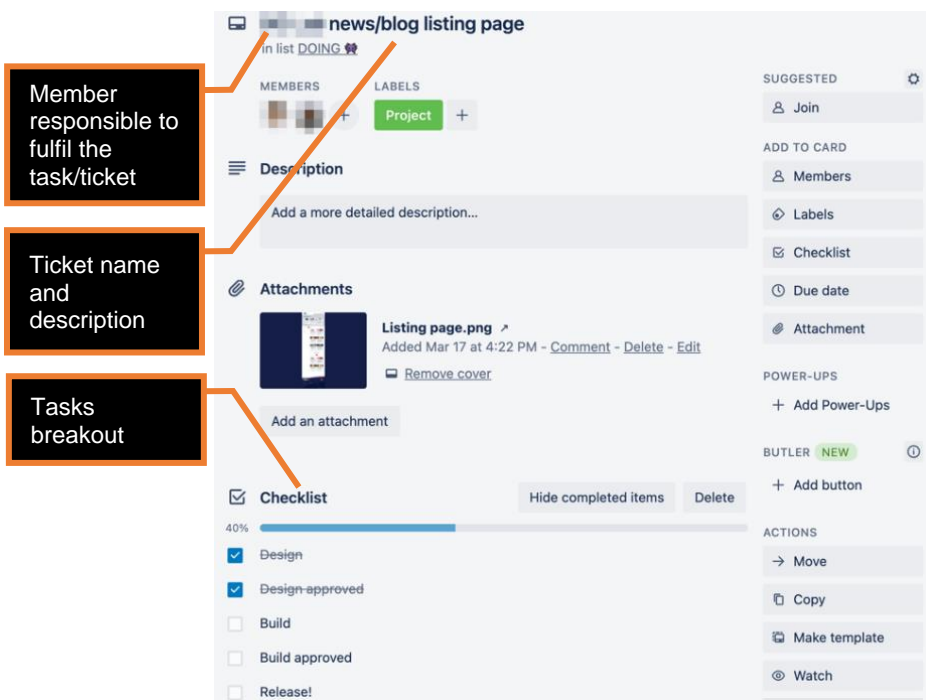


Image 28: A Trello ticket in detail

After the morning check-in meetings and the Trello board revision, throughout the day James and the team would have brief conversations on Slack sharing images, documents, jokes, GIF animations, and other work-related messages. Depending on the tasks at hand, the team members would also have one-to-one work cycles and meetings via Slack video calls as well as other online meetings with clients to discuss projects and requirements.



Image 29: A chat log screenshot and a GIF animation

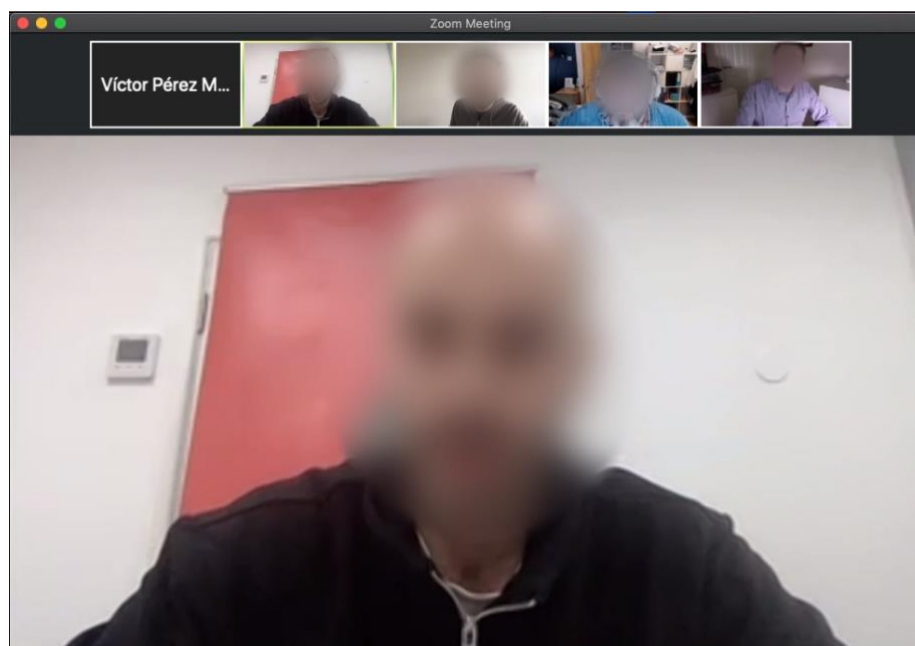
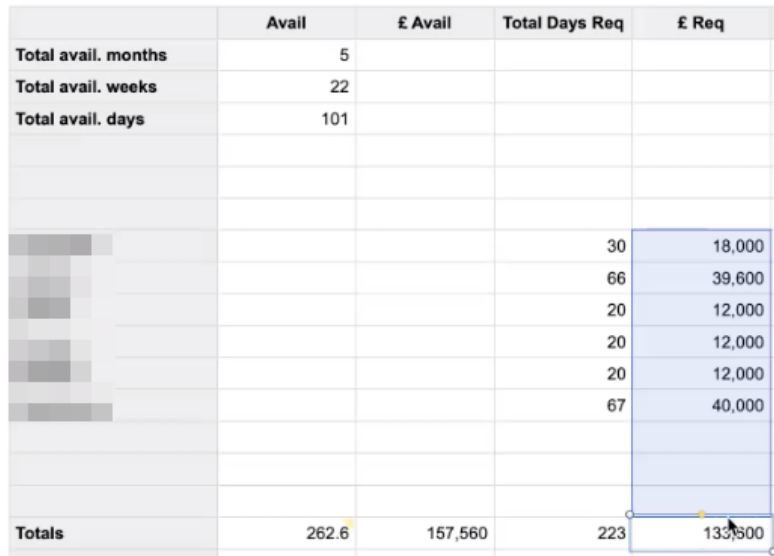


Image 30: A Zoom meeting with a client

3.2 Creativity and play emerging within daily routines

Most of the time, the team members would work individually. James, for instance, would typically conduct admin work writing project proposals, quotes and presentations, invoicing clients, having meetings to gather project requirements, and reporting on progress. To do so, he used to entangle with a wide range of bodies, human and not, including the team members, clients, and other software applications such as Notability, Zoom, Pages, and Numbers.



	Avail	£ Avail	Total Days Req	£ Req
Total avail. months	5			
Total avail. weeks	22			
Total avail. days	101			
			30	18,000
			66	39,600
			20	12,000
			20	12,000
			20	12,000
			67	40,000
Totals	262.6	157,560	223	133,800

Image 31: Material traces of James' admin work on Apple's Numbers

When not working on his administrative tasks, James also conducted design work developing mock-up proposals employing a software called [Sketch](#). In doing this job, James would entangle with shapes, colours, typographies, pictures, and other visual elements, developing several visual iterations each time.

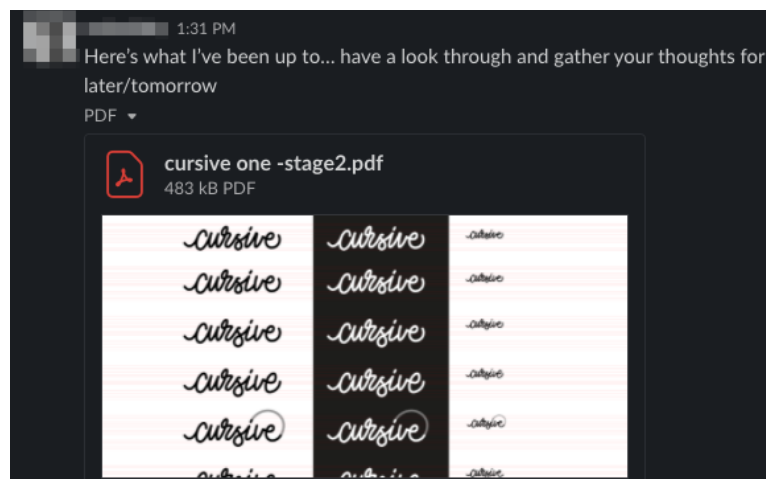


Image 32: Material traces of James' design work

After finishing a design proposal, James would share his work with the team for them to provide technical feedback on what could or could not be accomplished software-wise. Once the final mock-up was ready, James used to meet online with clients to get the final outputs and the necessary approval to continue with the next steps in the project, including the programming, testing, and publication stages.

The above activities, as James describes, were the very manifestation of creativity and play at work, permeating almost every aspect of his daily routine. It was a ‘coming together’ of multiple bodies at work, when meeting, for example, the team or the clients to think about design and technical ideas, moments he defined as a “really creative time, but it can be really fun as well” (James, workshop 9).

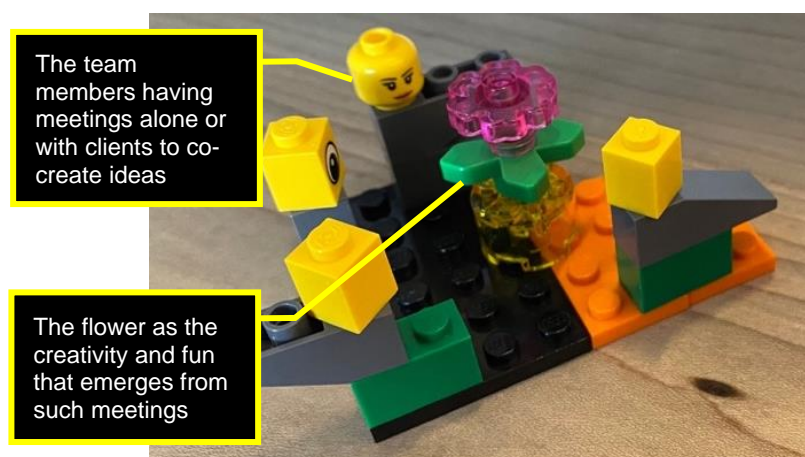


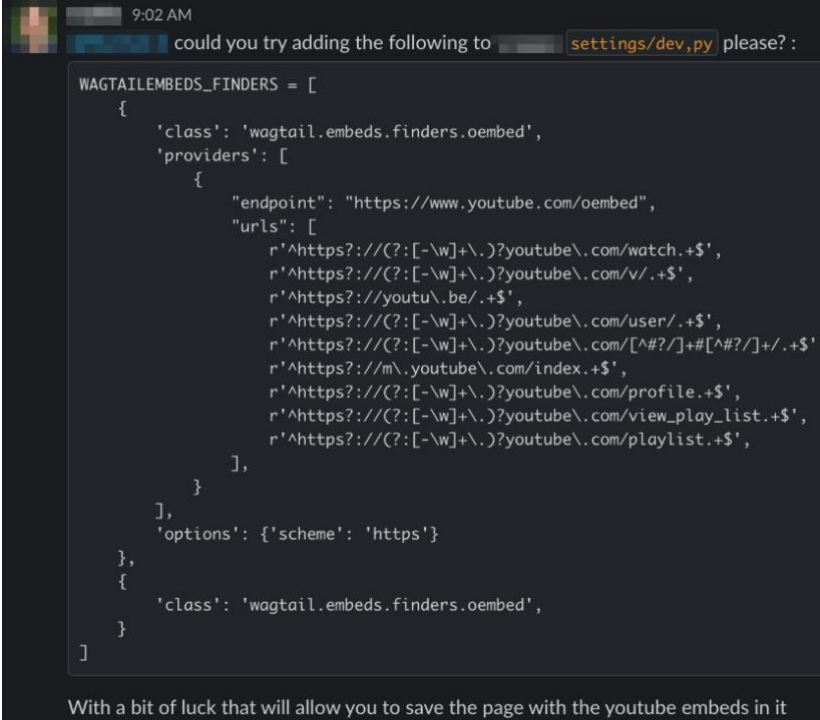
Image 33: James' most playful and creative aspects of work

As James also mentions, the playful side of work came from fitting components together –shapes, typographies, colours, ideas– when doing a piece of design, in the iterative and exploratory stages of work. As he illustrates,

“I think the designing and, you know, some aspects of work are playful in the sense that, you know, in the sense that you don't know what the end thing is going to be, you have an idea of where you wanted to be. And, you know, *the play comes from fitting things together when you're trying things out. Success, failure, iteration.* So, I think aspects of designing, certainly are play.” (James, interview. Italics added for emphasis)

From the software development perspective, John, Richard, and Peter would write and develop software codes to transform James' designs into working web-based products. John and Richard, for instance, would often work on the back-end, the infrastructure, server and database side of the projects, entangling with multiple code-based languages

and frameworks including [Python](#) and [Django](#), and other programming software and apps such as [Atom](#) and [Wagtail](#).



The screenshot shows a code editor window with a dark theme. At the top, there is a chat bubble that says "could you try adding the following to settings/dev.py please?". The code is in Python and defines a list of finders for Wagtail embeds. The code is as follows:

```
WAGTAILEMBEDS_FINDERS = [
    {
        'class': 'wagtail.embeds.finders.oembed',
        'providers': [
            {
                "endpoint": "https://www.youtube.com/oembed",
                "urls": [
                    r'^https://(?:[-\w]+\.)?youtube\.com/watch.+$',
                    r'^https://(?:[-\w]+\.)?youtube\.com/v/.+$',
                    r'^https://youtu\.be/.+$',
                    r'^https://(?:[-\w]+\.)?youtube\.com/user/.+$',
                    r'^https://(?:[-\w]+\.)?youtube\.com/[^\#?/]+\#[^\#?/]+\./.+$',
                    r'^https://m\.youtube\.com/index.+$',
                    r'^https://(?:[-\w]+\.)?youtube\.com/profile.+$',
                    r'^https://(?:[-\w]+\.)?youtube\.com/view_play_list.+$',
                    r'^https://(?:[-\w]+\.)?youtube\.com/playlist.+$',
                ],
            }
        ],
        'options': {'scheme': 'https'}
    },
    {
        'class': 'wagtail.embeds.finders.oembed',
    }
]
```

At the bottom of the code editor, there is a comment: "With a bit of luck that will allow you to save the page with the youtube embeds in it".

Image 34: Material traces of John's software writing activities

In addition, John and Richard would also conduct web maintenance and optimisation activities testing codes, debugging errors, and checking the proper functioning of the clients' products. To host these websites, Digital Co. employed a cloud-based solution named [Heroku](#), a platform that the team used to plug in or plug out data processing units (dynos) when a site struggled to stay online. Similarly, to optimise the clients' websites, the team would employ an accessibility app named [Silktide](#).

To John and Richard, the very act of writing code was deemed as a creative and playful experience at work, the very thing they were hired to do in this organisation. It was about the process of building, fitting, and connecting things to solve problems. As they describe,

"Coding is about building things. And I think ah, *building anything is a creative process.*" (John, interview, italics added for emphasis)

"Coding... that's where I get to try ideas. A bit like Lego, *plug things together and make something greater than the sum of the parts...* often I make things and for me, it's more about the process than the end product and properly get to the end of it, that works and you're excited for a bit and then you just move on, and you want the next thing. It's the- it's the process of doing it, solving

the problems. *That's the playful part.*" (John, workshop 9, italics added for emphasis)

"I think a playful aspect of my work is doing the coding, and, you know, it's like, I code even when I'm not at work, so that's how much I enjoy doing it." (Richard, workshop 10, italics added for emphasis)

On his side, Peter would conduct front-end activities, the visual side of the project users interact with, writing software code to add format, style, and motion to James' designs. In doing so, Peter would employ multiple tools to conduct his job, being his main coding environment, a software called [Visual Studio](#). Along with this, Peter used to check his work on multiple internet browsers including Firefox, Chrome, and Safari. Moreover, to translate design pieces and visual elements to web-based code, he would use software and platforms such as Sketch and [Figma](#). Peter would often share rich-visual work on Slack asking for feedback on designs and animations. To do so, he used to upload his code pieces to a web-based platform called [Codepen](#) and thus showcase his work. Interestingly, this was Peter's playground, what he felt were the most playful and creative aspects of his work.

Little stupid animations are really, I find it so much fun. That's- *that's my like, playground*. Is little, tiny things like that, that you can spend hours doing that... I really enjoy doing those animations. And like, yeah, just *the purely visual side of development*. All the code that goes into that and for it to pay off and actually work together, is really, really satisfying." (Peter, workshop 9, italics added for emphasis)

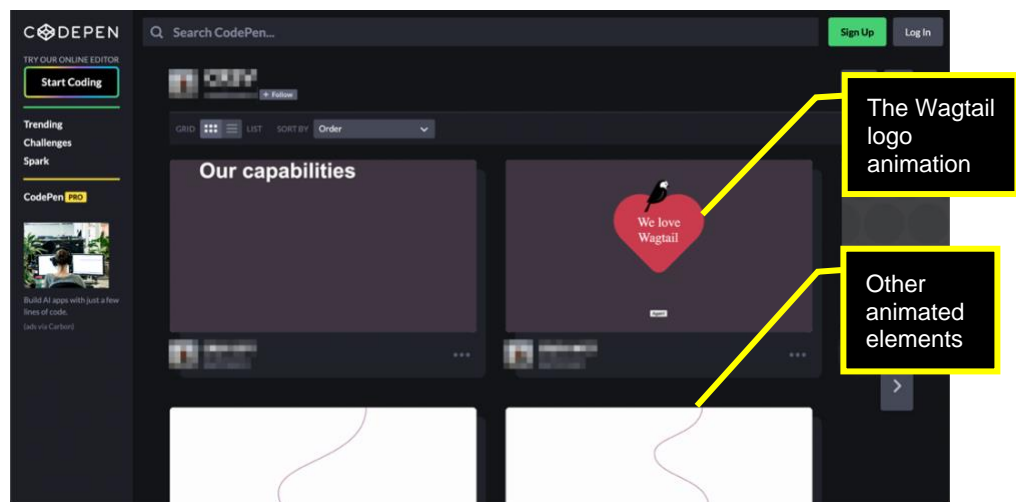


Image 35: Material traces of Peter's work

At Digital Co., creativity and play were deeply ingrained in everyday activities and practices, when having meetings, designing, coding, animating, researching, and planning. It was amid all these mundane work routines and socio-material entanglements that creativity and play used to emerge and unfold. The common thread linking these two constructs was the idea of building and assembling bodies to solve problems. It was the notion that “everything is connected” (James, interview). At Digital Co., the boundaries between play and work seemed to blur, where work was ‘like’ play and vice versa.

“I think if I didn't work ah, I would be ah, totally bored. And it's, so in a certain twisted way, *work is like play*, you know, because play, when I do play and when I do this sort of stuff, I'm alleviating my own boredom.” (Richard, interview, italics added for emphasis)

“I enjoy my work, and that is because I am... *definitely is like play*. Often, there are aspects of satisfaction of taking on a problem. And then the satisfaction of solving it and solving it well.” (John, interview, italics added for emphasis)

Play did not only happen when doing the day-to-day work but during a series of participatory workshops the team and I experienced with Lego bricks once or twice a month. As I pursued understanding play and creativity in the context of work, I offered the team the chance to experience 12 workshops where they reflected on a myriad of organisational and personal topics employing Lego bricks and materials (further details in [chapter three, section 3.1.4](#)).



Image 36: A Lego workshop in the meeting room

However, I had to question the very assumption that *manipulating the bricks* was 'playful' or 'creative'. In this respect, the team regarded the workshops as playful events, as a fun, enjoyable, engaging, focused, and sometimes serious experience. However, this 'seriousness' did not mean that the workshops were less fun or playful.

"I think I am focused. I think that's- that's true for all the participants on the team there thinking 'have I got what I want? Am I happy with the model I've got? What it is?'. You know, I think we all take it, *it's play, but we take it serious, serious play.*" (John, interview, italics added for emphasis)

To others like Richard, Lego naturally carried a playful ethos; therefore, encountering the bricks, their shapes, colours, and sounds while building models were inherently playful to him.

"I think *the Lego stuff has got this whole ethos of play* anyway, you know, I think it's got something that *is connected with play*, and fun, and being creative. So, I think that using the medium of Lego *is naturally playful.*" (Richard, interview, italics added for emphasis)

As I have shown, creativity and play emerged and unfolded in this workplace daily, on the mundanity of work as well as during the numerous Lego workshops the team experienced. At Digital Co., rather than being two distinctive entities, creativity and play were two overlapped experiences. Bodies being connected and disconnected, an ongoing assemblage process, fitting components together to find solutions and solve problems, it was about exploration, iteration, and experimentation.

4 Chapter summary

Throughout this chapter, I have introduced the reader to the situated context of this study. Digital Co. was a creative digital agency with four members: James, John, Richard, and Peter. These humans were often entangled with other nonhuman bodies including software, apps, codes, and tools. Digital Co. worked with a wide range of clients and projects offering web development, web design, maintenance, hosting, as well as branding and graphic design; however, in doing its work the company sold and organised time. By the time I began my fieldwork, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Digital Co. conducted most of its activities through Slack. This was the situatedness of my study, the always-in-flux source of data from which I develop my empirical and theoretical contributions to the leadership, creativity and play literature.

This chapter has also revealed how creativity and play emerged and unfolded in this organisation. Empirical evidence suggests that these two constructs were closely interrelated, overlapped, and deeply ingrained in most aspects of everyday work. Both constructs emerged simultaneously when conducting coding activities, research, design, and meetings. Broadly speaking, creativity and play in this organisation were about connecting bodies to make things and find solutions to everyday problems. At Digital Co., there was *creativity* in play, and there was *play* in creativity.

The acts and scenes that follow portray these creative and playful events at Digital Co. and how leadership emerged within. In some of these accounts, the relationship is clear. In others, the relationship is more subtle, ingrained in the daily flow of events, in meetings with clients, in solving software problems, when navigating conflict and rupture, and when performing design. Affective flows producing multiple directions, trajectories, and rhythms at work. The human-material relations I found at Digital Co. revealed the material effects of bodily encounters and how these encounters co-produced direction at work.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE LEADERFUL QUALITIES OF MATTER

The following chapter provides a deeper understanding of how leadership, creativity, and play emerged, unfolded, and entangled in a creative industry organisation I have given the pseudonym Digital Co. The objective is to reveal how leadership is co-produced within the never-ending flux of encounters and affects between bodies and thus disclose the *leaderful qualities of human-material* encounters at work. Overall, this chapter depicts a series of stories (Boje, 2014) around materiality (Strand, 2014) arranged in acts and scenes. In doing so, I provide the reader with thick descriptions of events and bodily encounters I witnessed and experienced throughout nine months of ethnographic work.

The chapter unfolds as follows: I begin with an OVERTURE, a prologue to introduce the reader to my stories of material encounters and their leaderful nature at work. Consecutively, ACT I depicts how encounters with Lego bricks co-produce direction by enchanting humans through affective spells that include human bodies and Lego shapes, colours, feels, and sounds. ACT II unravels multiple encounters with vibrant graphic design bodies and how consonant and dissonant flows of affect produced by a logo led the branding project. ACT III illustrates how leadership emerges and unfolds when encountering rigid and constricting regulatory bodies outside the organisational boundaries including laws and international standards. ACT IV depicts decomposing ruptures and tensions emerging from multiple encounters with software and apps and the multiple trajectories they set. ACT V illustrates the leaderful role of encounters with clients and how they co-produced direction with presence, absence, and rupturing power. Finally, I present the ENDING section providing the summary of findings these acts and scenes reveal.

1 OVERTURE: Stories of leaderful materiality at work

This is a study of bodily relations, capacities to affect and to be affected, and fluctuations of power. This is a cartography of actions, passions, bodily longitudes and latitudes: an *ethology* (Deleuze, 1992a). The stories I mobilise throughout this chapter portray a set of temporary, fleeting, and always-in-flux encounters between bodies, human and not, the flows of affect produced in those encounters, and how leadership emerged and unfolded from within. I present *antenarratives* –“fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and improper storytelling” (Boje, 2001, p.1)– of leaderful materiality at work. The acts and scenes that follow illustrate what I term ‘the leaderful qualities of matterly encounters’ arguing that when bodies collide with and between each other, humans and nonhumans produce flows of affect, rhythmic oscillations, movement, ruptures, and vibrancies, which in turn, produce directions and trajectories that lead to something or somewhere. Particularly, I thematise five interrelated qualities –affective spell, consonant and dissonant vibrancy, affective hindrance, decomposing rupture, and present presence/absence– to illustrate the ‘thingness’ of leadership in the context of play and creativity at work. These leaderful qualities of matterly encounters are not exclusive and often overlap across the varied acts and scenes this chapter narrates.

Throughout this chapter, I invite the reader to entangle with my stories, to entangle with Digital Co. and its human and nonhuman actors, and to follow leaderful traces of bodily relations and encounters. To accomplish this, I put into motion a series of antenarratives between a group of humans: James, Richard, John, and Peter; and a parade of bodies I encountered along them: clients, software, apps, codes, visuals, icons, typographies, colours, and so on. The antenarratives this chapter reveal portray fleeting moments within a never-ending flow of events. During the nine months I was entangled with this organisation, I attended encounters, followed bodies and the traces they left behind mapping connections and links that glued things together or broke them apart. This chapter is written as an assemblage of stories portraying *things that happen*, ordinary affects (Stewart, 2007), relationalities and encounters between human and nonhuman bodies in the workplace. This is a manifold of stories revealing *becomings-leadership*.

2 ACT I: Encounters with Lego bricks

2.1 Scene I: It's Friday! It's Lego day!

During the nine months I spent at Digital Co., the team had the chance to experience 12 Lego workshops (6 face-to-face and 6 online) to explore a series of topics related to the organisation, its employees, relationships, and practices (further details on the structure and topics of the workshops described in [chapter three, section 3.1.4](#)). Interestingly, the workshop days would be kindly named by the team members as 'Lego day'. Once or twice a month, and always on a Friday, the team would gather during the evenings, either at the office or via Zoom, and they would discuss the workshop themes, build Lego models, and often have a laugh or two. 'Lego day' was the space-time where the team members explored ideas and played with bricks.

The atmosphere of these workshops used to remain very similar throughout the 12 sessions the team experienced. James, Richard, John, and Peter would often seem engaged, energetic, and somewhat relaxed. The workshops felt like an open and safe moment for the open exploration of multiple topics.

"It all felt to me quite safe for people to express their ideas. Some of the things that we talked about were, you know, potentially quite difficult for everybody to talk about, um weaknesses, things like that. But I felt like everybody was quite open and honest, and I think that's- that's something that, you know, was created by you, created by the nature of the Lego. And I guess all this together as well, you know, we all sort of had a hand in, you know, allowing each other to feel safe and okay about sharing ideas." (James, interview)

To begin with the workshops, in my facilitation role I would first explain the overall theme picked for the session and develop some warming-up exercises to break the ice before entering the main topic of discussion. Probably, one of the most memorable exercises we did was when I asked the team to build a Lego model to represent the 'nightmare boss'. As the team members shared and explained the Lego models, as well as their previous experiences with bad managers, we laughed, made jokes, and experienced a hilarious time. It was a memorable moment that the team members would recall later during their day-to-day work.



Image 37: John's nightmare boss and his stick to shouting employees out

After the warming-up exercises, I would pose the main question for the session (e.g., build a Lego model that represents the company's weaknesses). Once the challenge was set, the team members would stand up, walk around the room, and look for bricks in the different Lego boxes placed around them. In the meantime, I would play some background music. In those moments, no words were said, I could only listen to the soft sound of music and the rumbling and strident sound of Lego bricks as humans rifled for parts and pieces in the boxes ([Lego workshop sounds](#)).



Image 38: Richard browsing Lego bricks in a box

During these workshops, especially during the building time, it was common to observe participants highly engaged and immersed in their worlds. The workshops were felt as a serious, intense, and very personal experience in which each team member entered their 'independent zone'.

“...play is very personal. It does look very personal, it looks like we are each, you know, in our own, immersed in our own sort of world. I mean, it doesn't look like um, it looks quite so focused, and quite intense.” (James, interview)

“Um, I think there's a lot of intense activity, I think everyone's very focused... everyone's very focused on trying to get their idea done.” (Richard, interview)

“So, um, yeah, we're all in our *independent zones*. Building. Yeah, nobody's looking at anybody else's stuff.” (Peter, interview, italics added for emphasis)

Once everyone was ready with the Lego model, I would stop the background music, and participants would sit back in their places. This was the part where each member shared the multiple meanings and ideas behind the models. Occasionally, we would feel interested in specific parts and pieces, on bricks that would resonate with us, or vibrate, and we would point these bricks out asking for their purpose or meaning. Sometimes, those pieces had a specific purpose, sometimes they did not.



Image 39: James pointing out a Lego piece that resonated with him

After each member explained the individual model, the team would reflect around the multiple Lego buildings spread out over the table (see Image 39 above) aiming to uncover further insights and thoughts on the workshop's topic. Lego, as the team members reflected, entered the organisation as a composite force, increasing its capacities to act, fabricating a 'safe time-space' to share thoughts, develop ideas, and reflect on the positive and negative aspects of the organisation, transforming itself in a silent but powerful nonhuman voice.

“I think the nature of the workshops has made it really kind of easy and safe for people to share the thoughts and views on things that, you know, would

have not necessarily been uncovered in through any other means.” (James, interview)

“...nobody sits in a conversation in an interview and goes 'let me think about that'. And then the silence for five minutes. That- that in my experience never happens. But that is exactly what you get with the Lego. And you get that time space to think, and turn it over in your mind, *get inspired by the bricks*, or find a solution within the bricks and *to play*, to have that space.” (Richard, interview, italics added for emphasis)

The bricks began to produce material effects in this team, opening safe spaces for dialogue. Lego served as an inspiration, the bricks seemed to talk without spoken words and began to produce direction. As James reflects, the workshops and the bricks allowed to distribute leadership in the organisation; thus, Lego acted as a democratising force.

“...this is the medium for leadership to emerge from the team. I think there's something really democratic about that, I think there's something, you know, really empowered, and because we have like, these guys are really talented, and they've got great ideas, and without the process like this, you know, how do you, how do you get that out of people?” (James, interview)

The Lego workshops began to reveal some of the leaderful qualities of human-material encounters, qualities that I not only observed in these workshop experiences, but I also witnessed throughout the day-to-day and moment-to-moment flow of events and bodily encounters at work. At Digital Co., matter was not a passive enabler for human interaction.

2.2 Scene II: Falling under the spell of the brick

Since the very first Lego workshop, I began to realise the silent but affective connection between the human and the brick. Throughout the sessions, especially during building time, silence reigned when each member encountered the bricks, for the team would barely talk to each other as they entered into the ‘independent zones’ (Peter, interview). However, even though no words were said, the bricks seemed to silently talk, to cast a spell upon humans. Lego would begin to co-lead, whispering to humans, enchanting them, saying ‘*pick me, I am that thing you are looking for*’. John portrayed this *affective spell* when looking for bricks through a Lego box. He experienced this connection when seeing a brick, which in turn, would talk and guide him back. Lego had the capacity to seduce, enchant, tempt, and persuade humans.

“Browsing Lego, I'm looking for ideas... looking for a bit that guide that, it's not like I'm looking for a specific piece, that's not the case at all, I'm looking for ideas in that box. Sometimes, I am looking for a specific piece to be fair. But that's usually towards the end. And you sort of go, oh what could that be? What could I use this piece for? How can I express this idea? Or you see a piece *and it speaks to you* and it goes '*well, I'm that thing, I can be that thing that you want*'". (John, interview, italics added for emphasis)

As John explains, he did not have preconceived ideas to build his models, but when looking for Lego bricks, he used to look for a piece that provided him with a sort of direction, a guiding clue to build his ideas up. John was revealing how his encounters with the bricks led his building process. As he vividly narrates in the above interview extract, Lego would *speak to him*. The bricks seemed to have a sort of gravitational force, attracting humans and their bodies towards them with their silent and vibrant presence, with its forms, colours, and sounds. As I further explore the leaderful quality of the human-brick encounter with John, he illustrates to me his relationship with one specific Lego piece, a Lego Duplo® elephant, a sub-brand of Lego for infants and children.

John: There is *my favourite elephant* as well...

Victor: Elephants were like, one of your favourites? Why?

John: Um, I think because they are a bit of an outlier. They're a very concrete thing. And they- the- I think I'm drawn to the um, to the esoteric I suppose... You know, they're just cute, I suppose is another way to put it in, *I was just drawn to them*. (John, interview 2, italics added for emphasis)



Image 40: John being drawn by Lego elephants

As John narrates, he simply felt 'drawn' by specific Lego pieces, the bricks acted as a nonhuman creative force allowing the team members to develop personal and unique connections such as the 'John-elephant' one. It was during this brick-to-human affective spell that creativity and play used to flourish. The leaderful capacity of Lego was often described as 'letting yourself get inspired by the bricks'.

"...it's part, sort of gathering bits, and *being inspired by the bits*... I remember that being my experience of doing it was sometimes, you know, you'd have an idea of what you wanted to build, and you'd look for the parts for that. And other times, you maybe didn't have any ideas and *the different bits of Lego would sort of spark ideas in*." (James, interview, italics added for emphasis)

"... it can be as simple as that, you know, you can see, see a piece, it sparks something off that- that *you make a connection*, you know, and *that connection doesn't happen to anyone else*... I think sometimes, and you take- you take inspiration from different places... And *instantly you see a piece* and you think, oh, well, you know, in my mind that's connected to another thing." (Richard, interview, italics added for emphasis)

"Yeah, I sometimes... your hand goes, your hand, and *your eyes are drawn to interesting pieces*, and that leading you at that point, and- and the point you reach for them, you don't necessarily even know what you're going to do with them. But you start, and then you go, 'oh! maybe that's this'. And yes, so it's, definitely I would say leading." (John, workshop 10, italics added for emphasis)

It was during these human-bricks encounters when multiple trajectories were produced, for Lego began to co-lead the workshop experiences. When encountering the bricks, humans felt inspired, guided, and enchanted, they fell under the spell of the brick. Throughout the workshops, Lego was not a dull, inert, or passive actor; rather, it played an active role in nurturing the creative process, facilitating the creation of new connections and arrangements. As the team experienced these workshops month after month, Lego would reveal its leaderful nature every time. Throughout the human-brick encounter, bodies would engage in a silent but affective encounter, in a process of enchantment. Humans would begin to listen to Lego. The bricks would talk and seduce through their shapes, colours, and sounds.

2.3 Scene III: Leading through colours, shapes, and sounds

As I have illustrated in the previous scene, Lego had the capacity to co-produce direction engaging in a silent but affective process of enchantment with humans, who would listen

and fall under what I have termed ‘the spell of the brick’. This ‘spell’ manifested itself through the bricks’ shapes, colours, and sounds, by its affective and vibrant presence. Throughout the many workshops the team experienced, I was often able to see how these vibrancies invited humans to pick specific bricks up, bricks that seemed to capture, seduce, and influence them back.

“I think the ideas can probably be expressed probably better with those more interesting pieces... I think, you basically get more bang for your buck, you get closer to where you want to be” (Richard, interview)

It was April 2021, and the team was experiencing the last Lego workshop. In this session, the team members were reflecting on the learnt lessons, downsides, and main takeaways after 12 sessions. As James, Richard, John, and Peter began with the silent building, after some minutes my attention got caught upon Richard. As he was browsing and collecting Lego pieces, I was able to see him selecting numerous bricks, all of them of the same colour. As he riffled throughout the Lego box, he was exclusively picking up red bricks, one by one. Then, he began building what would become a re-materialisation of a Formula 1 car, a Ferrari one. As Richard was building his race car, when one piece or the other did not work on his model, he would go back to the Lego box and look for further red pieces. He took his time in doing this.

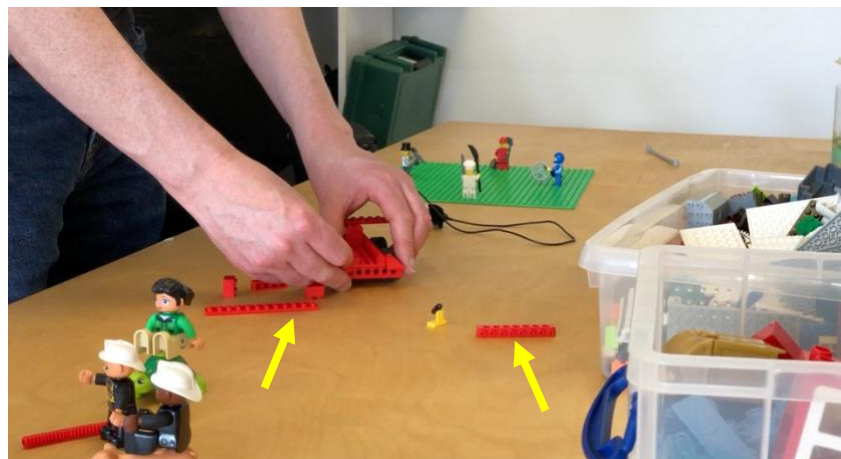


Image 41: Richard picking up only red bricks

This was not the only time I witnessed how the team members used specific colours to build models up. Often, as James described, they would follow patterns to ‘represent things’. In one of the warming-up exercises during an online Lego session, for instance, I asked participants to build ‘an awesome door’. In this exercise, John built what seemed to be a multi-coloured door following specific chromatic arrangements (see Image 42 below).

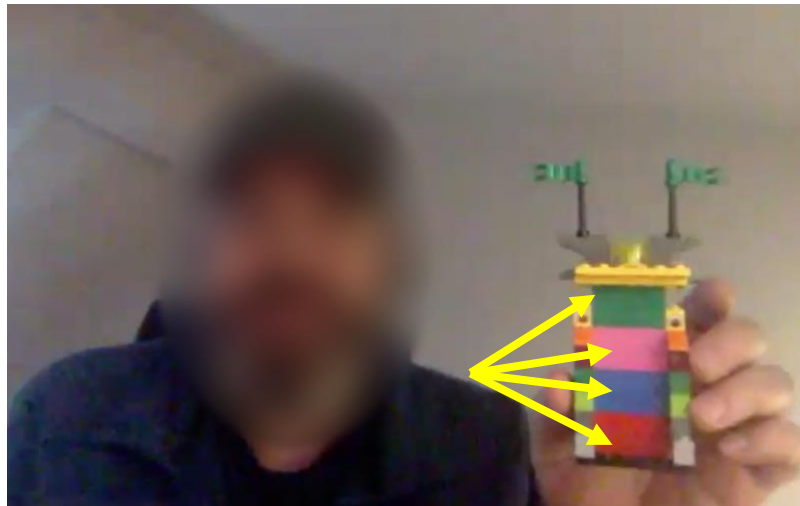


Image 42: John and his colourful door

As John described on his Lego model,

“Yeah... um, it's an enormous scale ((the door)), is meant to be like, this big! ((John puts a Minifigure beside the door)), epic! And it's a- it's- it's an awesome door, to another awesome dimension. Um and it's just um, yeah, that's it, is colourful. Because it's magical on the other side... that's the- that's the- the idea of a coloured sort of forcefield, perhaps it strobos up and down a bit.” (John, workshop 4)

The above examples illustrate how Lego enchanted humans through the vibrancy emitted by its colours. This vibrancy would in turn guide the team members throughout the building process. However, the affective spell cast by the bricks not only unfolded through colours but through shapes as well. As Peter described, “I would normally go for a shape like, like few principal shapes. Probably colour, second” (interview). Thus, the bricks guided humans through the combination of both, shape and colour. This was how the brick influenced humans back. As John portrays,

“You might select bricks and... and *they would influence you back*, you know, so you- we'd be going oh, you know, *you might be drawn* to the more technical bricks, cogs, spindles, arches, or things that just look technical. Or might be drawn to, you know, elephants, and cats, and dogs, and more softer, softer elements to express softer ideas.” (John, interview, italics added for emphasis)

Interestingly, as the team members browsed Lego bricks in the boxes, whilst they looked for specific shapes and colours, I could also hear a characteristic sound, a clashing noise of plastic bits ([Lego workshop sounds](#)). As John described during an interview, he did not feel that this sound was pleasant, it was rather a sharp and strident sound; and yet,

he felt this was part of the 'Lego experience'. The sound and feel of Lego had an evocative and nostalgic power that increased the team's capacities to act, unfolding as a creative force that contributed to co-lead the experience. This power was felt as a medium to transport humans to happy memories of childhood. Playing with Lego was associated with pleasant past experiences, abstract bodies being recalled by the very encounter with the brick.

"Um, so that- that just reminds me of being a kid, that sort of exploration through a big pile of Lego. The sound is really, really um, yeah brings up that image of being a kid." (James, interview)

"Well, I mean, it's- it's a, it's a sound that many of us are familiar with, from, you know, early days. And so, I suppose in that respect, it's- is a very familiar sound and it- that swooshing sound of the Legos as you run your hand through a box of Lego and the pieces and jangling around is a very um, you know, it brings back memories of happy times." (John, interview)

The affective sound of Lego was complemented by the 'touch' of the brick. Thus, in the human-brick encounter, there was a feeling of satisfaction and familiarity that emanated from the very encounter with Lego. As John recalls, "it's nice to clip the bricks together and pull them apart" (interview). Thus, fitting bricks together and making new arrangements to form larger compositions brought a sense of fluidity to the Lego experience, this was another manifestation of the affective capacities of the bricks.

"Yeah, it's- it's really, it's *a really satisfying kind of feeling when things fit together*. And, you know, it goes from, you know, bits... quite fluid and you shake them around, and then you fit them together to form a solid, some objects. I think that's a really satisfying thing. I mean, they're- they're engineered so perfectly to fit together. So, there's something really nice about that." (James, interview, italics added for emphasis)



Image 43: Human-brick encounter

As I have shown throughout this act, within brick-human encounters, Lego was more than a passive and inert toy, it had the capacity to affect humans, acting as a democratic force that allowed and facilitated them to express ideas, concerns, fantasies, and re-materialise routines. Touching the bricks and fitting them together, linking or pulling them apart, listening to the strident sounds, seeing vibrant colours and shapes, browsing Lego on the boxes; this is how the brick enchanted the team, casting a powerful spell. The bricks had the capacity to guide humans, inspire them, to call them through their language, a material and affective spell constituted of encounters between shapes, textures, colours, sounds, memories, and human bodies. However, it is important to point out that the positive experience attached to the encounters between humans and Lego bricks in this male-dominated context does not mean that such experience may be regarded in the same terms in different, gender-diverse, or female-dominated settings, for Lego has been traditionally described as a stereotypically masculine toy (Brosnan, 1998), an aspect that is also reinforced in a 'tech' and design setting that has been traditionally dominated by men. Thus, the stories I narrate in this act have revealed the affective 'specificity' (Dale, 2001) of Lego at Digital Co., a nonhuman materiality that entered into relations of composition with the men of this particular research context.

3 ACT II: Encounters with graphics and visuals

3.1 Scene I: My first encounter with Cursive

During my fieldwork, I encountered a plethora of visual and graphics bodies: design software and apps, shapes, colours, typographies, text compositions, animated buttons and arrows, slideshows, pictures, icons, and so on. These bodies would reveal *leaderful vibrancies*, bodies that would resonate with humans, entering in consonant and dissonant relations that would co-produce direction at work. In this act, I will focus on one of the most visible and affective design bodies I encountered at Digital Co.: the *Cursive* brand. This was a design project that would emerge, fade, and re-emerge throughout my whole journey with the team (see Figure 18 below).

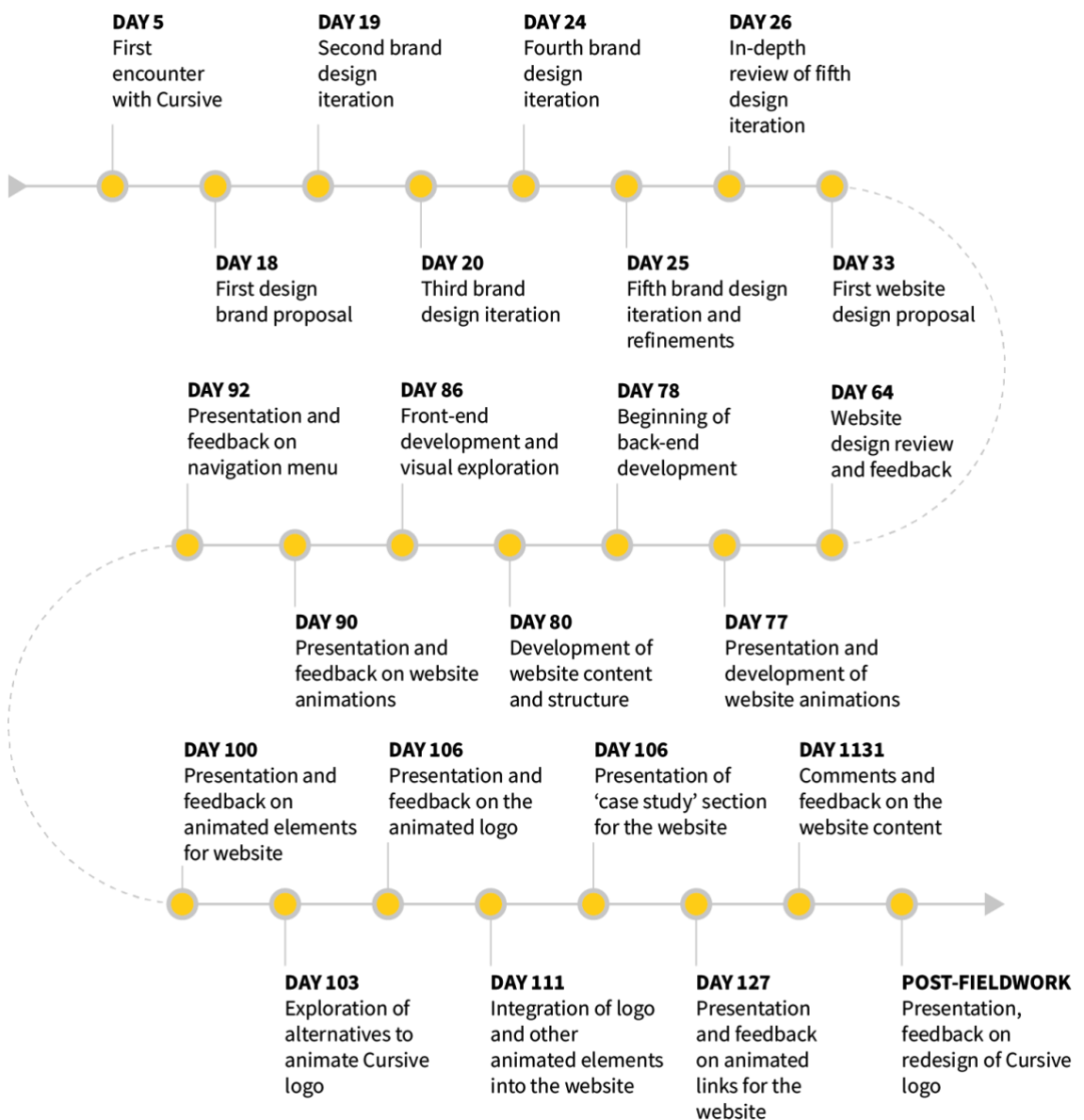


Figure 18: Encounters with Cursive over time

It was during one of the many daily check-in meetings when I encountered *Cursive* for the first time. Cursive was a branding project the company was working on, a project that involved designing a new logo, website, and content. This was a brief encounter, just a couple of minutes in which the team succinctly discussed when to start with the project. This would be the beginning of multiple and non-linear encounters with this project-assemblage. This first encounter, just like those that followed, was registered in my research diary.

“The team talks about ‘Cursive’. I do not know what this is yet, but I believe it may refer to a branding project the company is about to start. I remember that James briefly mentioned the project to me and whether I wanted to follow this process as well.” (Diary notes, day 5, 2020)

Two weeks after my first and a rather ephemeral encounter with Cursive, a material and visual trace of the project emerged. It was the first design iteration developed by James, who shared his work on Slack. It was a black and white composition, a single trace united from beginning to end mimicking a handwritten word.

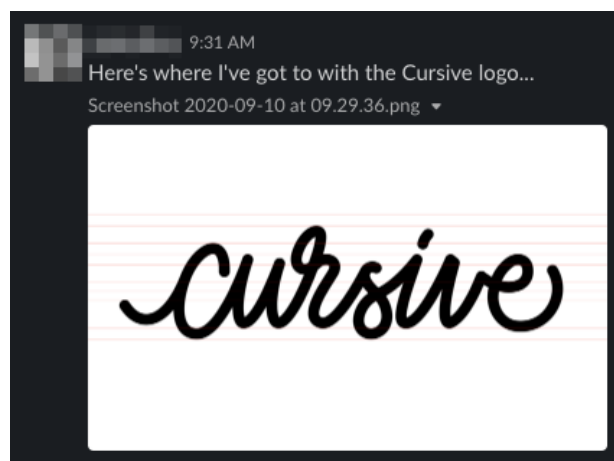


Image 44: The first Cursive logo

As James explained, this design was led by a couple of guiding concepts and principles. The idea was to communicate a sense of elegance and sophistication. Thus, to reflect these concepts on the design, he decided to employ a handwritten or ‘cursive’ style. James believed that the sense of elegance he was trying to develop was transported by this kind of visual composition. This is how the Cursive project officially began.

3.2 Scene II: Bodily vibrancies leading the event... is something missing?

James had been working on the Cursive brand for a while. It was on my third week at the company when he revealed his new work to the team. James asked for opinions as

he shared his screen on Slack to discuss the design. John believed that ‘something’ was missing but he could not tell what. The design, the logo, ‘felt’ out of frequency: *dissonant vibrancies* began to enter and disrupt the scene. The design was resonating with him. As John said: “it doesn’t look grown up”. Following up on John’s comments, James explained that he was looking for alternatives to make the brand more ‘united’, he was attempting to find a sort of consonance or harmony. Meanwhile, Richard was looking at some font families to share ideas with the team. Interestingly, whilst James was sharing his screen, the team began drawing lines around the design proposal. The brand was vibrating, talking, whispering, making humans ‘make’ things to it, to look for inspiration on the web, to feel the traces and lines as they resonated in them. The brand was affecting the team as much as the team affected it in return.

As the brand seemed to vibrate, something felt strongly out of place, dissonancy was decomposing the brand proposal. The ‘cursive’ word looked wonky and difficult to read, it had a legibility problem. The issue originated at the end of the word, with the letters ‘i’ and ‘v’ which seemed to form a sort of ‘w’ shape. As the team discussed the issue, John began drawing lines and cues on the screen to illustrate the problem.



Image 45: The Cursive logo - the 'i' and 'v' issue

Shortly after, the team jumped to the ‘r’ and the ‘s’ in the middle as they discussed the balance and white spaces in-between the typographic characters. The Cursive brand was producing movement, humans and design were entering into an affective encounter. The logo and its components were co-leading the event. It was not about James or another human providing directions and visual decisions, it was the very graphic design that affected the team, vibrancies that would lead humans and the project towards one direction or the other.

A couple of days later, Cursive emerged again. James shared with the team a new set of design iterations. He was experimenting, *playing* with the design, connecting characters and other visual elements together. The proposal began to mutate. This time, the design had a new *resonance*, it began to affect in new ways. The most noticeable change was with the ‘i’ and the ‘v’ that seemed no longer to form that sort of ‘w’ shape,

the proposal looked clearer and more legible. It 'felt' better. Some consonance or pleasant 'frequency' began to permeate the design composition.

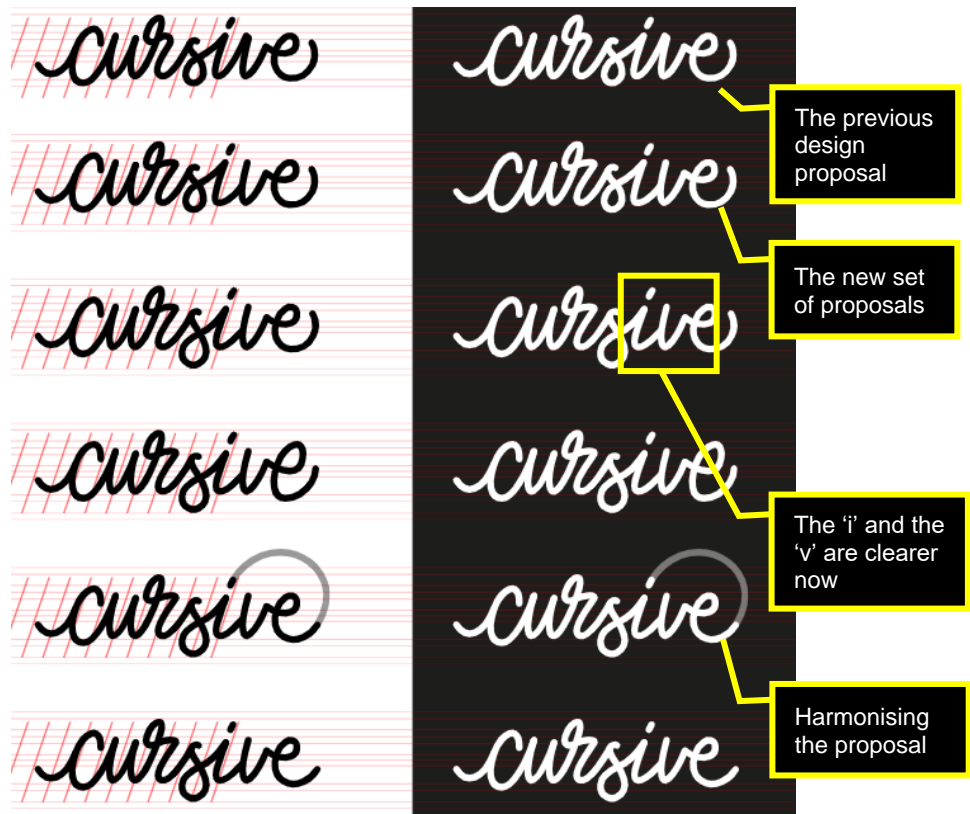


Image 46: The new Cursive logo iterations

However, the initial 'C' and the final 'e' had different proportions. This detail was picked up by John, who believed that the logo still looked unbalanced as he began to draw some lines on the Slack shared screen. The design was affecting him in new ways.

The changes that James applied to the new graphic proposals were about millimetres, little changes, but the result certainly produced something else, something new. There were improvements, the logo was producing new flows of affect; there was less distortion and less dissonance. James mentioned the 'r' and the 'v' and how they were better now, and that he preferred an open 'e'. He also tried to balance the 'r' and the 's'. James was attempting to reduce the dissonant vibrancies emanating from the brand design, looking for balance and harmony, whatever that meant or 'felt' like. While this event unfolded, the design had a central role in directing the course of events, it resonated, vibrated, and made humans feel something, a 'something out of place' was taking the lead, an intensive force producing multiple rhythms.

3.3 Scene III: The strange 'r'

As James kept working on the Cursive logo, the design proposal was not ready yet, it still had that 'something' weird, that uncomfortable look to it. The logo was still out of frequency. That 'something' seemed to originate from the 'r' character. James had been working on the design for a couple of days. He also showed the design to some external people, some friends, who commented to him that the 'r' looked 'h-like'. Even though James considered that these opinions were a 'bit ridiculous', he mentioned that he could not ignore them, he was affected by those comments; therefore, James explained that he had been playing with this 'r', trying out multiple shapes and positions, reconnecting and rearranging elements around.

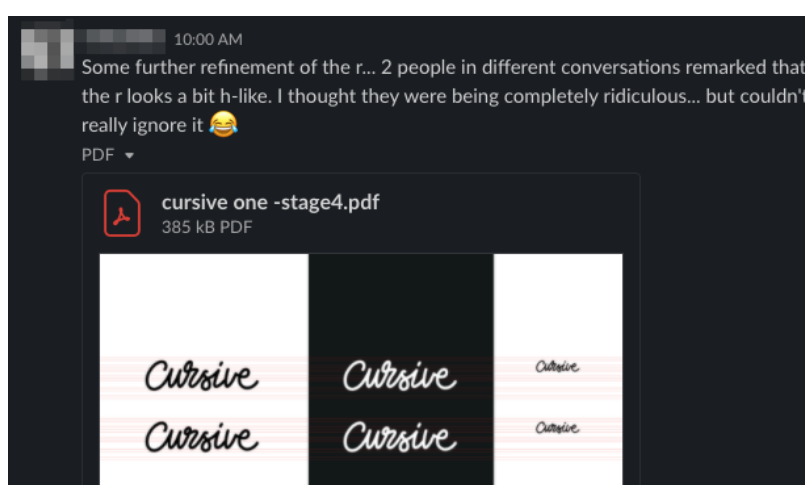


Image 47: James sharing a new iteration of the Cursive logo

The logo began to encounter further bodies outside the organisational boundaries, affecting and resonating with them as they collided and encountered each other. However brief, these external human bodies played their role in the project, producing new micro-directions; the 'r' character began to emerge and produce multiple trajectories. As James explained to the team the changes he had done to the logo, the team started to provide feedback by drawing lines on the shared screen. Slack, as always, was there with them, a silent nonhuman body enabling every piece of intra-action between the team and the brand. As the team reviewed the proposal, they stopped on the 'r'. The 'r' was wonky and seemed to disrupt the design. The 'r' captured all the attention, it began to lead the project, to produce direction, movement, and change.

A couple of days later, James shared a new set of designs with the team. He focused his work on the 'r' character. However, something still felt out of place, the 'r' was not good yet, it kept decomposing the brand proposal. The 'r' continued disrupting the design and its harmony.

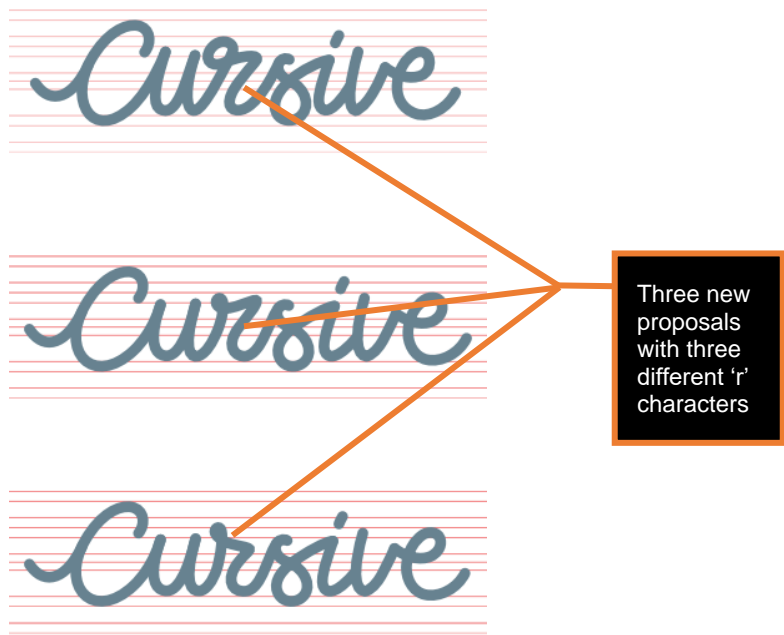


Image 48: The new Cursive iteration and the 'r' issue

As the 'r' captured the team's attention, they kept discussing what could be the problem signalling some of its parts and sections. In this new round of revisions, the team agreed that the 'r' loop at the top of the first proposal gave an interesting feature to the visual design that was lost in the other two alternatives at the bottom (see Image 48 above). Thus, shortly after this discussion, James shared a new iteration of the brand. It looked somewhat different, it looked more mature, grown up. That sort of dissonance seemed to decrease. The design 'felt' better than before. The design piece was increasing its affective capacities after each iteration. The affective response of this new brand got recorded on the Slack chat. John seemed pleased arguing that the brand was 'looking good'.

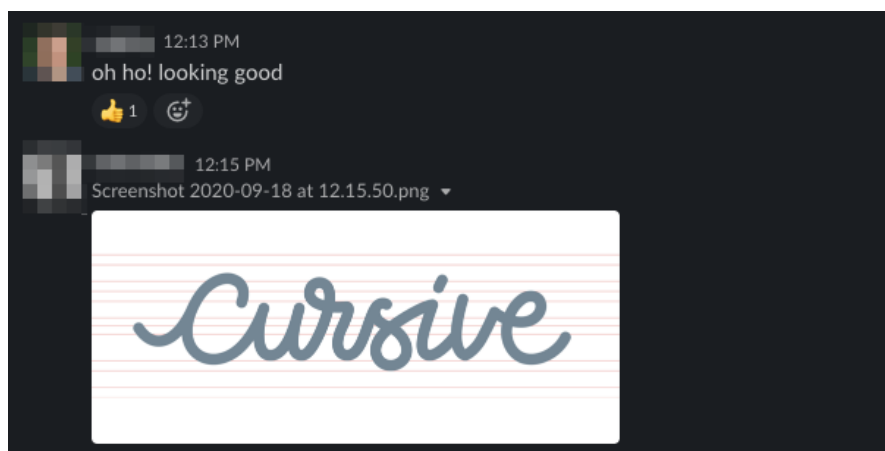


Image 49: James sharing a new design iteration

In the meantime, James shared two new iterations. Shortly after, John replied that the design at the top looked better, that it had a ‘pleasing symmetry’, but that the ‘r’ at the bottom was clearer. John’s remarks reflected the flows of affect the ‘r’ was producing on him. The visual composition was growing, improving, and refining, it was reaching a better frequency, producing a more ‘pleasant’ feeling.

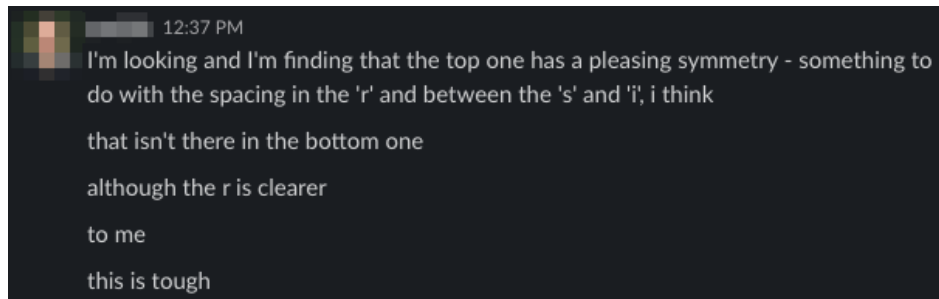


Image 50: John's comments on the 'r' issue

A few days later, James shared yet again what would be the last Cursive design iteration. He believed that the new design was clearer than the previous ones. The team was very happy with this last proposal. They navigated multiple dissonant vibrancies to reach this point, a design that now seemed balanced and harmonious. Consonance began to permeate this design, there was less disruption and less distortion. As the logo began to produce a consonant vibrancy, there was less movement and tension, as James remarked, the ‘whole thing’ was ‘much clearer’ now.

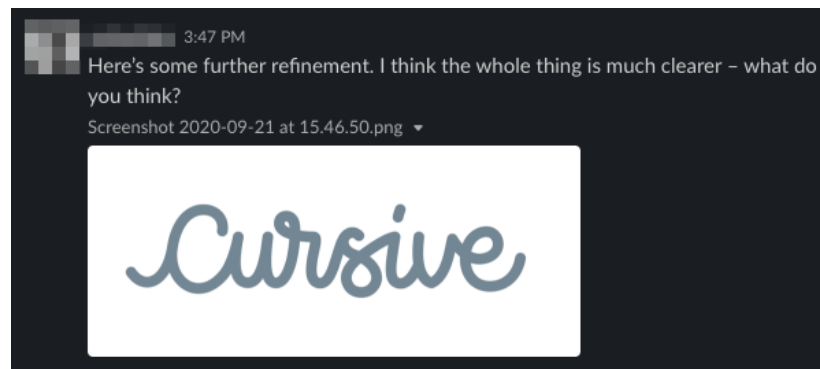


Image 51: James sharing a polished design iteration

3.4 Scene IV: Cursive haunting me back

Even though I finished my fieldwork at Digital Co. in April 2021, I kept in touch with the team. Thus, it was June the 29th 2021, when James sent me a WhatsApp message asking me whether he could ‘pick my brains up’ for something. We agreed in having a coffee at the office. As this event happened after my official data collection period, the following scene is shared with James’ permission.

When I arrived at the office that evening, James had several paper sheets laid out over the table in the meeting room. I could see several iterations for the Cursive logo, but something new, these were not small changes, it was a complete redesign. He looked at me smiling and said, “yeah, I am not entirely happy with it yet”. Despite all the different design iterations and developments, that rupturing dissonance was still there, producing rupture, James felt that this part of the project was not over yet. Thus, the Cursive logo came back to haunt me. A new affective encounter began to unfold.



Image 52: The new Cursive proposals over the meeting room table

At the start of the meeting, James began showing me the new designs. He was questioning the very idea of using a ‘cursive’ typographic style for the brand. I was able to have a look at the different proposals over the table. He was using sans-serif fonts, the opposite of handwritten or cursive style. He felt that the logo was not completed yet. It was ‘that something out of place’ all over again: affective and vibratory dissonance. The logo was still *out of frequency*.

That day we discussed the new proposals, the visual styles, which ones were better, and which ones were weaker. I explained to James that even though I liked the previous design, the handwritten style seemed childish to me, as when children learn to write on calligraphic books at school, it did not convey that sense of elegance and sophistication he wanted to achieve. Something was not ‘in place’ to me. The old logo was not able to resonate as James desired. As he showed me his new ideas, James was particularly fixated with one of the proposals; however, he was troubled as another company was using the same font family for its brand. I said to him that he could find other similar

families and modify them to reach that particular 'feel' he was chasing for. To see whether this idea worked, we grabbed a couple of paper sheets and began drawing into them. We overlaid designs against the window so we could copy some of the characters as the exterior light went through the sheets. We moved around the office and started working with it. Thus, based on two of James' designs, we developed a new version inspired by the family font that he liked. We began to entangle with the office, the paper sheets, pens, and the logo proposals.

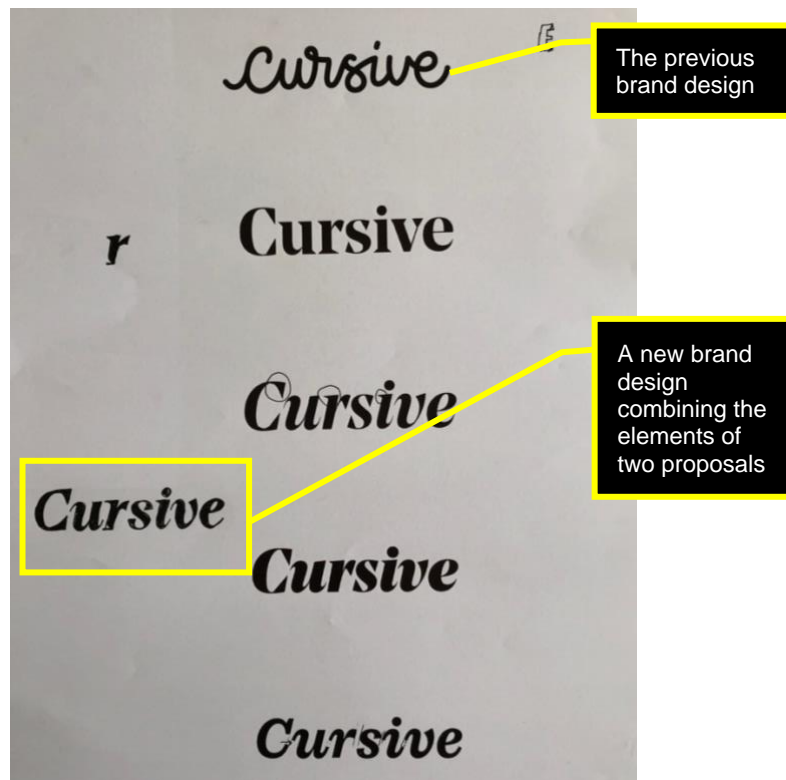


Image 53: A new brand design inspired by two family fonts

Interestingly, James confessed to me that he had not told the team yet about this decision. This was something completely fresh. The next day, as James remarked, he was still troubled with the family font, but he seemed not to find a better option. This font had a strong force in this new brand iteration. A couple of days later, James shared with me his 'last brand incarnation' as he called it. He thanked me for my input and said that the team was on board with this new idea. The event ends.



Image 54: The last brand iteration

Throughout this act, I have shown how the team experienced the unfolding of affective flows. *Matterly vibrancies* playing an active role in the development and unfolding of the branding project. The logo and its dissonant vibrancies led to new trajectories and produced multiple rhythms. These affective vibrancies gave the nonhuman a voice, and a capacity to co-produce direction making ‘humans’ keep working, experimenting, playing, and connecting new visual elements. Just like when tuning a radio station in, the team was actively looking to find consonance, the right sort of frequency when encountering the brand. That frequency was often described as a ‘pleasant’ or ‘weird’ sensation or feeling.

This act has revealed the leaderful quality of material vibrancies produced within hybrid human-nonhuman encounters. It was not about James as the business owner and designer setting direction, nor the other humans in the team, it was about the encounter of bodies and their leaderful vibrancies. Thus, creative work at Digital Co. was not directed by a heroic individual; rather, it involved the interplay of bodily forces, affects, and vibrancies produced within a never-ending flow of material encounters. When developing a piece of graphic design, the nonhuman seemed to ‘talk to’ the human, producing material effects. ‘Things’ like typographies and characters, colours, traces, shapes, and backgrounds generated direction and new trajectories. Sometimes, these bodies ‘felt’ out of place, they were wonky, weird, unbalanced, disharmonious, out of frequency: *dissonant vibrancy*. Certain bodies decomposed the project, forces bringing tension, movement, and rhythmic oscillation. In navigating these flows of affect, humans often attempted to plug in and plug out bodies, modify the visual composition and find the correct kind of frequency. After every design iteration, the visual work looked ‘better’; the logo felt harmonious, attractive, powerful, and in-frequency: *consonant vibrancy*. As James remarks, consonance was about multiple elements ‘belonging together’.

“I would describe it as looking for harmony and my eye is drawn to things that disrupt the harmony... Like if I feel like one thing belongs together with something else it is too far away from or if the vertical rhythm is not quite right

bothers me... There is a lot... that needs harmonising.” (James, Slack chat, day 133)

Throughout the multiple iterations of this piece of design, the team experienced that sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, belonging or rupture, the visual work resonated with them. As a designer, this experience is not alien to me. Often, when I am in front of a piece of work something happens, the design affects me, vibrates, I am using my senses, my body, I feel confident and happy, dissatisfied, or disgusted, I may wrinkle my face, nod, and even murmur something. That which I am observing vibrates and produces something in me: Leaderful vibrancies producing multiple trajectories when conducting creative and playful work.

4 ACT III: Encounters with legal regulations and standards

4.1 Scene I: The accessibility reports

It was during my second week of fieldwork when I heard the term ‘accessibility’ for the very first time. A fleeting moment, too short and fast for me to grasp. It was throughout one of the many check-in meetings when John informed the team that he was working on the ‘College’ project, one of the many websites Digital Co. was developing at the time. As John explained his work, he mentioned the accessibility report for the client’s website and informed of some new tools he had been trying out to test the site. Without me knowing it yet, I would encounter ‘accessibility’ throughout my whole journey with the team, a hybrid human-nonhuman composite that would play an active and affective role in many of Digital Co.’s projects –the University, the College, and the Drawing School– permeating every aspect of them, a bodily composite that would reveal a plethora of human and nonhuman bodies co-producing direction at work.

Accessibility is a term used in software and web development to describe inclusive practices applied to websites, apps, tools, and other web technologies in a way that individuals with disabilities and/or other limitations can use and access them. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), a non-profit organisation that generates Web standards, back in 1997 proposed the ‘Web Accessibility Initiative’ (WAI) to encourage and achieve Web functionality for persons with physical and cognitive impairments putting forward a series of recommendations, guidelines, and technical specifications to make the World Wide Web (www) accessible to wider audiences. These recommendations are currently contained in the ‘Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1’ (WCAG 2.1) and are designed to make web content accessible to users with speech disabilities, blindness or low vision, deafness or hearing loss, limited movement, photosensitivity, or a combination of these; as well as other adaptations for individuals with learning disabilities and cognitive limitations (W3C, 2018).

As James explained to me, this international standard, the WCAG 2.1, was adopted by the UK Government under the Equality Act 2010⁴ and came into force for public organisations in September 2018. In this context, central and local government entities as well as charities and other non-government organisations must comply with the ‘WCAG 2.1 AA’ standard (Central Digital and Data Office, 2021). A (lowest), AA, and

⁴ Guidance regarding the [Equality Act 2010](#) can be found online.

AAA (highest) is the nomenclature adopted by the W3C to determine whether a website, app, product, or technology complies with the guidelines (W3C, 2018).

As I further explored this topic with the team, James explained to me that most of the WCAG 2.1 work entailed specific adjustments of typographies, colours, shapes, backgrounds, and other visual, text, or audio elements to help users with disabilities and other limitations to access his clients' websites. Most of the clients needed to reach the 'AA' standard. As he confessed, this was not 'the sexiest job in the world', as there were many mechanical and repetitive tasks to carry out; however, many of his clients had to comply with these regulations and therefore the team needed to carry out this task. The accessibility issue would emerge and unfold throughout my whole experience with the team and its projects (see Figure 19 below for further details).

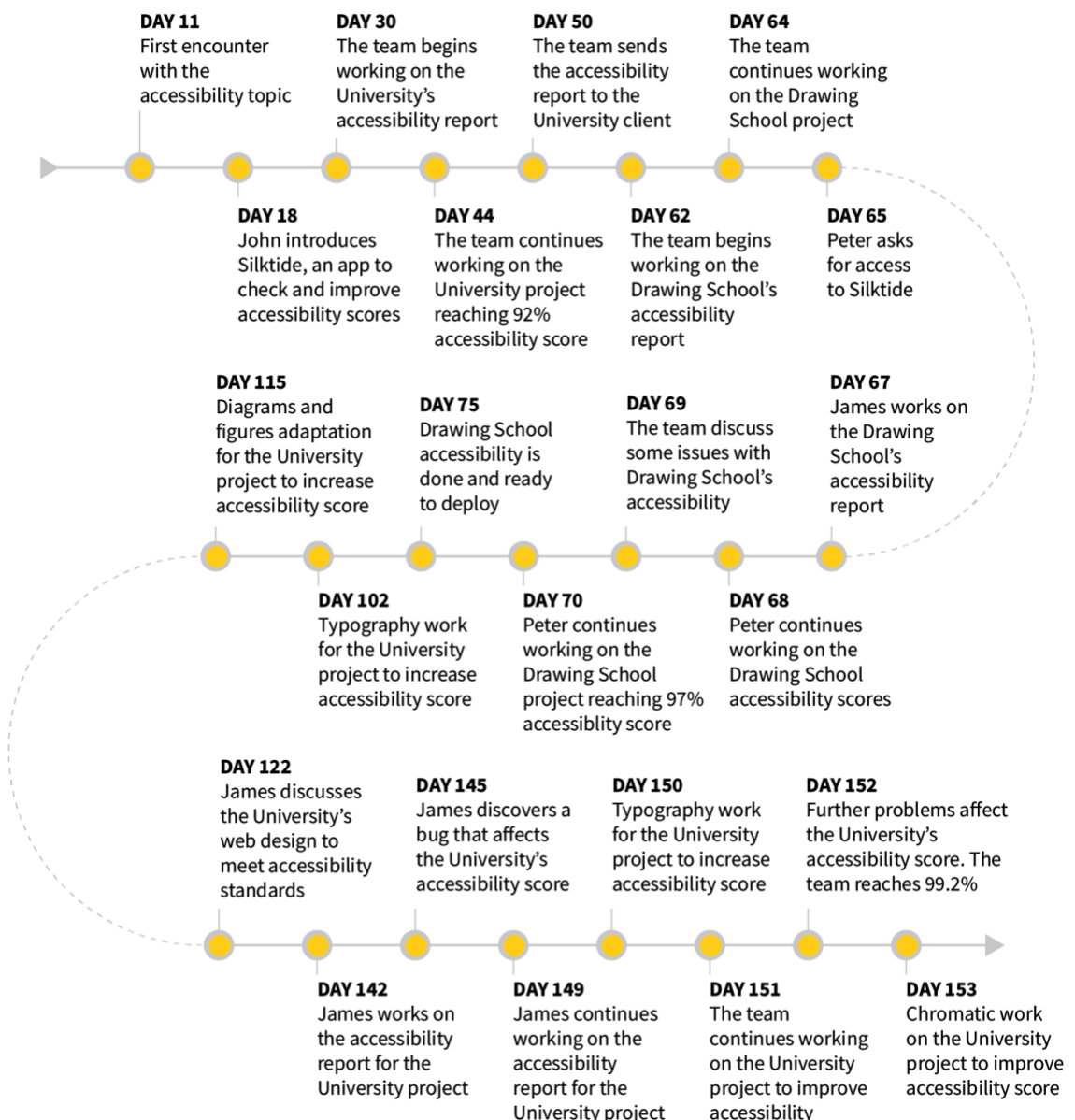


Figure 19: Encounters with accessibility work

4.2 Scene II: Plugging in Silktide

As the team navigated the accessibility aspects of the different projects they were working with, during a check-in meeting during my fourth week of fieldwork, John proceeded to inform the team that he had been experimenting with some new tools to test accessibility. Interestingly, John was navigating bodily capacities, exploring affects; an active search of bodies to increase the team's capacities to act, to sort out and meet the accessibility standards required by the international convention (WCAG 2.1) and the Equality Act 2010. As John explained, he had been playing around with a web platform named [Silktide](#). As he presented the tool and explained how to use it and what to accomplish with it, John shared a link in Slack. He was experimenting with the 'College' project. Thus, as John presented the tool, he explained that the client's website he was playing with was very good, although, it had a low accessibility score. John believed that this tool could enter into composition with the team, to improve the websites and projects they were working with and increase their affective capacities to meet the accessibility standards. John was navigating Silktide's bodily capacities, the affects it could exercise or not; what this body could do.

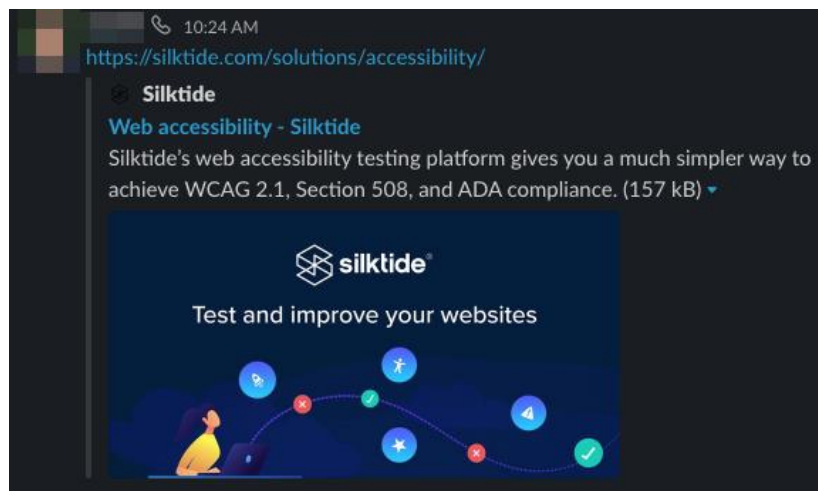


Image 55: John introducing Silktide

As the team members looked at the tool John shared, I could listen to James replying: “I do not know why we do not have that!”. He sounded very excited (research diary). The platform began to enter into composition with this organisation as soon as revealed.

Silktide was a web-based app that allows users to conduct automated testing to fix and find accessibility issues on websites. In doing so, Silktide breaks down these issues into specific metrics for developers to optimise and improve web products and thus facilitate meeting the international accessibility standards. When running a test, Silktide produces a report (see Image 56 below) that contains specific information to improve accessibility

scores (expressed in percentages). The report depicts, for instance, the percentage of compliance with the three standards (A to AAA), the most common issues on the website or product, the average issues per page, and the number of issues according to four main categories: visual, auditory, motor, and cognitive.

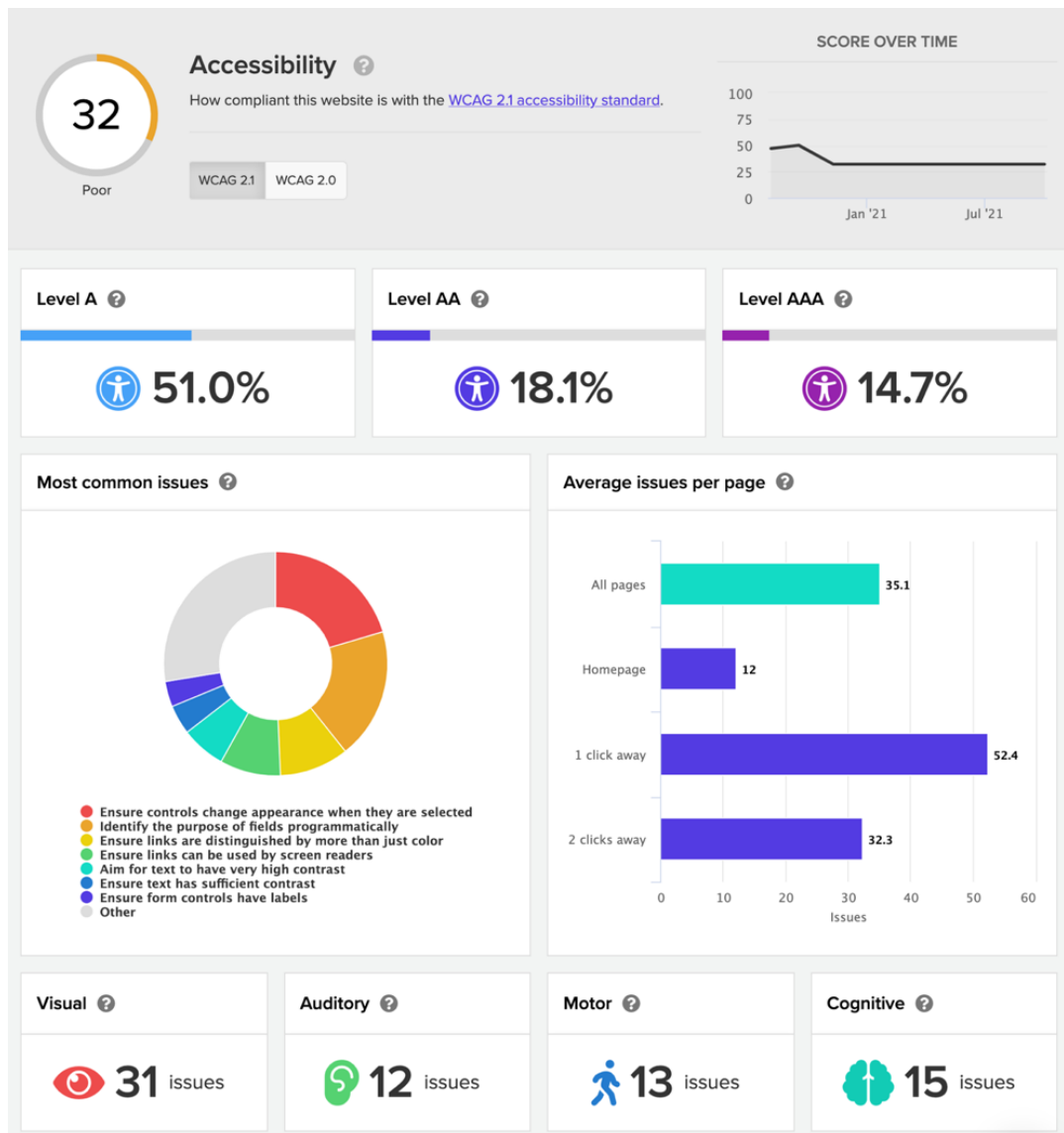


Image 56: Silktide's accessibility report demo

Along with these main metrics, Silktide also proposes the actions and tasks needed to solve the issues and meet the desired WCAG standard. In this part of the report, as briefly shown below (see Image 57), there are targeted actions concerning mobile platforms, navigability, use of text and headlines, colour contrast, legibility, readability, predictability, links, and code validation.

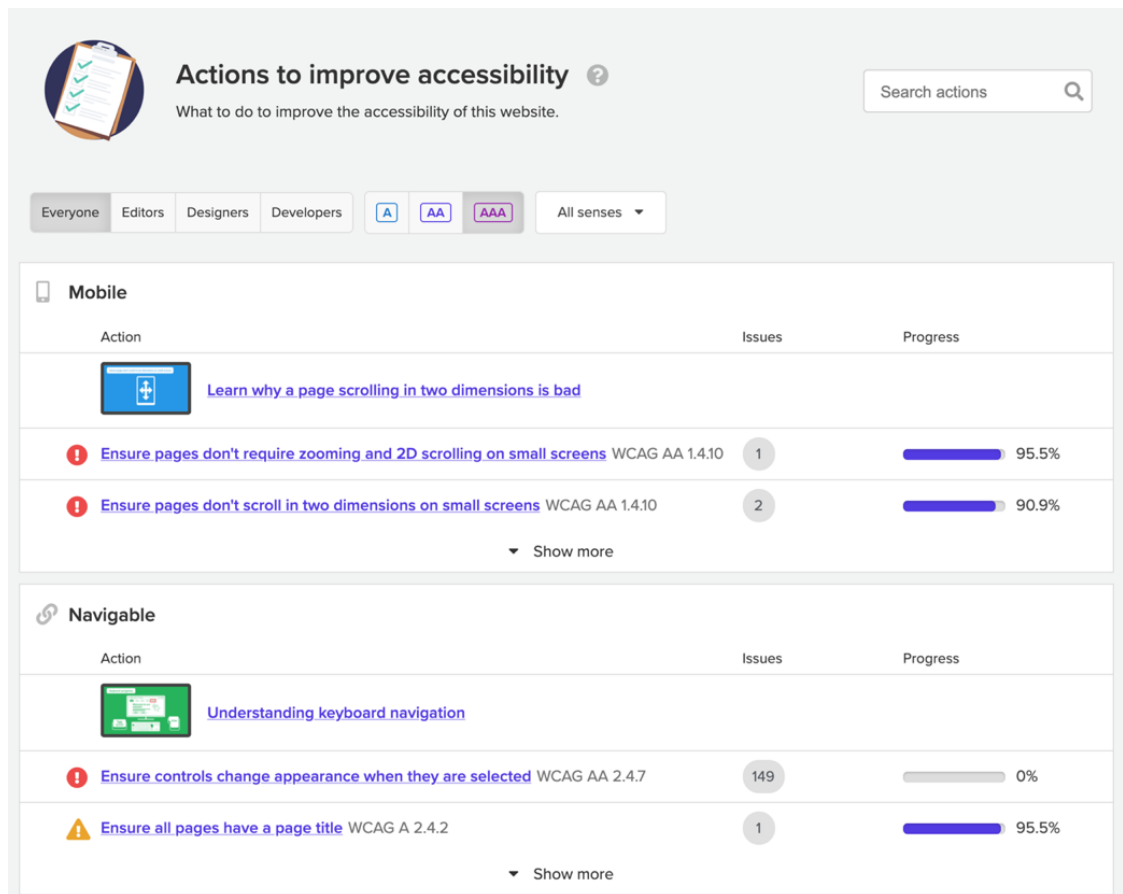


Image 57: Silktide's report. Actions to improve accessibility

To comply with the clients' requirements and the web accessibility standards required by the Government regulations, John introduced a new composite of bodies into the organisational toolbox, affecting it, increasing the team's capacities to act. John's desire to find a new tool acted as a productive and energetic force, making connections, and attracting new bodies into the project. The accessibility guidelines, the Equality Act, the accessibility scores, the reports, and the actions proposed by Silktide would co-lead the projects, constricting what James and the team could do or not to meet the standard. However, soon after the software was introduced, material and affective *hindrance* would begin to produce new and somewhat unexpected trajectories.

4.3 Scene III: The accessibility scores, resistance, and traces of rupture

Since the accessibility reports and Silktide were introduced into the organisation, the team began to routinely discuss how to improve the projects' scores. Once Silktide settled into the daily work, the team would discuss accessibility issues every week (see Figure 19 for further details). "We have reached 92% per cent!", James would inform. "We are very close to meeting the accessibility standards", John would reply. "I'm checking text contrast and colour issues", Peter would also report. After John introduced the platform, new capacities and flows of affect began to unfold in the organisation and

its projects. The Silktide report and its scores, proposed actions, and the WCAG 2.1 guidelines would begin to co-lead the creative work at Digital Co., to limit and set decisions for the team to follow and address. Silktide would begin to dictate and resist, to *push back* and demand changes in the web projects, to produce affective hindrances.

As Peter began to work with the 'Drawing School' client, another project under accessibility regulations, he asked James for access to the Silktide platform so he could begin analysing the site. Shortly after, James replied to Peter that they could only add one site at a time. The app was beginning to reveal certain limitations. Peter had to wait until James swapped the websites within the platform. The next day, Peter informed the team that there were some problems with the content of the Drawing School site. It seemed that certain text sections were decreasing the overall scores. James replied that, content-wise, it was not their problem as the client was responsible for how the content was written and presented. Brief ruptures and cracks began to emerge. Peter deepened his analysis by reporting that the Drawing School site additionally had contrast and colour issues and that some headlines needed adjustment. Following his previous comment, James pointed out that he preferred to leave colour issues to the clients. He asked Peter to try everything else before proposing the client to change the website's colours. The absent client seemed to enter the scene and disrupt the flow of events. Meanwhile, the Silktide report was still highlighting problems, it was beginning to produce rhythmic oscillations, forcing the team to make changes, to negotiate and change the visual output. Silktide was pushing back.

The days went by, and Peter was still working on the Drawing School's accessibility parameters. He was now working on the website's background. According to the Silktide report, a bright red colour in the website's background seemed to produce rupture and issues. Interestingly, as Peter worked on these issues, James said to him that they needed to pay attention to what Silktide was 'telling them' (research diary, day 70). The platform and its reports were producing material effects; Silktide was leading the team with its scores and proposed actions. By then, the site was reaching 97% for the AA standard, the team was getting close. Suddenly, as the team was working on the Drawing School's issues, John interjected saying that Silktide guided them, but that it was not the 'panacea'. Silktide began to enter into decomposition with John, the same individual who brought the platform in the first place. Interestingly, two weeks before, John addressed the same issue. This was not an isolated event.

After each work meeting around the accessibility issues, I began to observe the first signs of decomposition with the Silktide scores. As the team discussed how to inform the

client regarding this process and its development, John commented that they needed to be careful on how they reported the scores as these accessibility parameters always changed. To John, the accessibility scores were less static and mandatory as they seemed. He warned James that they should not be too precious regarding these scores and that the report handled to the client should be less specific than Silktide's. I began to witness tension and signs of rupture, Silktide showed me the many different affects the platform was able to produce upon the team. John began to resist the platform's scores. Silktide pushed back repeatedly, constricting the project, the website, and its content.

Week after week, I noticed that Silktide not only seemed to have produced brief ruptures with John but also began to limit James' design work and design decisions. It was during one of the many testing cycles of the 'University' project when I witnessed how James had to modify his design proposals based on what Silktide detected as an issue or not. James was designing a new landing page for one of the University's projects (see Image 58 below).

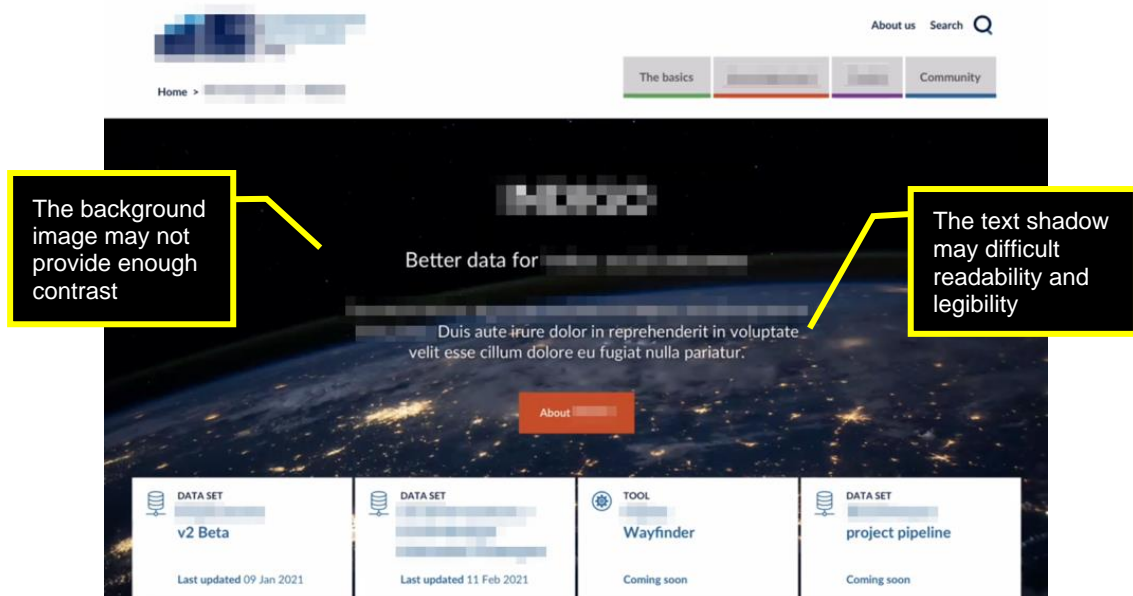


Image 58: The University project landing page design prototype

It was during a work meeting when James explained to the team that he was likely to change the background image as it may not provide enough contrast for the text block in front of it. James also mentioned that he added some shadows to this piece of text but that he was not sure whether this would affect the accessibility score. James was navigating affective capacities; he was modifying his design based on what Silktide could understand as an accessibility issue or not. The Silktide report and the scores were

leading and affecting James' decisions, producing new trajectories in the project, constricting him, and pushing his work back.

A couple of weeks later, as the team was still discussing the University's accessibility report, they were able to reach a 90% AA score. John asked what was happening and what was necessary to increase the score. Peter replied that the issues were located with the code semantics. Interestingly, John responded that sometimes platforms like Silktide aims to *satisfy the machine* rather than what the user wants. John pointed out that "the algorithm just seeks to justify the computer" (research diary, day 152). Silktide was asking for further improvement not just with the website's code, but with its frontend headlines. James shared a screenshot to show the team this issue (see Image 59 below). The platform was demanding more changes, Silktide was leading and dictating changes. The algorithm had to be satisfied.

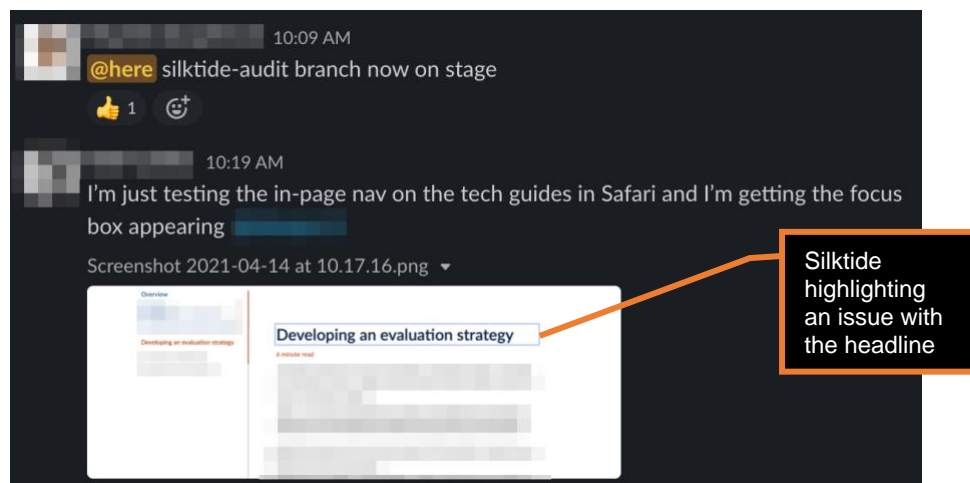


Image 59: Richard and James discussing an accessibility issue

As the team kept discussing the issue, Peter commented that there were some additional problems with the colours of the site. The colour affected the accessibility scores as well. Richard replied to him that probably he did not pick the right one. After a couple of hours of work, James re-tested the site. They achieved 99.2% WCAG 2.1 AA standard. The team and the machine felt finally satisfied.

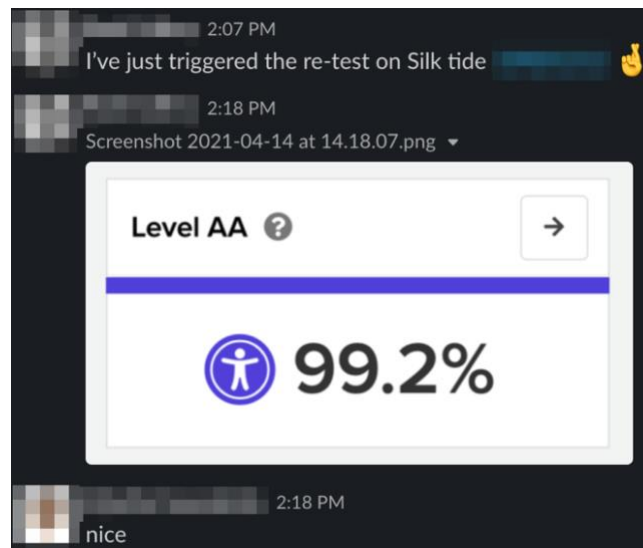


Image 60: The new Silktide accessibility score

Government regulations, international standards, software and reports, colours, shapes, typographies, images, scores, bodies colliding together, producing direction, changing trajectories, and affecting the project. Amongst these bodies, Silktide became a powerful force in this organisation, setting direction, producing material effects, demanding changes in the projects, resisting and pushing back. A body that entered into composition with the organisation producing decomposition afterwards. Silktide revealed to me the always-in-flux nature of bodily encounters and how the flows of affect produced within these encounters always mutated. The team followed the score and the proposed software actions to fix the issues. James complied; John sometimes resisted. Movement and flow, tension, affects, and material encounters led the event. Nonhuman and *affective hindrance* producing new trajectories. Hybrid composites outside the organisational boundaries affecting and co-leading projects and work.

5 ACT IV: Encounters with software codes, bugs, and processing units

5.1 Scene I: Rupturing bodies

Most of the time throughout the nine months I entangled with the team, the day-to-day work unfolded smoothly, steadily, and calmly. A normal day at Digital Co. flowed as a viscous fluid, with a steady pace and rhythm. However, all the tranquillity and viscousness of everyday routine would be interrupted at times by unexpected problems, issues, or events that would break the normalcy of work producing rupture, movement, and rhythmic oscillations, entailing sometimes short but intense flows of affect. These disruptions and problems would emerge along the day-to-day routine affecting the work and how the team would employ its time and resources. *Affective ruptures* that would lead the organisation and its members, a ‘somebody’ or a ‘something’ landing to disrupt the organisation, ruptures produced by humans and nonhumans alike.

“I think problems as well [lead us], you know, the problems that we hit upon along the way, you know, whether, you know, how- *how we spend our time on a given day will be influenced by problems that we've had upon and have to overcome*, or we haven't quite overcome yet. Or probably, you know, *somebody or something* lands, you know, on our desks.” (James, interview, italics added for emphasis)

As I progressively began to witness micro-ruptures in my daily entanglement with Digital Co., not only the team members or the clients would reveal traces of rupturing encounters during work cycles, meetings, and Slack conversations; the Lego models would re-materialise rupturing bodies at work. Lego began to reveal traces and material effects of decomposing bodies and how these ruptures affected the team and its projects. Often, these ruptures emerged as common notions like challenges, problems, or threats, as well as other less-common notions such as skeletons, zombies, snakes, bugs, spiders, and sharks, what Richard called ‘the nasties’ of work. These ‘nasties’ would reveal tensions between bodies when encountering each other. For instance, in one of his many models, John illustrated problems emerging from the projects in the shape of spiders and skeletons (see Image 61 below); problems that according to him, led the team to develop creative solutions. These ruptures were an affective and productive force.



Image 61: Problems, issues, and unexpected requests re-materialised with Lego

As John explained,

“...working on the project, which in this case is a castle. And we are working on it with these tools and building it... these are the problems coming out of it, that we- all *the bugs that come out the software project*, and they are making their way towards the planning table. Where, again, *myself, James and Richard have gathered with our planning tools to deal with these guys...* The problems coming out as the project goes and find creative solutions. This is where the- the- some of the creativity is happening... And it's been informed by these bugs that are coming out of it as well... The final piece of it, this is the client, with the fancy hat... And the client is holding a snake, which is ah, um, represents um, as yet *unknown requirement* that the client- the client has, *but we are unaware of*, this guy is going to throw that ((the snake)) into here ((the project)) and that's gonna sort of join this queue of- of problems.” (John, interview, italics added for emphasis)

Interestingly, John’s model revealed multiple problems the team needed to face when developing a project; however, he not only showed present and actual problems; that is, bodies exercising their affective and rupturing capacities to act, but he also revealed the ‘presence of the absent’, virtual bodies and its unexercised affects, the ‘red snake’ that the client could throw at any time, the unexpected and unknown request, a virtual presence that could potentially affect the direction of the project.

In a similar vein, as Richard described, rupturing bodies came in the shape of ‘the bucket of scary things’. Just like the snakes, spiders, and skeletons, the bucket illustrated the

latent presence of problems, ruptures, challenges, and issues the team had to tackle when doing its daily work.



Image 62: Richard's scary things in a bucket

The two models above illustrated the prospective sources of rupture in this organisation. These bugs, spiders, skeletons, and 'scary things in a bucket' had the capacity to change the rhythm and speed of the day, shifting from a viscous routine toward unpredictable and dissonant trajectories. Some of these ruptures would last a matter of minutes vanishing shortly after, while others would leave permanent marks and residues. The normalcy of work would be interrupted by these ruptures, dissonances produced by clients, unexpected requests, software bugs, and traffic overloads, to name a few disruptors. Ruptures and cracks producing rhythmic oscillations and new directions at work.

5.2 Scene II: The wheel hover is not working

James and John were reviewing the 'Guides and Scouts' project. This piece of work involved the design of visual pieces for a 'healthy eating program' the client wanted to disseminate across the organisation's members. Amongst the many pieces and parts the project included, the team spent some time developing an 'interactive wheel'. This piece illustrated six sections like 'pizza slices' that had to animate when the user rolled the cursor over them. This kind of function is often called 'hovering', a 'mouse-over' animation on clickable objects, like buttons or links that move when the user places the mouse on them. It was during a review cycle when James realised that the wheel was not working, the hover function was broken. This piece was not fully operable. A brief rupture entered the scene, leading both, James and John, to trace the origin of the

problem. I followed the issue closely; the team had encountered a *leaderful rupture*, a decomposing body affecting the project.

The first step to check the issue consisted of opening the website on multiple browsers; thus, plugging in more nonhuman bodies into the scene. Maybe it was just a problem with the Safari browser (Apple); however, they soon realised that the problem emerged across multiple web platforms including Firefox and Google Chrome (internet browsers). John opened the code visualisation function embedded into the Safari browser. He began to review the code base aiming to find a bug or software syntax error.

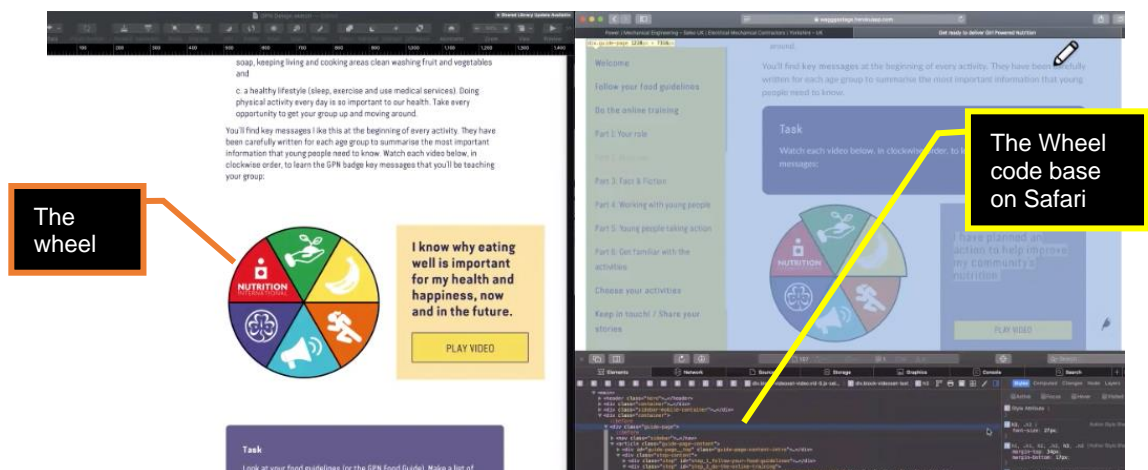


Image 63: The wheel issue

James and John discussed the improvements they needed to apply to this piece of visual work. John had to polish the code and find the bug. As James uncovered usability problems, they agreed on further actions to fix these issues. Micro-ruptures leaking into the project, ruptures that reverberated and produced movement, tension, directions, and new trajectories. As the team discovered these bugs along the way, they discussed prospective solutions, experimented with the page's elements, and rewrote pieces of code. The nonhuman code constrained the project, it decreased its capacities to act and to deploy animations. The rupture was not a mere and inert 'stuff', it had material effects. The website did not work properly. The team needed to find the source of the problem and thus plug out the broken code whilst plugging in the solving body that would alleviate the issue bringing stability to this piece of the project.

5.3 Scene III: The user traffic overload. We need to switch Dynos!

It was during my 30th week at Digital Co. when Richard asked the team whether the Drawing School site was struggling. A new rupture emerged disrupting the viscosity of normalcy. This event revealed new nonhuman bodies I was not aware of before. How

did Richard know the site was having problems? Who or what raised the alert? Was it the client or something else? For seven minutes, this rupturing encounter changed the trajectory of the day. It led the team to stop with the mundane tasks they were undertaking to restore the website's normal functionality.

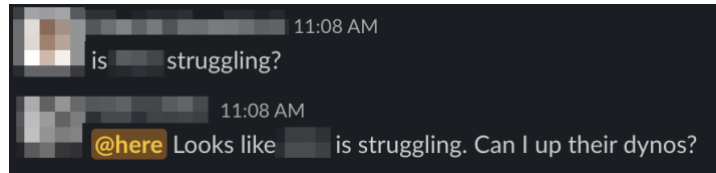


Image 64: Richard asks the team whether the client website is failing

Due to an unexpected increase in users and traffic on the client's website, some alerts began to emerge. Too many users were browsing the website at the same time. The server was not capable to handle such a level of traffic. The site began to crash. As the team discussed how to fix the problem, James asked whether he could raise *Dynos* up' switching from 'hobby' to 'standard'. At that moment, the site ran with a 'Hobby Dyno', a basic web processing unit. John replied that he could do it and switch from 'hobby' to 'pro' without further disruption. The solution depended on plugging-in nonhumans into the project. Bodies that would increase the site's capacities to cope with traffic and overload.

To understand what a Dyno is, it is important to know where the concept comes from. Digital Co. offered web hosting services, that is, a service that allows clients to publish a website as well as to manage and store data related to that site. To do so, the organisation offered to its clients a cloud-based service platform called [Heroku](#). This platform allowed to build, publish, manage, and scale up web-based apps. Therefore, a Dyno was a processing unit employed by Heroku that allowed to scale a project up and increase its performance. According to the Heroku website, developers can select three types of Dynos: (1) free, (2) hobby; and (3) professional (see Image 65 below). Each one has a running cost that increases according to its processing capacities.

Dyno Types						
	Free	Hobby	Standard 1x	Standard 2x	Performance M	Performance L
	\$0	\$7/dyno per month	\$25/dyno per month	\$50/dyno per month	\$250/dyno per month	\$500/dyno per month
			PROFESSIONAL			
What is it good for?	Ideal for experimenting with cloud applications in a limited sandbox.	Perfect for small scale personal projects and hobby apps.	Enhanced visibility, performance, and availability for powering your production applications.		Superior performance when it's most critical for your super scale, high traffic apps.	
RAM	512MB	512MB	512MB	1GB	2.5GB	14GB
Deploy from Git	●	●	●	●	●	●
Automated OS patching	●	●	●	●	●	●
Unified logs	●	●	●	●	●	●
Number of process types	2	10	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited

Image 65: Dyno types
Source: www.heroku.com/dynos

Thus, as James and John discussed whether to increase the site’s processing capacities, after a couple of minutes, the latter informed the team that he was able to fix the issue by upgrading the site’s Dynos. James replied that everything seemed to be working fine after John’s intervention. The website returned to normality. John warned that there was still plenty of traffic but that the Dynos he plugged into the server should suffice. James said that he would keep monitoring. The event ends.

I begin to reflect on what I have witnessed and dig in with the team about this issue. As Richard explained to me, they used [UptimeRobot](#), a web-based app that allows users to track and monitor websites. They had this service integrated into a Slack channel (I did not have access to this channel); thus, UptimeRobot sent alerts when there was disruption or when the website was down. It was this nonhuman actor the first one in raising the alerts regarding the Drawing School site. A failure disrupts, an alert mobilises humans, and more Dynos are plugged-in to the site to tackle the issue. Rhythmic oscillation and trajectories are produced by these encounters. Micro-ruptures producing directional effects at work.

5.4 Scene IV: A software bug crawling into the Lawyers’ website

The Lawyer client was annoyed, as James remarked. Some problems had arisen within the website, a software bug was causing troubles, crawling into the system, decreasing the client’s capacities to act, export and correctly visualise digital CVs and profiles. Broadly speaking, the Lawyer’s project consisted of maintaining and adding new features to a website that contained information on legal disputes, study cases, as well as a list

of barristers. On the barrister's list page, the website provided users with the option to export a PDF version with the barrister's biography, experience, and professional achievements. However, the client spotted a bug embedded into this function.

For some unknown reason, the PDF exporting feature was failing, the text broke down and produced an unwanted gap in-between paragraph. The client sent a screenshot to illustrate the issue (see Image 66 below). As the image depicted, the red circle pointed out the broken paragraph. The green circle showed that this problem did not originate in the Wagtail editor, the text seemed fine there. A rupture emerged into the project and began to produce unintended movement and acceleration.

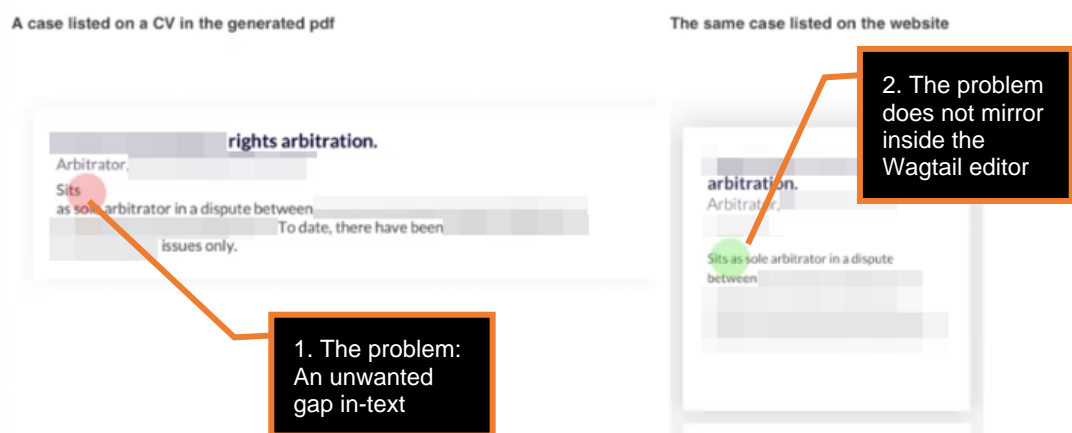


Image 66: The bug screenshot sent by the client

As the team began to discuss the issue to find a solution, John replied to James that he needed to investigate the issue as he did not know what could be causing the problem. He needed to assess the situation. James wondered whether this issue was experienced by other clients or users and whether the PDF exporter tool that Wagtail provided might be defective. Richard believed that the problem could originate due to the lack of 'hygiene' within the text, that maybe there was a 'dodgy character' that produced the problem, a line break inside the text file. The team wondered whether the problem was produced by the person who was editing the information and pasting it onto the CSM editor. However, the client illustrated that the problem did not seem to mirror inside the Wagtail editor. This was not a user's mistake in editing and importing the text into Wagtail.

Consequently, James logged in to the client's Wagtail editor to check the issue. He edited a page and attempted to export the barrister's CV, but the issue persisted. The team was not able to find the source of the problem. A bug co-leading the event, a rupture generating rhythmic oscillations and multiple trajectories. In the meantime, Richard began to inspect the site's code base. He also copied and pasted the faulty paragraph

into another text editor to check whether some hidden character or symbol was generating the issue. Nothing there either.

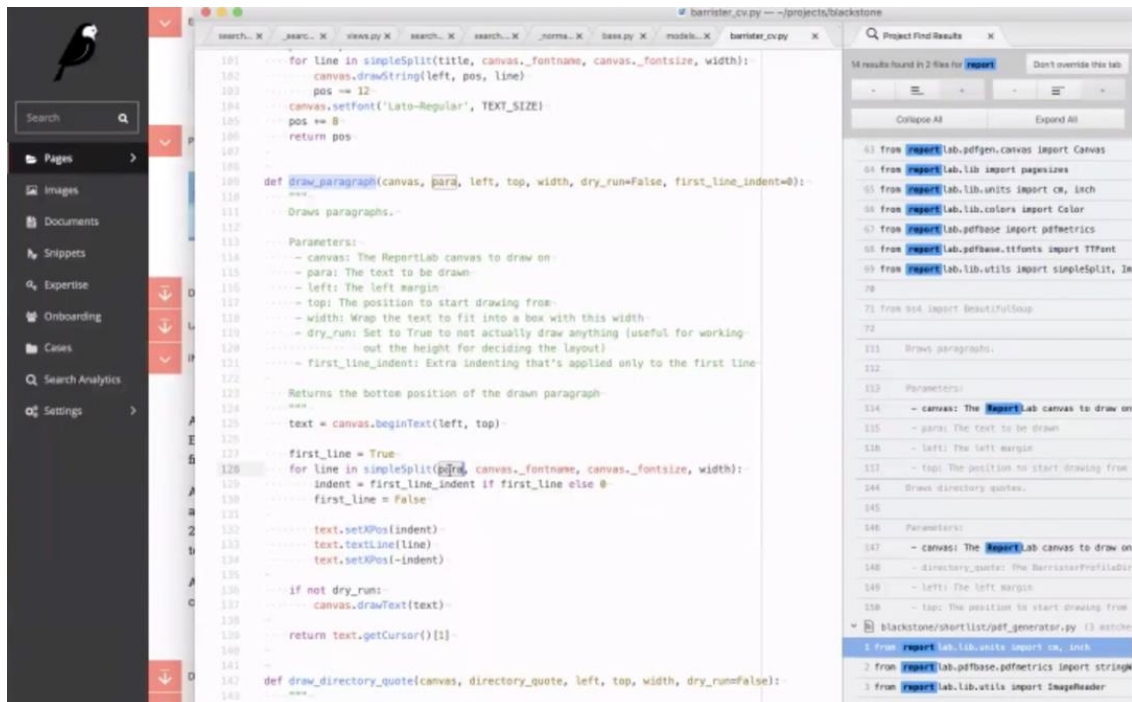


Image 67: A screenshot of Richard's screen inspecting the Wagtail editor

As the team discussed the bug the client found, they tried to identify the source of this problem so they could fix it. This was a pressing matter. One of the barristers needed to send his CV, that is how he discovered the bug. If they could fix the problem 'the client would be very happy', James said. A couple of days later, the team discovered that the problem originated from the PDF exporter tool embedded into Wagtail on Syntax's side, the creator of the editor, a rupture produced outside the organisational boundaries. Decomposing forces, micro-ruptures producing direction at work generating new trajectories, changes, and rhythmic oscillations. Software bugs, traffic overloads, unexpected problems and requests, and so on. Ruptures affecting the organisation, changing the normalcy of the work routine.

6 ACT V: Encounters with clients

6.1 Scene I: The centrality of the client

The clients were a powerful force in this organisation, a frequent source of motion and rupture. The many clients Digital Co. worked with played a central role in the projects and their development, they were an ever-present presence even when absent. The centrality of the client was clearly illustrated in the promise and corporate values the company was working on at the time.

“Our value proposition: We’ll give you the moon ((to the client)). We’ll move heaven and earth to get you what you want. We’re the guide that helps you *be the hero in your journey. We put you and your project at the centre* of what we do so you get the best of what our team has to offer.” (Internal document, italics added for emphasis)

Digital Co. placed clients at the centre, they were the *kings/queens* and *heroes* of the story. Often, the client would emerge re-materialised in multiple Lego models wearing crowns, or at the top of rockets and mountains. As James vividly illustrates,

“...it's about the sort of positioning them ((the clients)) as the sort of hero of getting this thing realised ((the project)) ... And we're not the hero. *He's the hero*, because he's sort of, you know, pulling it all together, he's got the research, he's got the, you know, all of those sorts of um, the people in the background, pulling everything together. And- and we're more of a guide to helping him sort of realise this- this vision.” (James, workshop 5, italics added for emphasis)



Image 68: James' model illustrating the centrality of the client

The client was “a big part of the journey” (James, workshop 10), a presence that I could often feel in this team. Digital Co. worked hard to keep the client happy and satisfied, for a dissatisfied client was perceived as ‘one of the worst things’ that could happen.

“...the threat is not making them happy and... dissatisfied client, an unhappy client is, is not ah, is not good for us at all... um, it's possibly, you know, worse than a client who can't pay... You know, *being dissatisfied is one of the worst things.*” (John, workshop 1, italics added for emphasis)

However, even though the clients and their happiness/satisfaction played a central role in this organisation, they were often depicted as a source of rupture and tension. Some clients were difficult to work with, they could be ‘wankers’ or a ‘pain in the ass’ sometimes, as one of the team members once depicted. In one of the Lego workshops, when the team members were developing a collective model, they all agreed that clients were a source of unpredictability, re-materialising this quality as the client holding a red snake, for they could throw ‘red snakes’ into the projects at any moment, the unexpected and bitterly surprising request.

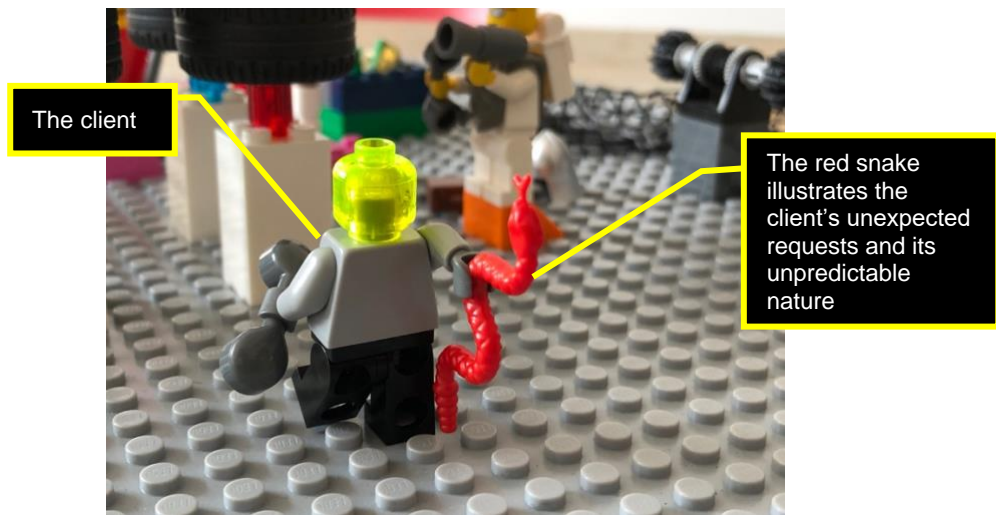


Image 69: The client and the unexpected requests

Even though the client was often seen as a source of rupture, James and the team had to keep them happy and satisfied.

“...we're focused on satisfying our client's needs. So, the work is very, very much focused on what our client needs... and contributing ideas and creative ways of solving the client's problems.” (James, workshop 1)

Because the client had a pivotal position at Digital Co., they used to co-lead the projects sending requirements, setting deadlines and budgets, and constraining what James and the team could or could not do. Interestingly, even though sometimes clients were not physically present, they were somehow always there, they were *absent presences* affecting the organisation. I would listen to the team talking about the clients, imagining whether by doing A or B they would be happy or not. At Digital Co., daily work revolved around the clients, their needs, and requirements.

6.2 Scene II: I am the client, it is my project, and I have the last word

Shortly after I started my fieldwork with the team, I began to realise the leaderful quality of the client. Interestingly, this was not only known by the team, but by the clients themselves. They had a strong sense of *ownership* and *control* over the project revealing tensions, power imbalances, and flows of affect within the client-organisation relationship, tensions and forces that often produced direction in the organisation and its projects. For instance, Theresa, the ‘Guides and Scouts’ client, illustrated to me her ownership sense over the project arguing the following:

“Um, one of the things my boss asked me, and I was like ‘you serious?’, ‘oh, what's- what's Digital Co's plans for the website? And I'm like, ‘they're not the

Digital Co's plans, *they're mine. I'm asking them to do, I'm asking them to do it'*. Um, so, yes, I do influence what- their work on in terms of the website, because um, *they can't just go ahead and do something without my knowledge*, really, unless it's a small, technical behind-the-scenes thing where it's a case of, well, no, it makes sense to do it". (Theresa, client interview, italics added for emphasis)

Theresa knew that the project was hers and that she heavily influenced it, she provided direction and was the one who had the last word regarding the work done by James and the team, on how and when to do it. She was adamant in making clear to her boss that all the plans and decisions were made by her. Similarly, Claudia, the 'Drawing School' client, mentioned that she felt often *annoyed* when Digital Co. undertook decisions without consulting her first. As she mentioned,

"...sometimes they ((Digital Co.)) have jumped the gun a little bit on, *onto doing stuff before you sort of maybe, thought you'd sort of confirmed or agreed to do it...* sometimes that's kind of a bit annoying, because you think, 'oh, actually, *I'm the client*. So, *I should be more in control of deciding if and when that happens'*. (Claudia, client interview, italics added for emphasis)

Clients felt that they had to *control* the projects, they had the power to *decide what happens or not*, to define priorities and set the project's tasks and conditions. They could be a force that increased or decreased capacities at Digital Co. As one client illustrated, the supplier-client relationship had to be that of 'devotion'.

"We long had a relationship with a company called Syntax, who developed our website. We did have, we did have some issues with Syntax, they became too large really *to give us devotion...* we were frustrated with how things were working. *We were not developing the website in the way that we wanted to.*" (Phillip, client interview, italics added for emphasis)

Clients were a demanding force. For instance, Michael, the 'recruitment software' client, probably one of the most challenging humans in this organisation, was aware that he was a complex individual. As he narrates,

I'd say, me as a customer, and I'm not an easy customer. And I will, *I will absolutely try and structure the relationship...* so I think I am, I'd say I'm reasonably challenging as a customer. Because probably my expectations sometimes sit above my, if you were to balance expectations against the value of a customer, I have- I have a- I have a view that I have contributed

reasonably significantly to Digital Co.'s, ah, to Digital Co.'s growth." (Michael, client interview, italics added for emphasis).

The fact that he paid for the project, set the requirements, and tracked the project's progress entitled him to ask for more and more, and if possible, to be done by yesterday, even if that request meant going above and beyond the contract.

"...this is one of many hats that I wear. And as such, the relat- the- the- *the investment from my side, is cash, I'm paying for it*, time and managing it, and-or checking that stuff is on track. Um, but also, at the front end, *setting the requirements in the first place*. So, I sort of interact with being the project manager, being the sponsor, and being the person who, who is, you know, articulating the- the requirement in the first place... But, you know, if you ask me what I want, *it's more, I want it faster, quicker, cheaper!*" (Michael, client interview, italics added for emphasis)

As the extracts above illustrate, clients pushed the team, sometimes decreasing the organisational capacities to act, delaying the project's schedule, or throwing 'red snakes', providing the team with little time to react, pushing to get the last-minute requirement out. As Claudia, a client, explained to me, sometimes she did not communicate her needs with enough time, throwing last-minute requests. As she was under pressure, she transferred that pressure to the team as well.

"...sometimes when I communicate about some things maybe *I don't give them enough time* to, you know, sometimes it's a bit last minute, a lot of stuff that happens... is a bit last minute... And then *I feel like I have to put extra pressure on them to try and get stuff delivered*. Because *I'm* under pressure, which isn't probably that helpful". (Claudia, client interview, italics added for emphasis)

What the clients wanted, their desires, requirements, deadlines, and budget restrictions led the team. For instance, Theresa illustrated to me a piece of work that she and James were working on, a design work that did not satisfy her; dissatisfaction that led James to improve and polish the work. What the client thought, did, and said was not something intangible, it produced material and leaderful effects. Clients were a powerful and *affective presence*.

"Um, so the latest piece that me and James have been working on, um where some parts was, like, mmm *not quite happy with that*. Um, and I'd say, right, yeah, *this looks a bit too clunky*. And I'm not sure about the colour, don't think

it works. Um, and there's one issue, we have consistently the website with too much white space, that's like 'can be tightened up?' (Theresa, client interview, italics added for emphasis)

Interestingly, this last extract revealed not only how the client affected the team, but also how other bodies affected the clients themselves, the colours, white spaces: design vibrancies directing the client. Bodies entangling at work, leading each other in different directions. Clients were a powerful and affective presence, playing an active role, often pressuring the team, bringing rupture and rhythmic oscillation. As James commented,

“I think clients' requirements... *I think definitely lead us* through how we spend our time and what we do.” (James, interview, italics added for emphasis)

6.3 Scene III: Absent clients affecting the project and its direction

I remember it very well; it was almost at the beginning of my fieldwork when I started to wonder *who* Michael was, for he was a very affective present/absent presence in this team. His name sounded and resounded. I would listen to expressions like: “Is this anywhere close to what Michael needs?”. Michael here, Michael there, Michael everywhere. He was with the team throughout entire work cycles: he was an absent presence affecting the work. However, it was not just Michael, I would appreciate other absent presences as well, “it is Andrew’s project...”; “Bella is going to be pleased...”; “Bella is a much easier client to work with, Andrew is a more difficult one”, absent presences producing material effects in the workplace. The team often invoked clients, wondering whether what they were doing would be good enough for them and whether they would feel satisfied and happy. I often felt these absent presences, bodies not-yet-to-be lurking around, affecting the scene as landmarks, the team often recalled and invoked them, they navigated non-exercised capacities, which in turn, produced real directions and trajectories at work.

It was during one of the many check-in meetings when Richard informed James that Michael had sent an email to him. Michael wanted to develop a new piece of work for the team to work with and he needed a quote. The job consisted of migrating Michael’s emailing service ‘MailChimp’ to another one called ‘Mailgun’; however, James replied that they needed a ‘triage’ meeting with Michael to better understand what he wanted. The problem was that Mailchimp did not comply with data protection regulations (GDPR) and Michael needed a new mailing supplier that complied with it. This migration project seemed to entail too many uncertainties, as James remarked, and that the lack of ‘joining

up' was generating surprises. Michael's *absence* produced problems and obstacles to develop the project. Him not 'being there' was producing rupture.

After a minute or two, the team continued talking about Michael, once again, even though he was not physically with them, Michael seemed to co-lead the event as the team discussed that they needed more time and information to develop the quote he was asking for. Michael seemed always present. As the team members discussed the issue, they began to realise that they needed to improve the project's organisation, they were using a single Trello board to follow all the tasks for Michael's projects and adding new tickets for the migration project into the client board could make a mess of both. I could listen to John saying that "if it is a separate project, it is better to have two boards" (research diary). Thus, Richard asked James whether the latter could have a conversation with Michael to have more insights into what he wanted. The email was insufficient. The team was navigating uncertainty, Michael was not clear enough.

After a couple of days, James and Richard were discussing the email migration project again. Richard described to James some of the problems they needed to address and that Mailgun seemed to be one of the best options. Richard believed that this was not a complex project and that he had "a good feeling about it". Richard said that they would need a week or two. However, James did not know if that was possible as the team had to work for other clients as well. I listened to him saying: "it is not up to Michael to decide what we do" (research diary). I could feel the tension that Michael brought into the team even when he was not there. The days went by, and James asked the team whether the quote for Michael was ready. The team nodded. A day after, James sent the client the required quote. Shortly after, Michael asked whether the team could deliver the project during the month. John believed they indeed could, informing the team that he had been working on the issue and exploring what they could do about it. However, James said to the team that he first needed "Michael's approval to crack on with this" (research diary).

As Michael's project began to grow, the team needed to plug in a new project management tool to organise the project. This is how the GitHub board was revealed to me as an observer for the first time. [GitHub](#) is an online repository for code-based projects allowing users to collaborate online for software development. In addition, this tool provides basic task management tools to track and trace project 'tickets'. In this context, a ticket, as Richard explained to me, was usually a "GitHub issue... a captured requirement for new work/feature, bug fix, etc.". Thus, it was during a check-in meeting when James shared his screen to present the new GitHub board (see Image 70 below). A new body entered the scene.

The team began to navigate the capacities of the board and what 'it could do'. The board's interface contained three columns: to do, doing, and done. Each column had a number of tickets or tasks concerning the project. James and the team discussed how to create boards, columns, to-do lists, and so on. When opening any of the tickets, the team could observe the objectives to fulfil the project's sprints and schedules.

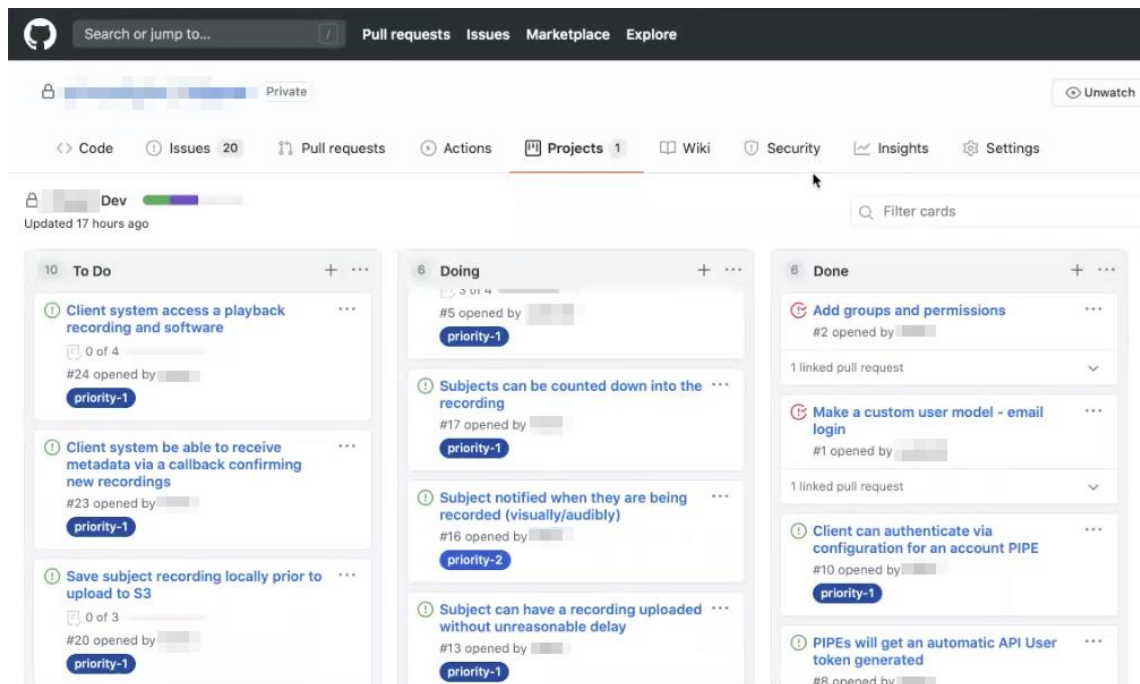


Image 70: A screenshot of the GitHub project board

As the team navigated this body and its capacities, Richard and John explained to me that they used GitHub before, "it is a developer's tool", they said; however, they did not use the task management feature. I could see the team navigating the tool, opening tickets and negotiating tasks as they assigned priorities (e.g., 1, 2, 3). With this tool they could visualise the whole project, the tool seemed to increase the team's capacities to act. It began to enter into composition. As John said to me: "we always try to work smarter... we explore things that might be better" (research diary).

Interestingly, as Richard and John were discussing the project board, the tasks at hand, the workload, and the timing for the project, it took a matter of minutes for me to capture small materials traces of Michael's *present absence* during the discussion: "As far as Michael is concerned, the project is on time...", John said; "we have to be careful to what we say to Michael, he is paying for the project, and he wants to know that there is a plan and that the plan is reasonable...", James replied (research diary). The team was organising the project based on what Michael thought or what he could eventually think. Michael was usually there even though he was not physically with the team, talking to them, directing them from the distance. Meanwhile, as James and the team discussed

what to inform Michael or not, they began to wonder whether they should invite him to the new project board or not. John believed that Michael should not be invited into the board, he feared that he could move and create tickets and ‘make a mess’ of the board: “it is *our* tool...”, he stressed. Richard disagreed with John. He did not believe that Michael would disrupt the project board. Both of them, John and Richard, were navigating virtual capacities, unexercised affects produced by Michael; and yet, what I was witnessing was very real, producing actual material effects. The whole discussion and actions revolved around Michael and what he could or could not do to the board. His absent presence was strong. The team was planning the project based on what Michael could have wanted or not, Michael was co-leading the event, affecting the scene from afar.

6.4 Scene IV: The cookie issue and the booking system failure

The evening, as any other day, was unfolding as usual. The team members were working on their tasks, with not much interaction on Slack besides a few messages until James informed the team that one of the clients, the ‘Drawing School’, pushed an unexpected request. A red snake emerged. The client had an issue with the live booking system and the cookies on the website. The live booking system was a section on the website that allowed users to book and pay for courses and training. This section was developed by another IT provider. On the other hand, a cookie is a piece of web-tracking and information-gathering technology used to identify users and their interaction and activities with a website or product (Sipior, Ward and Mendoza, 2011). Thus, James – who was supposed to be on annual leave– showed up on Slack writing that the client had requested support for these two issues (see Image 71 below), the red snake begins to disrupt the daily routine.

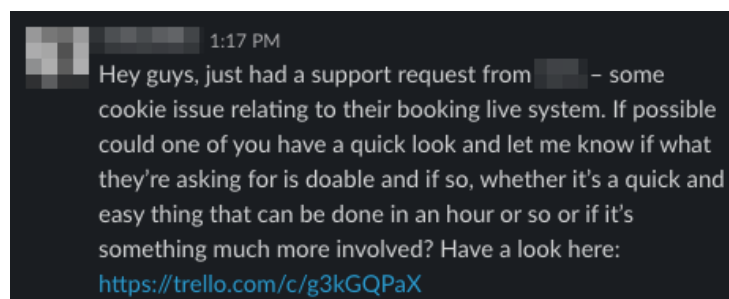


Image 71: James informing the team regarding the cookie and booking issues

Shortly after, John and Richard put their work routine into a halt and met by video call to discuss the issue. As they began to discuss the client's request, Richard shared his screen and then both proceeded to navigate the site's cookie configurations and

software codes. The team interrupted their flow of work to check the issue the client was pushing forward. A rupture began to lead the event.

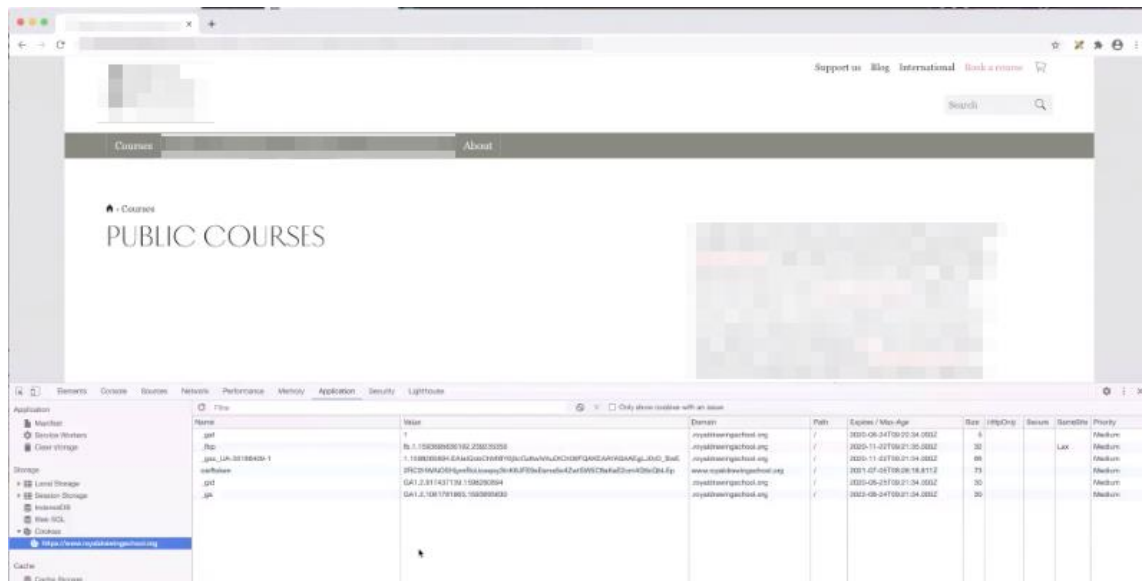


Image 72: John and Richard navigating the website's cookie configuration

For several minutes, John and Richard inspected the issue. They moved around the site's user interface, opened menu options, and checked codes. After 20 minutes or so, John replied to James that the problem seemed to originate with the booking service provider and that it was an integration issue that needed updating. As John mentioned, "it's [the booking provider] that are setting the cookies 'wrong', not us" (Slack message). Confusion and rupture were produced by the booking service provider and the client's red snake.

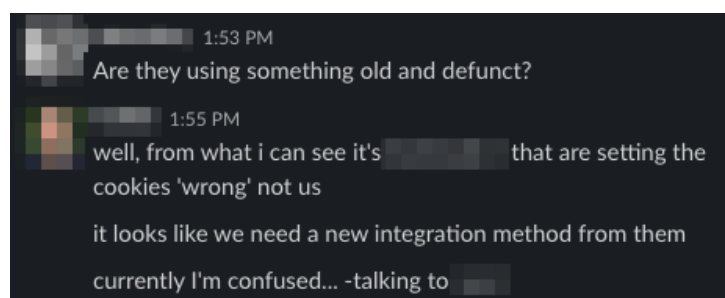


Image 73: John explains that the issue is not theirs

As John explained the issue to James, he remarked that it was the booking service provider the one that had to tell them (the team) what the integration code should be for the booking system. He felt confused. John copied and pasted the current piece of code into Slack to justify his conclusion.

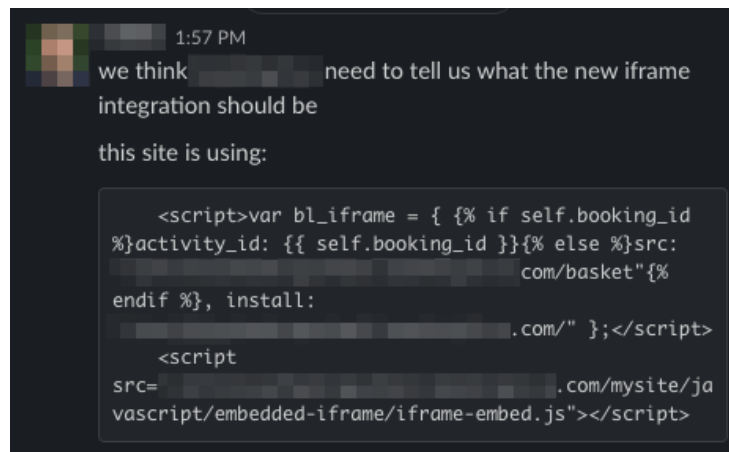


Image 74: John sharing a piece of code on Slack

Thus, before the day ended, James returned to Slack to inform the team that the booking service provider fixed the issue and that the client request ended up being a ‘wild-goose’ chase, a waste of time. He apologised to the team and left the chat room. The event ends.

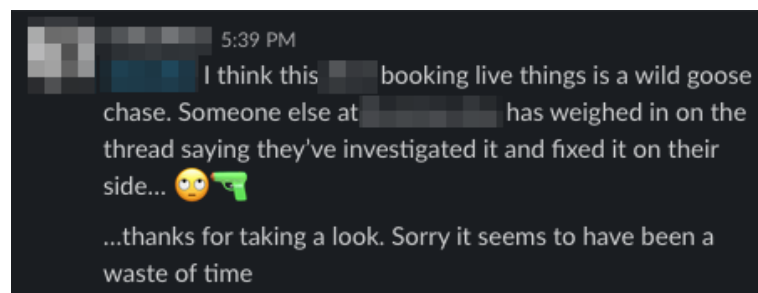


Image 75: James points out that the problem was a waste of time

These chains of events and relations reveal how clients affected the company when asking for unexpected requests, this was an example of a ‘red snake’ crawling into the normalcy of routine. This ‘red snake’ broke the daily rhythm of work, producing movement and new trajectories, although fruitless ones. A leaderful rupture in which the client, the team, the provider, and the code-base entangled to produce the very reality I was witnessing unfolding a myriad of emergent and leaderful effects.

6.5 Scene V: A very tense meeting

It was two months before ending my fieldwork at the company when I experienced one of the tensest moments of work at Digital Co. It was time to present Michael, the ‘recruitment software’ client, a demo of the product James and the team had been developing during the past months. The project consisted of a desktop app to capture, store, and reproduce video interviews for recruitment agencies. The task of the meeting

consisted of giving the client a demonstration of the features and functionalities of the software prototype.

On the client's side, Michael and one of his in-house developers. On Digital Co.'s side, James, Richard, John, and Peter. The meeting was set to take place via Google Meets. Bodies, human and not, were ready to collide, to encounter each other. Once the meeting started, John began his presentation by explaining the user's journey throughout the video platform. He opened his internet browser, logged in to the service, and explained how to set up the camera and the microphone, and how to start with the video recording. Human participants seemed attentive and focused.

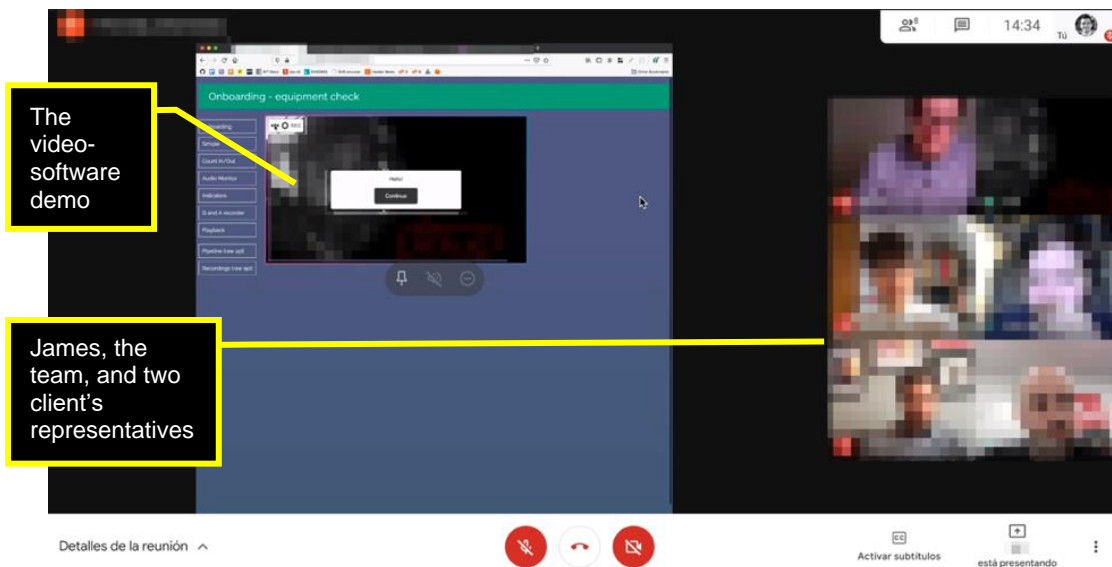


Image 76: A screenshot of the demo presentation on Google Meets

Interestingly, when John was navigating throughout the demo, a failure emerged to dislocate the event: the audio indicator (an animated icon) did not work properly. A brief rupture emerged. John explained that this was a very simple issue to fix. He opened the codebase to show where the problem was located, added some new lines of code, and showed the corrected feature on the demo site. This was not a finished product presentation but an unfinished and unpolished prototype. After fixing the issue on-site, John continued with his presentation.

```
37
38 <video id="..." playsinline class="video-js vjs-default-skin vjs-border"></video>
39 <script>
40   let options = {
41     controls: false,
42     plugins: {
43       record: {
44         maxLength: 10,
45         upload: true
46       },
47       preRoll: {
48         file: {
49           type: "video/m4v",
50           src: "..."
51         }
52       },
53       countIn: {
54         seconds: 3
55       },
56       countOut: {
57         seconds: 3
58       },
59       minRecord: {
60         buttonText: 'Next question',
61         seconds: 2,
62       },
63       audioMonitor: {
64         visualisation_type: 'orb'
65       }
66     }
67   }
68 }
```

The source of the problem

Image 77: John pointing out the fixed piece of code

However, following the audio indicator issue, Michael began to interrupt the presentation. The rupture experienced seconds ago produced something, a cascading effect that would affect and change the trajectory of the whole meeting. First, Michael asked whether they should deploy a warning message when there is no audio on the platform. John replied that they did not think it was necessary as the user had to test and configure the video and audio inputs before the interview process. Michael was also worried about the timing for the user to answer the interview questions. He explained that in a previous demo the timer indicator went slower due to frontend issues, therefore, Michael illustrated that even though the interviewee had two minutes to answer a question, users had more time than what was originally configured on the platform because of a software bug. Consequently, Michael asked whether the time constraints were being handled or not. Past ruptures and their affective residues began to affect the meeting. John replied arguing that the problem had been solved and that the recruiter could set time constraints for each of the interview questions on the content management side of the platform. Michael, who kept asking questions, was trying to direct the meeting. He was taking control over the pace and rhythm of the event as he pushed John against the corner.

Immediately after, Michael asked about the functionality of the software on different browsers. 'Oh God', I thought, this is going to be an issue as I knew the team was struggling with Safari, Apple's internet browser. During the past weeks, the team had been trying to enable the software into this browser, however, it had been fruitless. They needed to wait for Apple to release some updates. The problem was that this update had not been carried out yet. Thus, John said to Michael that Safari was a 'no-go' yet and that it seemed that this problem should be fixed in the upcoming months. Bodies outside the organisational boundaries affecting the flow of the project, decreasing the team's

capacity to act. Michael, who started to appear perplexed, asked how it was possible then for 'CameraTag' to work with Safari and why his product was not enabled with it yet. Tension started to build up.

[CameraTag](#) was a video web technology that allows users to use a computer or laptop camera to record videos and upload them to a server. This technology was chosen by Michael. As John explained to me several weeks before this meeting, CameraTag did not support an "emerging W3C standard", a web regulation that aids developers on how websites should look and work across multiple platforms. To illustrate this issue, John shared his screen with the demo loaded into the Safari browser. As expected, the software failed to enable the webcam, it had a problem with Flash, a defunct technology that Apple was abandoning. Then, John switched to Google Chrome and explained that this was the most permissible browser, the one that had fewer problems. Michael checked, in the meantime, how CameraTag worked in Safari. As the team tried to find prospective solutions, I followed a link shared by Richard with CameraTag specifications for each browser. Tension was building up. The client, the bugs, and ruptures were dictating how the event unfolded. Michael was pushing hard. He wanted answers.

The screenshot shows the 'Documentation' page for CameraTag version 14. It features a 'Browser Support' table with columns for Desktop (Chrome 49+, Firefox 40+, Chrome <49, Firefox <40, Safari, IE 10+, IE 9) and Mobile (iOS 6+, Android 2.3+). The 'Webcam' row shows 'Flash or WebRTC*' for Chrome 49+, Firefox 40+, and all IE versions, and 'Flash' for Chrome <49, Firefox <40, and Safari. The 'File Upload' row shows support for Chrome 49+, Firefox 40+, Chrome <49, Firefox <40, Safari, and IE 10+, but not for IE 9. The 'SMS Mobile Record' row shows support for Chrome 49+, Firefox 40+, Chrome <49, Firefox <40, Safari, and IE 10+. The 'MOBILE' section shows 'Mobile Recorder / Upload' supported on iOS 6+ and Android 2.3+.

DESKTOP	Chrome 49+	Firefox 40+	Chrome <49	Firefox <40	Safari	IE 10+	IE 9
Webcam	Flash or WebRTC*	Flash or WebRTC	Flash	Flash	Flash	Flash	Flash
File Upload							
SMS Mobile Record							

* SSL connection required

MOBILE	iOS 6+	Android 2.3+
Mobile Recorder / Upload		

Image 78: CameraTag specification on multiple browsers

Michael pushed and encouraged the team to look at how CameraTag works on Safari, he was fixated on that, bringing it into the discussion as often as he could. However, even though Michael reckoned that Safari was not the main browser selected by his platform users, he wanted that browser enabled anyway. He insisted on this. Things

were heating up. Faces looked serious; the atmosphere felt dense and strange. Michael was a strong and rupturing presence growing after each encounter with bugs and software development problems and uncertainties.

Following the above topic, Michael then asked about mobile functionality. It seemed that with iPhones the software may not work yet. Android did. Michael, who at that point seemed very serious, commented: “it seems to me that *you haven’t tested that*”, with a very serious and deep voice, almost angry. John, who was under the spotlight and pressure, replied: “I will defer to James” (tension). James explained to Michael that they wanted to show him the desktop version that day, not a mobile one. In the meantime, John began to load the platform in a phone-sized format to show that the app was responsive on mobile devices as he shrank the browser’s size on his screen. He added that the text seemed crowded but that the size could be edited on the backend side of the software. Michael had concerns with the user interface as he asked whether the app was ready for testing or ready for use, he turned towards James to get an answer.

James, with a paced and calmed rhythm, replied to Michael that the idea of the meeting was to check the app and to define any concerns. Michael asked about testing again. John replied that the software integration to the client’s infrastructure was fairly simple. Michael asked then how many users could simultaneously record videos on the app and whether there could be a ‘bottle neck’ effect produced by unusual or high levels of traffic. At that point, the developer on Michael’s side interjected by saying that this aspect of testing might be difficult to do locally as it was too challenging to emulate different camera inputs in a single device to test.

Michael, who seemed to be pushing harder and harder asked the team about the stability of the software and what happens when the audio or video input is corrupted, or what happens when the internet connection is lost. John replied that it was desirable to install ‘2x dynos’, specific processing units within the server to handle heavy loads of traffic. As the meeting was approaching its end, Michael said that he would further check the software to raise any concerns about any bugs he and his team may find. Then, both teams agreed on the next steps to develop the project as Michael wanted to prepare the product for mass testing. The meeting ends.

Immediately after encountering Michael, the team shared some perspectives on Slack. James and Richard congratulated John for the presentation as Richard noted that the audience was ‘not the easiest’. James echoed the comment by replying: “[h]e can be a bit *brutal* eh?”. The tension of the meeting was not only felt by me as an external observer

but by all the members of the team, tension transferred into the Slack space, *affective residues* left by the event the team just experienced. As an observer I felt it, this event also seemed to affect me. I felt it in my guts just as if I had been in the hot spot. James said to the team that he would check the project proposal as he was sure that the mobile application was not covered by the contract, it was not ‘a thing’, as he remarked. The project only considered a desktop version. Michael was pressing and pushing to get the most out of his money even if that meant going beyond the contract.

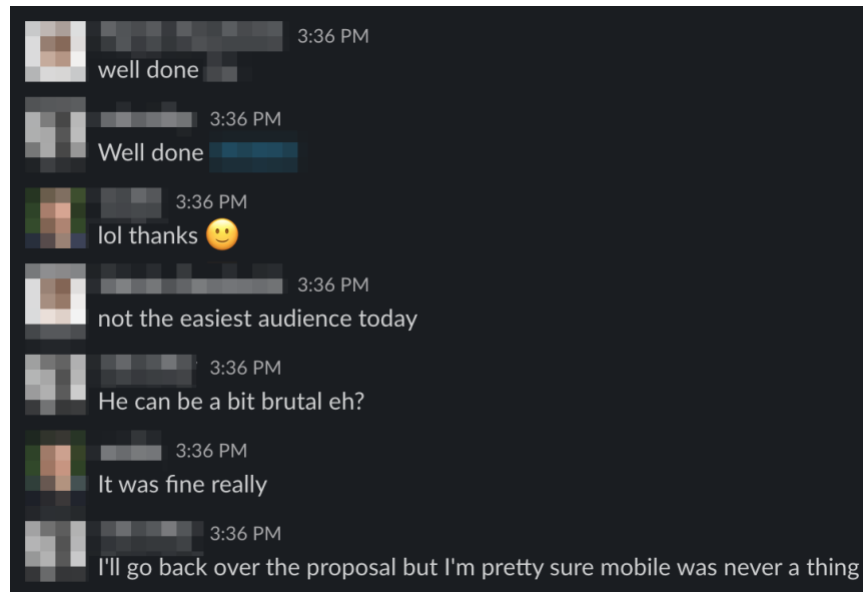


Image 79: The team sharing some thoughts after the meeting

As James and the team shared their thoughts, they began to look for prospective solutions to the Safari issue. James said that it would be interesting to know whether CameraTag worked in Safari and how, so they could solve the problem. John replied that the whole issue seemed “like voodoo” at that moment. In the meantime, Richard was doing some research, looking for answers. This was Richard’s playground. He was being led and motivated by what he just experienced, by Michael, the tensions, and ruptures unleashed during the meeting. After some minutes, Richard shared some links on Slack. Michael seemed to be leading this part of the event even though the meeting ended several minutes ago. The affective residues left by him were producing all this movement, trajectories, this change in the work rhythm, a leading rupture produced by an absent body that was present just minutes ago. Present and affective bodily presences/absences, ruptures, bugs, and tensions producing direction at work.

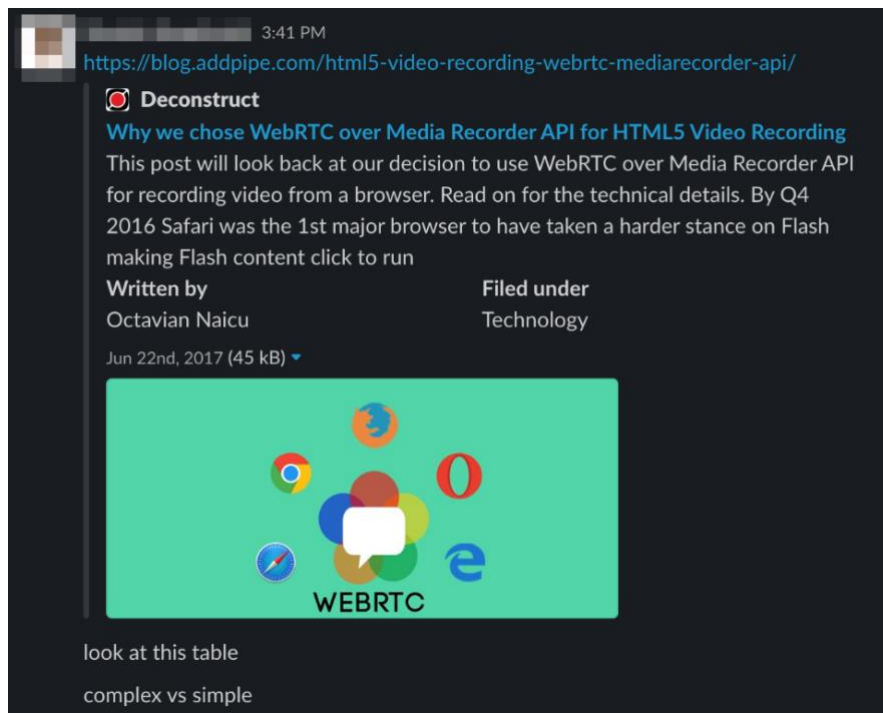


Image 80: Richard sharing links on Slack

Shortly after, the affective residues left by Michael were discussed by James and me. As James allowed me to observe the meeting, I thanked him for the chance as he confessed to me that the meeting did not go as well as he hoped; however, the team already knew that Michael was a complex and challenging client.

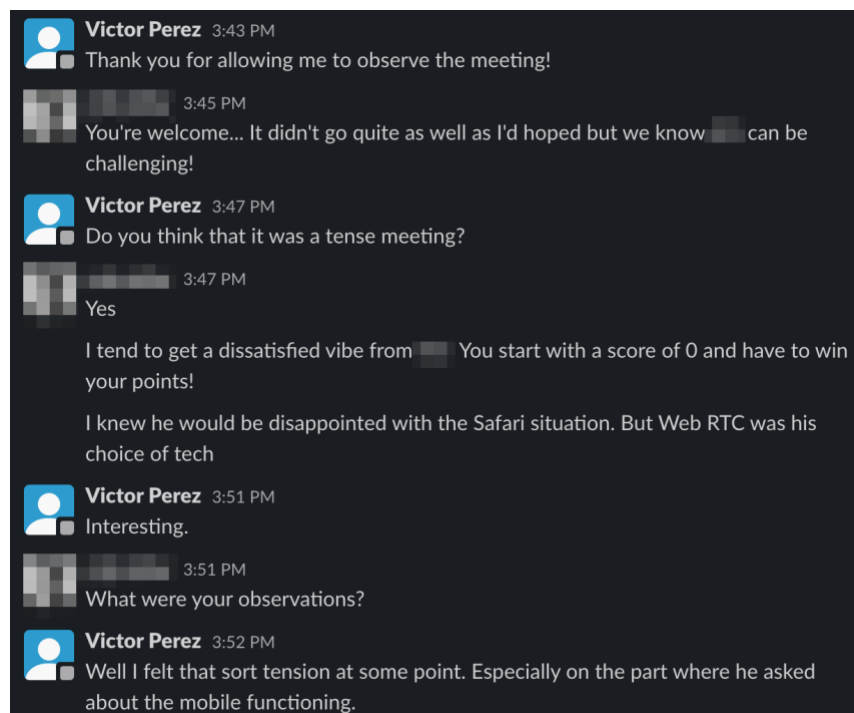


Image 81: James and I discussing the post-meeting feeling

James felt a sort of vibe that Michael emanated, a vibrancy that conveyed dissatisfaction; however, the choice of technology was made by Michael himself. The Safari issue was a material effect of his decision. Michael and his choice of technology decomposed the project, producing all these intensities, rhythmic oscillations, tensions, and ruptures. This vibe that James talked about was not only felt by him, but also by Peter who asked whether all the meetings with Michael were like that. He looked like a 'serious chap', he said. John replied that Michael was serious and tough. James seconds John adding that Michael was very serious and that other clients were 'a lot less intense' and more 'grateful and easier to please'. As John mentioned once, "what Michael seems to want is having a team devoting their job to his project" (research diary). Michael was not physically present with the team, but his *absent presence* was still producing something, affecting the scene.

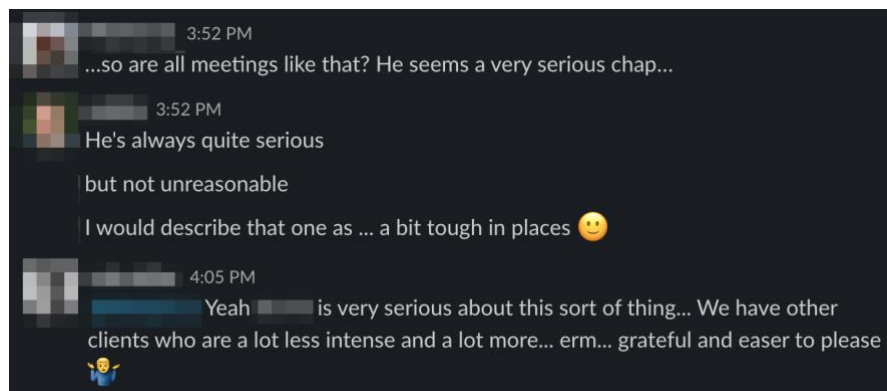


Image 82: Peter commenting on the post-meeting feeling

This chain of events reflects the tensions, ruptures, and multiple directions produced by clients and other rupturing bodies at work, how they can dislocate the event and decompose the project, decreasing the team's capacities to act. Michael, Safari, Apple, CameraTag, bodies that together produced rupture, instability, and tension. Bodies entangling together, affecting each other. An event imbued, impregnated with flows of affect. Interestingly, the failure at the beginning of the meeting seemed to unleash a cascading effect, allowing Michael to hijack the meeting.

As I have shown throughout this act, the client was a powerful force, a present/absent presence able to produce a myriad of affects. Clients were often a source of rupture, throwing 'red snakes' into the projects, adding pressure and pushing out requirements. Clients were not passive and un-affective; on the contrary, they were a very active presence in this team, even when they were not physically present. Clients co-produced direction and produced leaderful effects.

7 ENDING: The leaderful qualities of matterly encounters

Throughout this chapter, I have illustrated a manifold of ‘material storytellings’ (Strand, 2014) involving the entanglements and encounters of bodies, human and not, and how the flows of affect produced in such encounters produced direction at work in the context of a UK-based creative and digital agency called Digital Co. By narrating hybrid encounters with (1) Lego bricks; (2) graphic and visuals; (3) regulations and standards, (4) software codes, bugs, and processing units; and (5) clients, this chapter depicted the affective capacities of bodies, what they can do, what they produce when colliding with each other, and how these doings and collisions co-produce leadership in the workplace. Overall, I argue that within the unfolding of creative and playful activities and practices, leadership is not something that emanates from heroic and human-centric figures such as those of leaders and followers but emerges as an emergent effect of the flows of affect produced within human-material encounters at work. In doing so, I empirically and theoretically contribute to the leadership literature by developing what I conceptualised as the ‘leaderful qualities of matterly encounters’ thematising five interrelated qualities: (1) affective spell, (2) consonant and dissonant vibrancy, (3) present presence/absence, (4) affective hindrance, and (5) decomposing rupture.

In [ACT I](#), I have illustrated how Lego had the capacity to cast *affective spells* on humans, who would feel drawn toward vibrant shapes, colours, sounds, and touch. This was the silent, seductive, and enchanting power of Lego. Within the human-brick encounter, the team members fell under this spell, feeling inspired and attracted to specific pieces that would lead them to develop ideas, thoughts, and models. [ACT II](#) portrayed multiple encounters with a branding project named Cursive. Within the human-logo encounter, *dissonant and consonant vibrancies* were produced. These vibrancies were traduced on bodies and elements that seemed ‘in’ or ‘out’ of place, a ‘something’ that seemed to disrupt or harmonise the visual output of the project. These leaderful vibrancies had the capacity to lead the team in one direction or the other. [ACT III](#) revealed how multiple bodies outside the organisational boundaries such as regulations, standards, and other apps had the capacity to constrict creative work. This is what I conceptualised as *affective hindrance*, bodies resisting, pushing back, dictating changes and developments, imposing limitations on work affecting the direction of multiple projects the team was working with. [ACT IV](#) illustrated encounters with software, apps, and bugs introducing the idea of leaderful and *decomposing ruptures*. Within human-nonhuman encounters, certain bodies collided in such a way that disrupted the normalcy of routine, producing sometimes short but intense flows of affect. Finally, [ACT V](#) portrayed how *present and absent* encounters with clients had the capacity to produce direction at work. Clients had

the power to ask for unexpected requests, to push changes on the project, and to put pressure on the team, often producing rupture and new trajectories. However, clients not only co-produced direction with their *present presence*, but with their *present absence* as well. The team often developed work and projects based on what the client could have wanted or not, thus, even though these clients were not physically present with the team, they were absent landmarks affecting work in real time. To sum up, these five acts have rendered the doings of materiality visible, providing empirical illustrations of how matterly and affective encounters produce emergent leadership effects in the context of creativity and play at work.

The following chapter presents the concluding remarks of this thesis including the discussion section depicting how these empirical findings and theoretical developments are related to the extant literature. Then, I continue with the main conclusions of this study, its practical implications for organisations, as well as the limitations and opportunities for further research in the field.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

The following chapter unravels the findings and themes uncovered throughout [chapter four](#) and [chapter five](#) discussing them in relation to the reviewed literature. This chapter unfolds as follows: Section 1 begins the discussion by providing an overview of the research findings. Consecutively, section 1.1 discusses the situatedness of my study by outlining how creativity and play emerged and unfolded at Digital Co. and the implications of such findings for the current understanding of leadership in these contexts. Section 1.2 provides a detailed discussion on the 'leaderful qualities of matterly encounters', the main finding of this study, unpacking the five qualities I identify through my analysis. Section 1.3 repacks the research's findings providing a discussion of the implications of these leaderful qualities in the field of leadership studies. Finally, section 2 closes the discussion with a summary.

1 Bodily encounters leading creative and playful practices at work

When mainstream leadership literature concentrates on individual leaders and how they are supposed to manage and support creativity and play at work, it creates ego-centric (Schweiger, Müller and Güttel, 2020) and competency-based frameworks (Bolden and Gosling, 2006) that privilege and elevate corporate figures (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019). Such conceptualisations tend to marginalise and silence materiality favouring instead heroic and romantic theories focused exclusively on human traits, behaviours, and performances; thus, constraining leadership within the confines of human-human relationships (Salovaara and Ropo, 2018). These anthropocentric and heroic approaches tend to obscure the active ways in which nonhuman bodies, forces, and intensities co-produce direction at work; thus, restricting our understanding of organisations and how they are led. Inspired by the theoretical tenets of new materialisms and affect theories, this research has sought to decentralise the heroic human subject revealing instead how human and nonhuman bodies co-direct creative and playful practices in a micro-business under the pseudonym Digital Co.

1.1 Creativity and play: Beyond instrumentality and performance

The initial objective of this research project was to investigate the materiality of leadership in the context of organisational creativity and play. To better understand leadership in these contexts, I had first to explore how creativity and play empirically emerged and manifested in the field site. As emphasised in the literature review, organisation studies often focus on how creativity can be enhanced and supported in the

workplace (e.g. Amabile and Khaire, 2008; Gilson, 2008; Shalley and Gilson, 2004). In attempting to outline prescriptive accounts on how to increase employees' creative behaviour, prior studies have emphasised the role of play in facilitating and fostering creativity (e.g. Anderson, 1994; Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006; Schulz et al., 2015; West, 2014). The main assumption is, therefore, that play can *serve* as a creative catalyst (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006; Schulz and Geithner, 2014; Statler, Roos and Victor, 2009).

However, the empirical evidence revealed in this thesis questions the above assumptions suggesting that the boundaries between creativity and play are less clear, and more importantly, less instrumental than the literature commonly suggests (see [chapter two, section 2.1](#)). The current study found that creativity and play are less about developing the 'new' and 'useful' (Amabile and Pratt, 2016) in playful ways (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006). Rather, it suggests that both constructs are more about the mundane *connection* and *arrangement* of bodies, human and not, in daily work. At Digital Co., creativity and play emerged as a 'coming together' of human and nonhuman bodies, an ongoing, never-ending, and iterative process, a socio-material entanglement (Tinggaard, 2013). The common link between these two constructs was the idea that every human and nonhuman component was 'connected', it was an arrangement process consisting of fitting bodies in and out within daily, routine, and mundane work activities and practices. At Digital Co., there was *creativity* in play, and there was *play* in creativity.

The above entanglement is what I articulate as *creato-playful* practices (see [chapter four, section 3.2](#) for further details). Consequently, rather than conceptualising play as a management technology that serves creativity (West, 2014), or creativity as something that emerges from play (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006), this thesis argues instead that both constructs emerge simultaneously with no clear distinctions in-between, a socio-material practice that permeates almost every aspect of work. As the empirical evidence reveals, creativity and play were entangled throughout moment-to-moment practices, when designing, writing software, animating web elements, meeting with team members and clients, planning work, stacking Lego pieces together, researching on the web, and so on. This was arguably an unexpected finding. Therefore, this thesis suggests that rather than paying attention to performative views on how organisations can increase and improve individual and team creativity by employing, for instance, serious play, we can begin to understand creativity and play not as two distinct processes, but as an emergent, on-going, and simultaneous confluence of bodies coming together through

connections, arrangements, and relationships immanent in moment-to-moment work routines.

This non-performative articulation resonates with critical and posthuman creativity theories and other recent play studies. Osborne (2003), for instance, argues that creativity is not an issue of novelty but that of arrangements as well as organisation and reorganisation practices. This finding, therefore, further supports the idea of creativity and play as distributed and relational processes (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017; Styhre, 2006; Sundgren and Styhre, 2007), as pure connectivity (Linstead, 2018) unfolding within never-ending fluxes of events; rhizomatic processes always in motion and change (Badiou, 2007; Beck and Gleyzon, 2016) emerging in-between subjects and objects. Such conceptualisation contributes to developing a posthuman sensitivity that explores notions of everyday creato-playful practices in the form of relational encounters; thus, placing emergence, connectivity, and flow as pivotal units of analysis calling to attention how organisational creativity and play are “generated in connections or alliances between human and nonhuman agents” (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017, p.430).

The above finding has important implications for how we conceptualise leadership in such contexts. Mainstream research, as extensively discussed throughout the literature review (see [chapter two, section 2.2](#)), often portrays heroic leaders as a powerful determinant for creativity and play to happen in organisations depicting prescriptive accounts of what leaders need to know (Shalley and Gilson, 2004) or what they need to do (cf. Amabile and Khaire, 2008; Brown, 2016; Mumford et al., 2002) to foster creativity proposing play to accomplish such purpose (see [chapter two, section 2.3](#) for further details). The main assumption is that leaders hold a determinant role in building the necessary conditions for creativity to happen by giving employees ‘permission’ to play (Deterding, 2018; West, 2014). Therefore, research in the field of leadership and its relationship with creativity and play tends to perpetuate and reproduce performative, heroic, and anthropocentric assumptions focusing on the figure of the leader-hero and her or his unquestionable role in influencing and directing these two processes. However, in contrast to earlier findings, this thesis suggests that leading creativity and play is less about a human ‘leader’ managing and supporting these processes and more about the ongoing and material directional effects produced by bodily encounters that emerge and unfold within creato-playful practices happening in moment-to-moment work routines, what I conceptualise as the ‘leaderful qualities of matterly encounters’.

1.2 Unpacking the qualities

Central to my narrative is the idea that leadership emerges as a *material and ongoing effect of relational encounters* between human and nonhuman bodies, effects that unfold amid mundane and moment-to-moment creato-playful practices at work. Consequently, this thesis suggests that creativity and play are led by the flows of affect that emerge within bodily encounters and the intended or unintended consequences they produce, effects that generate rhythmic oscillations, continuity, discontinuity, stability, rupture, tension, distension, harmony, and disharmony. This capacity of materiality is what I have conceptualised as the *leaderful qualities of matterly encounters*. From this perspective, I argue that human-material encounters possess distinctive and leaderful attributes; that is, emergent and generative capacities or qualities that reveal the subtle but powerful ways in which human and nonhuman bodies co-direct work practices. Such qualities disclose invisible relations, forces, and intensities arising and circulating in-between bodies and how such relations lead to something or somewhere.

The leaderful qualities of matterly encounters (as empirically illustrated in [chapter five](#)) depict continuous micro-variations and passages of bodily powers and affective forces. Thus, this thesis suggests that organisations are led by the material consequences produced by active and passive affects (Spinoza, 1996) circulating between bodies (Ahmed, 2004). In doing so, throughout this research I have uncovered and articulated five of these qualities: (1) *affective spell*, a quality that portrays the seductive and incantational capacities of nonhuman bodies to seduce and make humans ‘do’ things; (2) *consonant and dissonant vibrancy*, a quality that illustrates how bodies produce flows of energy and vibratory forces within continuous processes of territorial adjustment to find vibratory consonance and frequency; (3) *affective hindrance*, a quality that conveys a sense on how within human-material encounters, bodies –particularly nonhuman ones– resist and constraint work, making humans to adapt, forcing them to change work trajectories; (4) *decomposing rupture*, a quality that portrays how bodies can produce sometimes short but intense flows of affect disrupting the normalcy of work, producing tension, conflict, and acceleration; and finally (5) *present presence/absence*, a quality that reveals how not only present presences can produce material effects, but present and absent bodies alike, absences that tele-act and co-lead from distance (see Figure 20 below for further illustration).

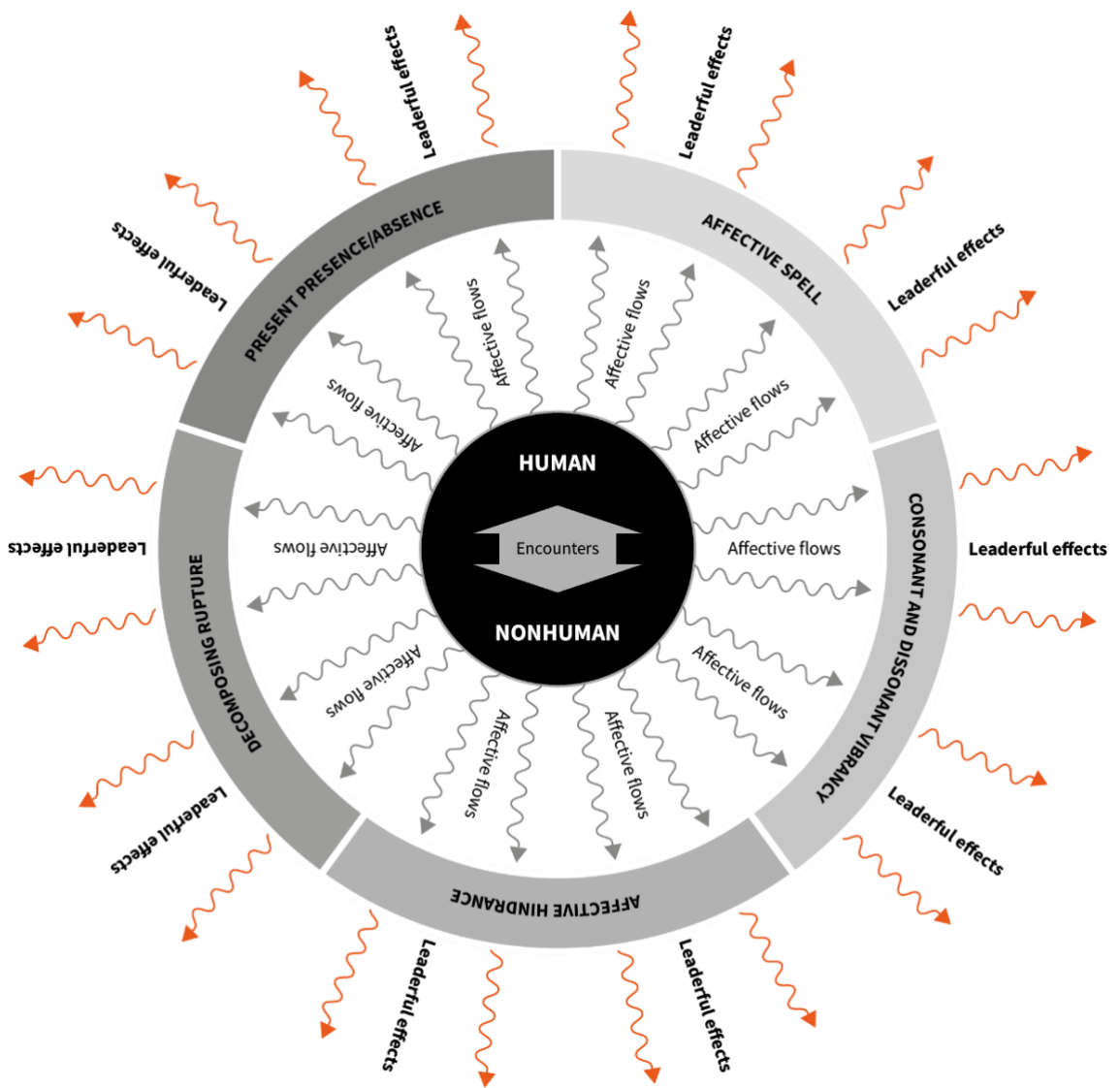


Figure 20: The leaderful quality of matterly encounters

The above qualities, as I contend, can be used to explain and describe leadership processes in the context of creative and playful work as *flows of energies and intensities* that emanate and circulate when bodies encounter each other. Taken together, these five qualities aim to develop a less heroic explanation of how leadership materially emerges providing alternative views on how human and nonhuman bodies and their multiple forces, rhythms, and intensities ‘lead’ and shape creative and playful action.

1.2.1 *Affective spell*

This leaderful quality of matterly encounters proposes that organisational direction emerges amid ‘affective spells’ that emanate from encounters between human and nonhuman bodies and its silent but seductive capacities to enchant, seduce, and persuade. As this thesis reveals, Lego bricks had the capacity to draw participants’

attention resonating, vibrating, and capturing their attention. Within human-bricks encounters, wordless and enchanting whispers seemed to stem in-between bodies as an affective spell or incantation process that produced material effects, inducing humans to enter into composition (Deleuze, 1988); thus, increasing their capacities to act. As the empirical materials illustrate (see [chapter five, section 2](#)), Lego bricks affected humans by casting spells upon them through their shapes, colours, sounds, and feels; thus, building unique and personal connections with them. Humans simply let themselves get inspired, dragged, seduced, and enchanted by the bricks. The notion of enchantment, as Bennett (2001, p.111) suggests,

is a mood of lively and intense engagement with the world... a mixed bodily state of joy and disturbance, a transitory sensuous condition dense and intense enough to stop you in your tracks and toss you onto new terrain and to move you from the actual world to its virtual possibilities.

By casting spells, the brick would enchant humans facilitating the playful connection of bodies to explore specific topics related to the day-to-day work. When falling under the spell of the brick, humans experienced a pleasant connection that evoked good times from childhood, acting at the same time as a democratising force that opened spaces for discussion and reflection at work. Lego bricks were much more than a bunch of plastic and inert toys, they had the capacity to guide and influence humans, to move them inducing new and sensuous conditions.

The notion of affective spell resonates with Ropo, Sauer and Salovaara's (2013) findings, who argue that individuals are led by subjective experiences with materiality; aesthetics experiences felt at the level of the sensuous body (Hansen, Ropo and Sauer, 2007). In studying how spaces lead, Ropo and colleagues suggest that a given space leads not only through its physical layout, "but [with] the feeling, smelling, touching, seeing and listening that delivers us the personal understanding of the space" (Ropo, Sauer and Salovaara, 2013, p.390). From this perspective, the Lego-human encounter produced a similar effect in which the brick had the capacity to seduce and enchant humans with its shapes, colours, feels, and sounds; material and experiential qualities that helped build a personal and affective relationship. Under this lens, the sensuous nature of these human-material encounters led the Lego workshops in multiple directions.

The notion of the spell is consistent with further findings shown by scholars such as Clifton, Fachin and Cooren (2021), who employ the metaphor of ventriloquism. From this perspective, the authors hold the view that nonhuman actants talk by themselves through the human 'operator'. This is a pre-reflective dialogue where the material invites humans

to do something, what Thompson and Adams (2013) term as the 'call' of the thing, an invitational quality of matter that influence humans to do something, to engage in affective relations. In such a way, humans and nonhumans talk and lead each other (Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021; de Vaujany and Vaast, 2014). This call, as I contend, manifests itself as an *affective spell*, a bodily articulation that contributes to deepening our understanding of how, within human-material encounters, powerful, sensuous, enchanting, and yet invisible forces and intensities produce directional effects at work.

1.2.2 *Consonant and dissonant vibrancies*

The second quality of human-material encounters this thesis articulates is the notion of 'consonant and dissonant vibrancies', a mutating and leaderful effect of encounters that had the capacity to direct the organisation and its projects, an ongoing process of territorial adjustment in which humans and nonhumans produced bursts of movement, rhythmic oscillations, and differential speeds. During my data collection period, I witnessed a plethora of encounters between humans and visual elements proper to the organisational activities in design and software development. These visuals and graphics included design compositions, logos, typographies, shapes, colours, pictograms, and pictures, to name but a few. Within human-graphic encounters, visual elements would begin to vibrate, to produce a sort of intensive energy that flowed between bodies producing material consequences.

As the empirical evidence suggests, the nonhuman seemed to emit a vibratory force difficult to register and explain in words. This force was often described as a 'something' that felt out of place (or out of frequency) that used to dislocate and disrupt the visual composition producing multiple rhythms. This was often the case with a branding project the team was developing: Cursive (see [chapter five, section 3](#) for further details), a logo design that produced micro-directional flows as the brand mutated and evolved after each design iteration or loop. It was an interplay of bodily forces, an ongoing quest to find the 'correct' frequency, harmony, or what I term 'vibratory consonance'. This vibratory quality was described by participants as a 'pleasant' feeling; thus, revealing the active role of the sensuous body (Küpers, 2013), which modulated these fluctuating vibrancies and bodily intensities.

Material vibrancy is what Bennett (2004, p.351) articulates as *thing-power*, or "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle". The Cursive logo revealed how these vibrancies produced a myriad of material effects depicting the always-in-flux processes of re- and de- territorialisation that bodies produce when encountering each other. When out of place or frequency, the visual

composition produced short but intense rhythmic oscillations where visual elements deterritorialised the project-assemblage, being a sort of destabilising and decomposing force (Deleuze, 1988), dissonances often resisted by the human members of the team, who often attempted to transform visual disruption into consonance by enduring multiple rounds of design revisions; corrective practices that included plugging bodies in and out, as well as emitting judgements to reach visual harmony and thus achieve the desired stability or visual consonance.

More often than not, the greatest movement and rhythmic oscillations were caused by dissonant vibratory forces, intensities that used to impact the project destabilising the visual assemblage. This finding supports the ideas of Ropo, Parviainen and Koivunen (2002, p.23) who argue that “leadership is everyday practice, sometimes ugly, with less harmony and balance and lots of discomfort, dislike, and profound disagreement”. At Digital Co., the lack of harmony often produced accelerating direction at work. This finding is contrary to previous studies which have suggested that leadership is about beauty, harmony, balance, ethics, symmetry, and pleasure (Ladkin, 2008). Rather, I contend that leadership is more about the processes of disruption, tension, and change that the very lack of harmony produces. Consonant and dissonant bodily vibrancies represent a ceaseless negotiation between bodies, like when tuning a radio station, when rotating knobs, a fine-grained process in which the aim is to reach the desired frequency. As Ropo and Parviainen (2001, p.6) suggest, “our encounters with the world are a *negotiation* and not a definition of reality”, negotiation that unfolds in the never-ending flow of affects that bodies produce when encountering and relating to each other. This negotiation process is defined by scholars such as Koivunen and Wennes (2011) as ‘aesthetic judgement’, a process of interpretation in which the human and its sensuous body perceives and experiences other bodies and ‘feels’ when something is either harmonious, disruptive, beautiful, or ugly. As such, the design vibrated and resonated; the logo-assemblage and its affective flows produced direction and led the project. Thus, this creato-playful piece of work was not directed by a heroic individual –as most research suggests– rather, it involved the playful arrangement of bodily forces, affects, rhythms; consonant and dissonant vibrancies produced within a never-ending flow of material encounters. Leadership at Digital Co. manifested in the mobilisation of bodies, sensuous experiences, and its perennial territorial adjustments.

1.2.3 *Affective hindrance*

As bodies undertake and produce always-in-flux processes of consonant and dissonant territorial adjustments, sometimes new bodies entered the organisation-assemblage producing flows of affect that strengthened the team’s capacities to act; and yet, the

same bodies could show subtle signs of resistance and rupture afterwards, for matter *repulses*, a leaderful quality of human-material encounters I have termed as 'affective hindrance'. This was the case, for instance, of Silktide, a software Digital Co. began to use to monitor and improve web accessibility (as illustrated in [chapter five, section 4](#)). When John introduced the software, the team felt amazed by its capacity in facilitating the measurement and diagnosis of web accessibility. The software entered into composition with the team; however, Silktide would soon produce new micro-trajectories on the projects the team was working with. By providing metrics and suggestions to improve accessibility, the software began to dictate what to do or not, demanding changes on the websites' visual outputs. On multiple opportunities, James had to adapt or change his design decisions and ideas due to Silktide's suggestions and scores, asking the developers to pay close attention to what the software was 'telling them'. Silktide constricted the projects and their development. However, as the software began to push back, John would react by showing resistance against it, attempting to illustrate that the software was not a sort of panacea, but just mere guidance. These were material traces and signs of micro-resistance processes that began to emerge within the team-project-Silktide encounter, humans and nonhumans pushing back, resisting; thus, engaging in tensional flows of affect that produced material and constricting effects at work.

This finding is contrary to previous studies which have suggested that nonhuman artefacts can facilitate the work of humans in accomplishing leadership. Arvedsen and Hassert (2020), for instance, have shown that information and communication technologies participate in producing direction, alignment, and commitment by contributing to ensuring intersubjective understanding between the organisational members regarding the tasks at hand. Under this lens, objects are under total control and subordination. The problem with Arvedsen and Hassert's claims, however, is that they conceptualise artefacts as passive entities with no agency or power to act. Similarly, Ford et al. (2017) argue that organisational leaders can materialise themselves by intra-acting with clothes and accessories and thus convey 'better' leadership presence, or emanate 'charisma' (Maran et al., 2021). Others have suggested how leaders can master materiality to enact effective leadership practices (Wellton, Jonsson and Svingstedt, 2019). These studies install the assumption that both, human and nonhuman bodies, co-produce leadership by nurturing beneficial and fluent cooperation between actants (Vuojärvi and Korva, 2020).

However, as discussed in the literature review (see [chapter two, section 1.1](#)), leadership is often treated as a positive phenomenon (e.g. Blom and Alvesson, 2015; Collinson,

2012). Consequently, how human bodies, and particularly, how nonhumans resist humans is an aspect that is often ignored. Research on the material aspects of leadership has shown that nonhuman bodies can make humans 'do' things (Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021; Sergi, 2016); however, this literature often takes for granted that for as long as the nonhuman produces material effects, it can also restrict and decrease the organisational power to act. As McCoy (2012, p.764) observes, matter "is not a formless blob that is given shape by our imaginings of it", matter resists. Yet, scholars often explore how bodies and materialities enact 'better' leadership in productive and positive ways; thus, depicting bodies as passive and compliant, as "backdrops to practice" (Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013, p.268).

Few studies have shown that matter can resist and push back. In examining how leadership is enacted by socio-material practices, Mailhot et al. (2016) argue that the task of leaders is to mobilise objects and artefacts to materialise their vision by reinterpreting objects and their meaning. At the same time, these reinterpreted meanings are collectively negotiated amongst the organisational actors. However, as the authors suggest, once artefacts perform in-situ, these can either enable or constrain leaders' actions, who adapt according to the function dictated by the object. This was the case of Silktide, a nonhuman that when performing in-situ, began to push back, generating constriction at work, imposing rhythms, actions, and new flows of affect. Therefore, this leaderful quality of matterly encounters sheds light on how within human-material encounters, bodies resist and push back constraining work and dictating directions that defy the human will.

1.2.4 Decomposing ruptures

As Deleuze (1988) suggests, when bodies encounter each other, they can either form strong composites or decompose one another threatening the cohesion of the assemblage and its territory. From this perspective, bodies not only can increase the collective capacities for action, but they can also resist and push back producing processes of deterritorialisation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) or hindrance that ultimately disrupt the viscous rhythms of daily routine, producing in turn, agitating oscillations, a leaderful quality of human-material encounters I have called 'decomposing rupture'. At Digital Co., certain encounters with bodies produced brief and intense flows of affect that broke the normalcy of work producing unexpected effects, these were labelled as problems, bugs, traffic overloads, unexpected client requests, and so on. These disrupting bodies were described as 'something' or 'someone' landing over the desk, bodies that would determine at times how the organisation could spend its day and resources. These were not innocent and passive bodies; they had the capacity to

decompose the organisation-assemblage bringing disruption, acceleration, and unexpected trajectories.

I witnessed multiple events of rupture. Sometimes, a corrupted line of software code would break a web function producing errors and problems. Often, these kinds of ruptures were informed by the clients, who would communicate with James regarding an issue, such as the case with the Lawyer's website (see [chapter five, section 5.4](#)). Software bugs were often the source of disruption, a decomposing force that used to produce a halt to the work routine. The team would stop what they were doing at that moment, meet through Slack, discuss the issue, and try to solve the problem as fast as possible. When it was not a software bug; rupture was caused by traffic overloads due to an increase of users visiting a client's website. These situations would push clients to contact James or would generate software alerts that were picked up by the team members. When a traffic overload broke down a website, the team would discuss therefore on what to do to solve the issue. These ruptures were a powerful source of disruption and decomposition.

At times, a rupture could be caused by a mingling of bodies colliding together throughout one work event, such as was the case of a very tense meeting the team had with Michael, one of the clients (see [chapter five, section 6.5](#), for further details). In that meeting, a spiralling chain of ruptures produced conflict, tension, and unexpected acceleration. During a demonstration of a piece of software Digital Co. was developing, some bugs and issues emerged disrupting the demo, ruptures that were used by the client to hijack the meeting and produce intense flows of affect. In that meeting, following a software 'glitch', Michael began to interrupt the presentation, asking questions and pushing the team harder and harder. During the meeting, several forces began to collide augmenting and magnifying the decompositional quality of this matterly encounter. These ruptures not only disrupted the flow of routine but left *affective residues*, producing several effects after the event. These bodily encounters dislocated the work routine, producing conflict and tension.

This finding supports the idea that matter is not only active and agentic, but it acts, counteracts, and pushes back, producing several forces and counterforces (McCoy, 2012) that lead organisations towards unpredictable paths of conflict, tension, and disruption. For instance, in studying the embodied aspects of leadership in the military and war context, Fisher and Robbins (2015) show how the materiality of extreme events can produce stressful and harmful effects on humans. Encounters with loud noises, explosions and firing of guns, dead and dismembered bodies, land mines, hostile

soldiers, and so on, compromise and deprive the soldier's capacities to act disrupting the bodily senses and sense of self. Under this lens, leadership is not just about positive or 'joyful' encounters that increase the organisational capacities to act, it is also about the 'sad' affects that can mislead organisations and decrease its power to act (Munro and Thanem, 2018). Bodies can produce rupture and tension when encountering each other. However, this darker side of leadership, the destructive kind, often focuses on an individual's traits and behaviours and how they produce harm to organisations and employees (e.g. Mackey et al., 2021); thus, focusing exclusively on human bodies portraying a somewhat anti-heroic/villain rhetoric.

This leaderful quality of matterly encounters shows a destructive and disruptive side of leadership produced by flows of sad affects emerging within human-nonhuman encounters, flows that decompose the organisation or project-assemblage. This finding is consistent with recent studies, such as Munro and Thanem's (2018), who briefly mention that organisations are 'misled' by sad affects; thus, illustrating to some extent how bodies can produce rupture and tension when encountering each other. However, the authors advocate a positive view of affective leadership, that is, as something that should strive towards the development of 'good encounters', for leadership always needs to give the impression that everything in "one's immediate world is stable and under control" (Wood and Case, 2006, p.141). Yet, as previously discussed, leadership is not just about harmony, mastery, control, and beauty (Ladkin, 2008), it can be about disruption, tension, conflict, and chaos (Koivunen and Wennes, 2011), it can emerge within decomposing or 'bad' encounters.

1.2.5 *Present presence/absence*

Finally, the findings of this study additionally shed light on how not only bodily *presences* produce direction at work, but regarding the leaderful quality of encounters with the *absent*. During my fieldwork, it was evident that the present presence of bodies and their affective capacities produced direction and rhythmic oscillations. I often witnessed, for instance, how human clients were able to produce intense flows of affect when demanding for new tasks, asking information regarding the project's sprints and completion, imposing deadlines, throwing unexpected requests, and so on (see [chapter five, section 6](#), for further illustration); thus, producing multiple trajectories and fluctuating capacities at work. Moreover, not only human bodies as those of the clients co-led the organisation's projects, but *nonhuman presences* including, for instance, software apps, lines of code, design pieces and artefacts, international laws, and other industry standards. Some of these presences, as I have previously discussed, produced affective spells, enchanting and making humans do things; vibrated entailing always-in-flux

processes of de- a re- territorialisation imbued with consonance and dissonance; pushed back demanding for changes, and adaptations, resisting the will of humans; or produced ruptures that dislocated, changed, and affected the daily routine. At Digital Co., human-material encounters between bodies making 'presence' were the source of a myriad of affective flows and micro-directional effects.

The problem, however, is that leadership studies often emphasise the notion of bodily presence. For instance, heroic theories as those discussed in the literature review (see for instance [chapter two, section 3.2.1](#)) often portray how leaders convey leadership with their presence, either by their physical, corporeal, and often visible bodily traits (cf. DeGroot et al., 2011; Elgar, 2016; Geys, 2014; Henderson et al., 2022; Lindqvist, 2012; Re et al., 2013), as well as with their clothing and accessories (Ford et al., 2017), gestures and movements (cf. Maran et al., 2019; Talley and Temple, 2015; Trichas and Schyns, 2012; Trichas et al., 2017), bodily performances, and how those performances are perceived by followers (cf. Bathurst and Cain, 2013; Biehl, 2019; Koivunen and Wennes, 2011; Ladkin, 2008). Consequently, leadership studies often explore what means 'being there' and doing 'leadership presence' (Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009).

Moreover, the idea of the 'present' body in leadership studies is not only secluded to human-human encounters but human-objects alike. From this perspective, it is often argued that artefacts co-produce leadership by their presence. As Clifton, Fachin and Cooren (2021, p.256) observe, artefacts 'do' leadership "when a hybrid presence is made relevant to the interaction and when this presence provides authoritative grounds for influencing others to achieve the group's goals". Consequently, the notion of presence permeates the literature on leadership materialities; thus, it is assumed that without presence, leadership simply cannot happen. Under this lens, leadership is therefore about physical and present connections between leaders and followers (Biehl, 2019; Ladkin and Taylor, 2014) or between people and objects (Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021); thus, depicting a strong metaphysics of presence (Ford and Harding, 2004).

The notion of presence installs the assumption that, for leadership to happen, we need bodies doing and materialising physical connections in situ effectuating their capacities to act. However, despite the fact the literature on leadership and materiality often focuses on the present presence of bodies, another interesting finding of this research was that not only bodies doing affective presence produced leadership effects, but also *absent* and *unseen* ones; that is, bodies 'not-yet-to-be', or bodies 'already-gone'. As extensively illustrated in the empirical chapters of this thesis (see for instance [chapter five, section](#)

6), clients left material traces of their absent presence producing directional effects at work, these were affective residues, remnants of intensive forces. For instance, the very 'idea' or 'thought' of a client manipulating a project board induced debate between employees on how to proceed with work: a body 'not-yet-to-be' playing an affective role in the project development. Likewise, the team often discussed what to do or not according to what the client might like or dislike; thus, the absent client emerged as a landmark or signpost the team employed to make sense of the project development and direction. This was often the case with Michael, one of the most affective and disruptive clients.

Michael's absence often produced rhythmic oscillation, tension, and disruption. Sometimes, his lack of communication and clarity, as well as his demanding character, were often sources of confusion and surprise. The lack of 'joining up' with him generated problems and disorganisation decreasing the team's capacities to act; thus, deterritorialising the project and its development, for employees had to guess what he wanted or not. Moreover, absent Michael also produced leaderful effects even after enacting his affective presence. This was the case after a very tense meeting the team had with him (see [chapter five, section 6.5](#)). After the meeting, once Michael left, I was able to witness the affective residues of his past presence, an 'already-gone' body producing direction, telling employees what to do or what to search for, co-leading the project even when not being there enacting his active capacities to act. This finding supports Spinoza's (1996, pp.77–78) philosophy of the body, who observes that

The mind as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body's power of acting... as the human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human mind will regard the same body as present... Hence, so long as the mind imagines those things that increase or aid our body's power of acting, the body is affected with modes that increase or aid its power of acting.

Therefore, Michael's absent presence often produced material effects, just as if he would be present 'in the flesh'; thus, co-producing leaderful effects from afar. This finding resonates with previous research arguing that leadership is not only made out of bodily presences, as commonly assumed but also of present absences (cf. Clifton and Mueni, 2021; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009). Fairhurst and Cooren (2009), for instance, have shown that leadership effects are not only produced by present bodies, as they observe, "absent agents can not only make themselves present through various devices but also and consequently *tele-act*, that is, act from a distance as they become knowable through

the traces of past organizing” (Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009, p.473, italics added for emphasis).

Similarly, Clifton and Mueni (2021) have shown how deceased bodies of past leaders and other abstract and non-physical bodies such as dreams, can produce leadership effects by inspiring followers to undertake actions. As they suggest, both the living and the dead can perform leadership. Consequently, even though bodies are physically absent, as Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) argue, they materialise themselves through their *spectral presence* (Derrida, 1994). As the authors observe, what is absent can produce as many effects as what is present, for human and nonhuman actors can tele-act and co-lead from afar. The issue of absence and its leaderful effects; however, still represents a widely under-researched field in leadership studies.

1.3 Repacking the qualities

The leaderful encounters this thesis has portrayed “bring to the fore the becoming of things” (Bennett, 2010, p.8), endless and always-in-flux processes of re- and de-territorialisation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) that human and nonhuman bodies produce and undertake amid a series of bodily encounters within moment-to-moment and routinary creato-playful practices at work. As this thesis has shown, leadership is not something possessed or enacted by humans as James and his ‘visions’ for the company, nor by an organisational and heroic collective (Collinson, Smolović Jones and Grint, 2018) comprised of the four members of the team. On the contrary, leadership involved the interplay of bodily forces, intensities, and affective flows between human and nonhuman bodies inside and outside the organisational boundaries, including, but not limited to, the human members of the team, clients, software, apps, laws and international standards, visual elements such as typographies, mockups, and graphic compositions, and further objects such as Lego bricks and its colours, shapes, and sounds. Thus, leadership emerged as an ongoing and emergent effect emanating from bodies exercising their power to act (Deleuze, 1988; Spinoza, 1996).

The results this thesis unveils further support the idea of the active role that nonhuman bodies play in co-producing leadership. Such studies argue that leadership is distributed across human and non-human networks, an aspect that conveys a sense of leadership as something that can be owned or possessed by the many (e.g. Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013). However, the findings shown in this thesis offer a more emancipatory view arguing that leadership is not necessarily something distributed between bodies articulating the idea of ‘leaderful effects’ as an

emergent and generative consequence of *bodily relations* that materialise when humans and nonhumans encounter each other, an inherently affective process, an open effect of bodily forces and intensities (Knights, 2018a; Munro and Thanem, 2018; Salovaara and Ropo, 2018). Therefore, in suggesting that leadership is a consequential and generative attribute of bodily relations, I join scholars that conceptualise leadership as in-betweenness (Biehl, 2019) extending this notion not only to what happens between leaders and followers but as a leaderless (Raelin, 2016a) construct that situates human and nonhuman actants in a web of affective and leaderful relations.

Even though these findings support recent studies indicating that leadership emerges as a property of relations (Knights, 2018a) and affects (Munro and Thanem, 2018), these also differ in the sense that affective leadership is not only about increasing the collective powers of employees (see Munro and Thanem, 2018). Rather, it sees affective leadership as a process that can either decrease or increase the organisational capacities to act, bodies and forces subject to perennial processes of territorial adjustments, processes that can either bring seduction and enchantment, consonance and harmony, or unleash tension, disruption, rupture, and dissonance. Therefore, in this thesis, I contend that affective leadership is not the sole product of 'joyful' organisational practices and arrangements of 'good encounters' (Munro and Thanem, 2018). Rather, I argue that leadership is a *generative effect* of actions and passions alike: desire, joy and sorrow (Spinoza, 1996), affects producing leaderful effects that unfold within ongoing processes of composition and decomposition (Deleuze, 1988), connective and arrangement practices with no moral compass nor organisational agenda. Therefore, this thesis has shown the ambivalent nature of bodies and the myriad of opposing affects they can exert, for bodies, either present or absent, can act simultaneously as both, reterritorialising and deterritorialising forces bringing either temporal stability and internal homogeneity; or tension, conflict, and chaos. Under this lens, relationships between bodies and their leaderful effects are never static nor predefined, they always shift, travel, and mutate: these are becomings-leadership.

It is easy to ignore something as evident as the role that material forces play in shaping organisational life and leadership action. However, as this thesis has shown, leader-follower relations and other heroized leadership bodily traits and performances are not sufficient to explain leadership phenomena. Therefore, a more integrative understanding of materiality can disclose the often ignored and hidden effects that bodies produce when they encounter each other and how such relations lead creative and playful practices at work. When conceptualising leadership as a material and generative effect produced by affective flows and bodily forces, this thesis cultivates a post-anthropocentric sensitivity

that aims to decolonise the performative, heroic, and human-centric narratives that underpin mainstream research. Thus, this thesis argues that tracing leadership effects must not be secluded to human individuals or collectives; rather, it must be sought in encounters between humans and nonhumans and the flows of affect they produce and undertake.

Human and nonhuman bodies in relation to leadership are much more than passive and innocent materialities. Instead, these materialities are active and transformative, affective participants in the production of organisational direction; bodies that have the capacity to stabilise and destabilise organisational practices in predictable and unpredictable ways; thus, shaping action through dynamic and transitory relations in which new leadership possibilities emerge. This articulation counteracts the dominant and reductionist narratives based on heroic competencies often privileged by traditional leadership studies providing access to a more authentic, fuller, and organic view of leadership that widens our comprehension of the often silenced 'doings' of matter; thus, contributing to the embryonic field of posthuman and affective leadership theories.

2 Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the findings of this study concerning the extant literature on leadership and its relationship with creativity and play in work organisations. Overall, this chapter began the discussion by providing insights on how creativity and play emerged at Digital Co. concluding that both constructs are more entangled and less distinct than the literature suggests. After establishing this important distinction, this chapter unpacked what I have conceptualised as the leaderful qualities of matterly encounters, the main finding of this thesis, discussing each one of the five qualities this research uncovers. Finally, the chapter closed the discussion with an overview of the implications of such findings for the current understanding of leadership contributing to advancing our knowledge of leadership posthuman theories in the context of creative and playful work. The next chapter finishes this thesis by providing the concluding remarks.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUDING REMARKS

This section will bring this thesis to a close by summarising the research findings in connection to the research aims and questions, as well as how these findings contribute to the extant literature. This closing chapter unfolds as follows: Section 1 presents the concluding remarks of this thesis depicting how this study answers the research questions. Section 2 presents an overview of how the research findings contribute to management knowledge and practice. Section 3 outlines the limitations of this study by providing an overview of the challenges and shortcomings I faced throughout the research process. Finally, section 4 describes the opportunities for further research that I draw from this study.

1 Answering the research questions

This research aimed to better understand the materiality of leadership and its relationship with creativity and play by exploring how human and nonhuman bodies and their flows of affect co-produce direction at work. To date, material and affective approaches to study leadership in the context of organisational creativity and play have been very limited privileging instead heroic, human-centric, and performative narratives (as extensively depicted in [chapter two](#) of this thesis) that restrict and limit our understanding of organisational life (Orlikowski, 2007) and the leadership processes behind it (Hawkins, 2015). To tackle these limitations, this study aimed to answer three questions: (1) How does leadership emerge, unfold, and entangle with creativity and play in the workplace? (2) How do human and nonhuman bodies co-produce leadership and direction in the context of creativity and play at work? And (3) what are the flows of affect and the material effects produced within human-nonhuman encounters in such contexts?

Concerning the first research question, the main finding of this research proposes that leadership emerges and unfolds as a *relational and generative effect* of human-material encounters and the flows of affect that such encounters produce within moment-to-moment processes of connection and disconnection of bodies; that is, within creato-playful practices ingrained in everyday work. Regarding the second research question, this thesis has developed the theoretical notion of the *leaderful qualities of matterly encounters* to describe that, when encountering each other, human and nonhuman bodies co-produce leaderful effects at work. Finally, the 'leaderful qualities of matterly encounters' contribute to answering the third research question by uncovering five of such qualities; thus, empirically illustrating what kinds of affective flows emerge and unfold from material and relational encounters between bodies. Under this lens, this

thesis has argued that humans and nonhumans and the material products of their encounters are a fundamental part of the emergence and unfolding of leaderful effects at work. Therefore, human bodies and their entanglements with tools, artefacts, technologies, visuals, standards, laws, and so on, were not mere accompaniment for James and the team, but consequential for leadership to happen (Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013).

Consequently, the production of direction at Digital Co. manifested itself through the perpetual mobilisation of bodies, their territorial adjustments, and their capacities to affect and to be affected. Leadership at Digital Co. was a continuous plugging-in and plugging-out of bodies, never static, and always in flux; only becoming. Thus, throughout this thesis, I have argued that organisations are led by directional encounters between bodies, by the *effects* of their ordinary affects (Stewart, 2007) and the material consequences these affects produce (Fox and Alldred, 2017), for “we never apprehend anything but the effects of these compositions and decompositions” (Deleuze, 1988, p.19), the material effects of bodies acting upon bodies. These were becomings-leadership, passages from one state to another permeated with rhythms of intensity and never-ending dis/connections between bodies.

2 Research contributions

The present research contributes to the leadership literature and its relationship with creativity and play by revealing novel insights into the generative and leaderful capacities of materiality. In doing so, this research has empirically shown how human-material encounters lead creato-playful practices at work offering rich ethnographic accounts. Overall, I argue that it is not only human leaders, collectives, artefacts, or socio-material assemblages that ‘lead’ creativity and play in the workplace; rather, I propose that leadership is a *generative effect* of ongoing and always-in-flux encounters between bodies and their affective capacities at work, processes of becoming and territorial adjustment I conceptualise as the ‘leaderful quality of matterly encounters’ uncovering five of such qualities: (1) affective spell, (2) consonant and dissonant vibrancy, (3) affective hindrance, (4) decomposing rupture, and (5) present presence/absence. These results further support the idea of leadership as an emergent, relational, and processual phenomenon that includes both, human and nonhuman bodies (e.g. Clifton and Mueni, 2021; Hawkins, 2015; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013; Sergi, 2016) and their power to act and to be acted upon (Deleuze, 1988).

By de-centring the heroic leader and the human collective, this thesis has challenged trait and competency-based leadership theories (Knights, 2018a) showing the central role that human-material relations play in accomplishing leaderful effects at work. This view provides a richer and fuller picture of how leadership unfolds and emerges in organisations unravelling connections, forces, intensities, and relationships; thus, creating further ways of thinking about leadership that attend to the relevance of encounters and the role of the affective flows generated within such encounters. Therefore, this study has produced incremental, scientific, and practical contributions (Corley and Gioia, 2011) to organisation and leadership studies extending and deepening existing perspectives and theories on the role of materiality and its connection to leadership processes outlining a set of empirical, theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions.

Empirical: By undertaking a piece of research focused on the relationships between leadership, creativity, and play from a posthuman, new materialist and affective perspective, this research contributes to the leadership literature by providing in-depth ethnographic accounts of this under-explored research territory constituting, to the best of my knowledge, one of the first pieces of research that systematically bridges these three bodies of literature. In doing so, this thesis empirically contributes to our understanding of how human and nonhuman bodies co-produce direction at work providing a disparate collection of acts and scenes taking place in a UK-based creative micro-business firm. These acts and scenes portray a myriad of material storytellings; that is, stories of space, bodies, artefacts (Strand, 2014) and what these hybrid materialities do and produce when encountering each other. These stories or antenarratives illustrate how creativity and play emerged and unfolded in this field site, and how leadership was co-produced by human and nonhuman forces in such contexts revealing five leaderful qualities of human-material encounters at work. The implications of these findings empirically contribute to providing a more emancipatory view of leadership; that is, as something that is not possessed and practiced by human individuals and collectives, but as a flow of forces and energies with intended and unintended consequences in the workplace.

Moreover, this thesis contributes to the literature on creativity and play by empirically studying how both constructs entangle at work. This was arguably an unexpected contribution that emerged whilst I was attempting to understand how creativity and play were articulated by the organisational members. It is traditionally argued that play can contribute to increasing and fostering creative practices and behaviours at work; thus, installing performative assumptions (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006; West, 2014). Under

this lens, both constructs are treated as distinct and independent entities that influence each other for the sake of organisational productivity. However, this research reveals that rather than being two discrete and distinct constructs, creativity and play overlap emerging and unfolding simultaneously within everyday activities and moment-to-moment processes throughout the ongoing connections, reconnections, combinations, and recombination of bodies (Dodgson, 2017; Linstead, 2018; Osborne, 2003). This entanglement is what I have conceptualised as *creato-playful* practices. Thus, this thesis argues that there is creativity in play, and vice versa. The implications of this finding allow to understand both processes as entangled becomings ingrained in the everyday practices rather than as two discrete entities that serve each other; thus, challenging the dominant rhetoric around creative performance.

Theoretical: By taking into account the relational forces and intensities of bodily encounters and the material effects they produce; I contribute to organisational leadership studies by outlining a theoretical articulation that extends our knowledge on the yet embryonic field of *affective leadership* (e.g. Knights, 2018b; Munro and Thanem, 2018, 2020) attending the often-ignored *doings* and *affects* of human and nonhuman bodies at work. From this perspective, rather than conceptualising creativity and play in instrumental and performative terms focusing on how individual leaders or leadership collectives ‘manage’ or ‘influence’ these processes, I adopt a more mundane, relational, non-performative, posthuman, and processual position. Consequently, this research reveals that rather than being led by human individuals, collectives, or artefacts, organisations and their *creato-playful* practices are led by the material and ongoing effects produced within human-nonhuman encounters and the flow of affects they produce at work, encounters I contend possess emergent and generative qualities. Therefore, throughout this research, I articulate the notion of ‘leaderful qualities of matterly encounters’ thematising five interrelated qualities: (1) affective spell, (2) consonant and dissonant vibrancy, (3) present presence/absence, (4) affective hindrance, and (5) decomposing rupture.

These findings contribute to the current debates on how human and nonhuman materialities and relationalities co-produce leadership in the workplace (cf. Clifton, Fachin and Cooren, 2021; Clifton and Mueni, 2021; Hawkins, 2015; Oborn, Barrett and Dawson, 2013; Pöyhönen, 2018; Ropo and Salovaara, 2019; Sergi, 2016), and more particularly, how such relations lead work practices in the fields of creativity and play. The five leaderful qualities of human-material encounters this thesis reveal depict the many ways in which leadership emerges in such contexts conceptualising ‘leading’ as a material consequence of relations, forces and intensities; that is, fluctuating powers to

act and to be acted upon that circulate between bodies. Such conceptualisation sheds light on how leadership emerges as an *effect of power*, generative capacities of bodies exercising their affective capacities within everyday encounters and moment-to-moment practices, as the unfolding of ordinary affects (Stewart, 2007). These leaderful forces coexist in a perpetual process of territorial adjustment. Moreover, this thesis has shown that leadership often emerges from ‘sad’ passions (Spinoza, 1996); that is, from encounters that decrease the organisational capacities to act producing conflict, confusion, tension, rupture, and abrupt rhythmic oscillations; thus, questioning the overly positive nature of leadership (Collinson, 2012). This thesis suggests, therefore, that leadership emerges as a process of becoming, as a flow of bodily forces, power, and capacities to act and to be acted upon that emerge in the form of *actions* and *passions*: desire, joy, and sorrow (Spinoza, 1996). The implications of such findings allow decentralising the sovereign and heroic subject attending instead a mangle of unseen and often ignored forces and intensities circulating between bodies; thus, articulating leadership as a residual effect of hybrid encounters and fluctuations of power in the workplace.

Methodological: In tracing human-nonhuman encounters, bodies, connections, and flows of affect, this thesis contributes to the literature on posthuman, new materialist, and affective research methods (cf. Feely, 2020; Hickey-Moody, 2020; Blackman, 2015; Marn and Wolgemuth, 2017; Wilson, 2021) by offering an empirical and novel application of projective techniques as a methodological alternative to capture the doings, affects, and entanglements of bodies at work. It is traditionally argued that projective techniques can reveal participants’ inner feelings, emotions, thoughts, motives, and aspirations (Boddy, 2007; Donoghue, 2000; Hofstede et al., 2007) dormant at the level of the subconscious mind (Porr et al., 2011). Thus, research often highlights the capacity of projective techniques to grant researchers access to hidden and often inaccessible mind content (AQR, 2020). However, by applying a ‘constructive’ technique (Lindzey, 1959) employing Lego® bricks, I show that projective techniques not only reveal what is dormant and unconscious within participants’ cognition but what is hidden and often ignored in plain sight. Lego had the capacity to *re-materialise* and bring to the surface the affective presence of bodies at work projecting, or rather re-mattering, human and nonhuman actors (such as employees, clients, and tools) and its multiple capacities at work. Therefore, the brick served as a sensitising device that allowed to uncover connections and relationships between bodies; thus, contributing to obtaining meaningful research insights on the doings of materiality and its effects in the workplace. This finding challenges over-cognitive approaches revealing instead bodies and capacities outside the realm of the mind.

Practical: This study proposes practical contributions to micro-business firms in the field of creative industries, and more specifically, to practitioners involved in the development of creative, software, and design projects. By proposing that creative organisations are led by the material effects produced within relational encounters between human and nonhuman bodies at work, what I have conceptualised as the *leaderful qualities of matterly encounters*, I argue that it is important to pay particular attention to the doings of bodies when they encounter each other and how they increase or decrease the organisational capacities to act, that is, the affects they are capable of. Understanding leadership as an attribute of human-material encounters can help practitioners to depict how people and artefacts come together and what directional effects such encounters produce.

By acknowledging the doings and affects of bodies at work, managers and subordinates can assess and navigate the material effects produced by relational encounters and thus plug in and plug out bodies as they increase or decrease the organisational capacities to act. This process, however, is always in flux, meaning that the task of understanding relationships and material effects never ends, it is perpetual becoming. For instance, even though bodies can enter into relations of composition (Deleuze, 1988) with certain projects and work processes and strengthen the organisational capacities to act, these actants can rapidly shift their affective capacities producing the opposite effect; thus, decomposing work processes leading toward rupture, instability, conflict, and unintended consequences. Therefore, the non-fixed and fluctuating nature of affects demands constant monitoring of forces, intensities, and leaderful effects at work. To better understand leadership processes in organisations, this contribution invites practitioners to pay attention to relational encounters between bodies rather than the skills and behaviours of human individuals occupying management positions.

3 Research limitations

This study was not exempt from limitations including, for instance, the Covid-19 pandemic and other theoretical as well as methodological shortcomings. First, due to the Covid-19 outbreak, my research suffered several unexpected alterations and difficulties in terms of design, participant recruitment, and data access. The lockdown rules imposed by the UK Government at the time of this study forced me to look for new approaches to collect data in a world where access was drastically reduced and hindered. This led me to adopt an online approach (e.g. Hine, 2008), a choice that raised additional questions regarding the legitimacy of my data in a setting where most of the activities were mediated by information and communication technologies. However, a virtual/online

approach to ethnography allowed me to adapt to the contingencies of Covid-19 whilst observing the ethnographic principles for data collection (Hine, 2008). Moreover, as Postill (2016) suggest, the legitimacy of remote data collection methods is not inferior nor less valid than face-to-face modalities; thus, the use of ICTs does not impede the collection of good quality data and develop equally meaningful research findings.

Second, from a theoretical point of view, new materialist and affect studies often suggest following human and nonhuman actors and their doings (Davies and Riach, 2018; Latour, 2005); however, due to the limitations of the Covid-19 pandemic, my access to the field was highly restricted and somewhat curated; therefore, I was only able to have partial access to organisational processes and practices through Slack, the software Digital Co. was employing to mediate daily work. This meant that my access to 'bodies' was limited. Consequently, Covid-19 decreased my capacity to collect data in face-to-face contexts and discover the doings and affects of further bodies such as the office space, furniture, stationary, and similar. However, even though my access to bodies was hindered and somewhat black-boxed by the natural restrictions of a global and deadly pandemic, the list of actors that play a role in work organisations always extends massively. As Latour (2005, p.77) observes, "we have to take non-humans into account only as long they are rendered commensurable with social ties and also to accept, an instant later, their fundamental incommensurability". Therefore, the events, relations, and encounters this thesis reveals were circumscribed by the access I was able to obtain under the pandemic context having to accept that multiple actors would be missed in a constellation of bodies that could easily extend beyond the organisational boundaries. Thus, following Latour's observations, I had to acknowledge the incommensurability of materiality.

Third, from a methodological point of view, ethnographic studies have been often criticised and scrutinised due to their supposed 'lack' of generalisability, replicability, validity, and representativeness, research quality indicators that essentially belong to functionalist and positivist approaches (Golafshani, 2003; Sinkovics, Penz and Ghauri, 2008; Small, 2009). However, these indicators often miss the fact that ethnographic studies do not aim to provide generalisable accounts (Vuojärvi and Korva, 2020). Rather, the aim is to obtain rich, distinct, and in-depth insights to understand a 'bounded system' collecting data from a limited and relatively small number of cases (Thomas, 2011). As Small (2009, p.28) argues, "ethnographers facing today's cross-methods discourse and critiques should pursue alternative epistemological assumptions better suited to their unique questions, rather than retreat toward models designed for statistical descriptive research". Therefore, comparing the merit of ethnographies with functionalist studies does not contribute to the advancement and development of ethnographic research.

Instead, to increase the credibility and rigour of ethnographic studies, scholars need to pay attention to issues of *trustworthiness* (Elo et al., 2014; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Shufutinsky, 2020; White, Oelke and Friesen, 2012) by providing an accurate, transparent, and thorough reporting of the research process, design, and choices (Elo et al., 2014), as this thesis extensively depicts in [chapter three](#).

Fourth, it is important to note that this study was conducted by a male researcher entangled in a male-dominated setting within a hegemonically masculine industry, employing at the same time research artefacts (e.g., Lego bricks) stereotypically made for boys. Therefore, the relationships and affective encounters I have depicted in this research context were highly gendered and developed from a male-oriented perspective. As a male researcher in a masculine organisation, I did experience certain gendered events that caught my attention, including, for instance, jokes of sexual nature I wondered whether they would have happened in presence of non-male workers. However, I chose not to pursue my enquiries in such a direction despite the fact I was inserted in a 'boys' club'. Moreover, I may have experienced gendered situations that I was not able to fully recognise because of my very position as a 'man' and the unconscious biases such position may entail. Consequently, this thesis may appear blind and deaf regarding gender (Wilson, 1996). As an example, the use of Lego at Digital Co. was regarded as a very positive experience that brought participants 'happy memories of childhood'; however, as Brosnan (1998) argues, Lego is a kind of toy given predominately to boys rather than girls; thus, in another research setting with more gender diversity, such a quality may differ or even get contradicted leading towards unexpected situations. Consequently, further attention needs to be paid to how gender acts as an affective force that can produce further leaderful effects. Gender makes "an overwhelming difference for organizational reality" (Wilson, 1996, p.835), a critical factor that needs to get recognised and properly included in organisational research. However, due to the limitations of Covid, my own gender identity, and my rather small sample of male participants, in this research, no further insights have been developed concerning gender issues.

Fifth and final, an important limitation refers to what to observe and what data to collect when studying leadership (Bryman, 2011b). As Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b) suggest, leadership often disappears becoming somewhat vague and contradictory when put into practice. However, the opposite also applies, where leadership not only does not disappear but is present everywhere, being everything and nothing at the same time (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b). When undertaking a relational approach, as Kelly (2014, p.908) observes, "the problem of 'what is leadership?' is quickly

compounded by ‘which relationships really matter?’ and ‘how do we identify specific forms of leaderful influence?’”. Therefore, if leadership is conceptualised, as this thesis contends, as a generative effect of human-material encounters and the flows of affect such encounters produce, this assumption raises several questions and problems. For instance, if leadership is an emergent effect of bodily encounters, is every human-material encounter leaderful? If yes, what is the conceptual value and distinctiveness of leadership? If not, do we even need the notion of leadership? Maybe, we need to reconceptualise the very idea of what leadership is or even disregard it. As Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b, p.359) reflect, “thinking about leadership needs to take seriously the possibility of the nonexistence of leadership as a distinct phenomenon”. Maybe, what we call ‘leadership’ is the simple and everyday flow of forces and intensities that transverse bodies and produce material and palpable effects at work. Under this lens, leadership is only movement and becoming (Wood, 2005), the unfolding of ordinary affects (Stewart, 2007).

4 Opportunities for future research

The findings and limitations proposed throughout this research open further avenues and potential directions for future research. First, this study encourages posthuman researchers to trace the doings of human and nonhuman bodies and assess the material effects that such encounters produce and thus disclose the ‘thing-ness’ of leadership (Hawkins, 2015). From this perspective, this research has uncovered what I have conceptualised as the leaderful qualities of matterly encounters depicting five of such qualities. Following this line of research, future studies could aim to uncover further leaderful qualities of human-material encounters or deepen our knowledge and insights on each of the qualities this thesis has already depicted. Therefore, this study suggests that more attention should be paid to the affective flows produced by bodily encounters and how these material relations produce leadership in the context of creative and playful work.

Second, throughout this thesis, I have shown how the encounters between bodies produce leaderful effects at work. These effects put into evidence how hybrid relations between humans and nonhumans can produce changes within daily work routines and rhythms. From this perspective, I was able to grasp strong leaderful encounters when certain bodies affected the event-assemblage and when the rhythms of practice fluctuated producing multiple trajectories. For instance, when bodily encounters produced rupture and tension, there was a sense of acceleration, bodies acting and reacting. On the contrary, when the daily routine unfolded normally, there was a sense

of viscosity and steadiness. Bodily encounters and their flows of affect revealed rhythmic oscillations that led to something or somewhere. Future research could employ, for instance, Lefebvre's (2004) *rhythmanalysis* to better understand how multiple rhythms and their alignments (e.g., polyrhythmia) and misalignments (e.g., arrhythmia) produce leaderful effects in work organisations.

Third, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this research was conducted in a hybrid modality being highly restricted to online research methods. Future research can widen the scope of analysis and study by considering face-to-face locations as well as new online settings to uncover further bodily presences and absences, relations, encounters, flows of affect, and their leaderful qualities. Likewise, I acknowledge the limitations of a single ethnographic study; however, as previously discussed, ethnography does not aim to generalise knowledge; therefore, this thesis does not suggest that similar encounters and flows of affect would unfold in every creative and digital agency; however, further research could begin to assess whether similar or new leaderful qualities unfold either in the creative industries or beyond this business segment. Thus, this research aimed to provide empirical illustrations to better understand the multiple, fluid, and fleeting ways in which materiality co-produces leadership in organisations. Future work can draw on this posthuman understanding of leadership to better understand how matter plays an affective role at work considering new cases, industries, and participants.

Fourth, this study did not consider the issue of gendered and racialised bodies at work and their affective capacities as such. Digital Co., as John mentioned once, was a very 'white', very 'male', and very 'British' team. Therefore, future research can address the issue of gender and race by exploring the affective flows produced within bodily encounters in organisations that provide more diversity in such terms. Likewise, such studies could explore the disruptive and destructive capacities of bodies and how, for instance, flows of sad affects may produce or perpetuate inequalities and abusive work relationships, especially toward disadvantaged workers.

Finally, from a critical perspective, further studies could question the assumption that leadership is a product of encounters and assess whether leadership has any theoretical distinctiveness when conceptualised as such. As I have discussed in previous paragraphs, if leadership either disappears or presents itself everywhere (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b), is every encounter between bodies leaderful? If not, what makes a leaderful encounter distinct? Should we reconceptualise the whole idea of leadership? This thesis does not provide answers to these questions; however, I do believe that the field could benefit from such critical explorations.

I hope this thesis encourages further cross-fertilisation between organisational leadership, creativity and play from a posthuman and new materialist perspective and thus reveal new ways to describe and explain how human-material encounters produce leaderful effects at work.

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