

## Fly as One

### Collaborative Sandboxing as Method

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#### **Abstract**

This article examines sandboxing as a collaborative storytelling method by turning the sandbox into a place of collaborative storytelling to break open existing narratives and create new and different stories. The paper describes the method itself and the steps to be taken for using sandboxing. While simple in its setting, the process creates the foundation for a collective understanding of complex challenges. The second part of the paper analyses the final setting of a sandbox session on collaborative future-making. The analysis shows the need to connect and fuse apparent binaries and opposites, both in individuals and society at large. While the binary mostly relates to humans and gender characteristics, the division and splitting apart of entities into smaller, countable, and definable parts has been and still is part of an ongoing process in Western culture. Material storytelling in the form of sandboxing

plays a small, but important role in recreating the idea of wholeness and community.

**Keywords:** Sandboxing; Collaborative sandboxing; storytelling; future making; material storytelling

### Introduction

Throughout this article, we will insert musings from our sandbox session. While we had a clear framing – creating the actual call for this edition of Academic Quarter – the process itself took the participants to many unknown and surprising places and ideas. As such, this article can be seen as a reflection on the process itself, which has no clear-cut results or conclusions but must be seen as a work in progress. In this, this article opens the gates for other methods of storytelling and future-making, some of which can be found in this 26th edition of Academic Quarter.

### The first agential cut

“The box is filled with white, neatly raked sand, resembling a childhood sandbox or a small beach. It is pristine and almost calls to the participants to engage with it. Around us, the room is stuffed with more sandboxes, shelves, and tables, which hold an array of different artefacts: transportation devices, natural objects, all kinds of animals, people from different jobs, cultures, and religions, décor and furniture, houses, fantasy figures from Disney to mythical beings, religious and spiritual figures, and broken or halved things. We are almost ready to begin our sandbox session on collaborative future-making.

Sandboxing is one method within material storytelling methodologies. It has been developed over the past fifteen years by Strand (2010, 2012) and has mostly been used within organisational settings and challenges. Only recently, Strand has turned to further develop sandboxing as a collaborative method for creative storytelling outside an organisational setting. The main idea in material storytelling stems from Barad’s theory on quantum entanglement of matter and meaning (Barad 2007). Matter, like time and space, is seen as having an active agency in the process of materialisation, where stories are a congealing of agency (Barad 2010).

Our sandbox session is framed within the making of a future less driven by the markings of differences and with it the fear of the Other, the estrangement that it rests upon, than the recreation of wholeness in the individual and communities. To initiate the process of becoming, an agential cut is needed. With it, the founding difference which entails cutting something or someone together-apart (Barad 2007) is made. Cutting something together in Barad's sense means excluding (cutting apart) all other left on the outside of that which is defined as the including commonness. The estranged become the Other, the excluded. This cut matters as it sets the boundaries for what is or can be made meaningful from here on out. Some things, ideas, and arguments will be less likely to be thought, meant, felt, and acted upon once such a founding difference is installed.

Our session on collaborative future-making takes its starting point from the call and subsequent presentation for the conference on Collaborative Future Making in Malmö, Sweden, 2-4 May 2023. The main idea is to use the session to express our ideas on the subject matter, as well as a trial on how to use sandboxing in exactly this setting. While Strand is the expert, Jensen comes from fandom research, focusing on fanfiction communities and storytelling as a way of transforming an original piece of pop culture (Jensen 2018). This sandbox session is our first collaborative storytelling project.

Our first agential cut is a framing of the richest possible difference for our ability to collaboratively make a future for all living. One that carefully considers past mistakes in care of a new emergent story to take us truly beyond the present situation of uncaring and being uncommitted, the careless continuation of fear-based estrangement (Strand 2023; Bauman 2013).

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*When the two-headed beast is placed beside the two love birds, something changes in the dynamic of the sandbox. The two figurines become the centre piece, re-storying the evolving tale of the other groupings. Despite the beast denoting a binary, further cemented by the apparent harmony of the pair of birds and contrasted in the beast's disfigurement and disharmony, the other dualities of the sandbox merge, turning into a potential story of becoming, of sense- and meaning-making.*



## The configuration

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*In upper left corner, we have the tank, huge and menacing; in the opposite corner a small group of figures, denoting different religions and philosophies. A red heart is placed between the tank and the two-headed beast. In the lower left corner, figures from pop culture are placed, next to these, and as a contrast to them, is the owl, denoting universities and knowledge, with the group of religious and philosophical figures on its right. Across the sandbox, in the opposing corner of the pop cultural figurines, a paper pyramid with the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals by the UN is positioned, together with a prism, breaking the light into its different colours as a hint to a pristine read of the pyramid. Right beside these, sit a figure of “The three wise monkeys”, a few casino chips in front of them hinting at the societal gambling of non-seeing, non-hearing, and non-speaking as a disabling of the senses.*

*The centre evolves around the two-headed beast and the love birds. Slowly, several other animals find their places, creating a larger circle, which is surrounded by other artifacts, a looking glass, an empty easel, and a nature person next to a heavy dice. The number of animals is growing. A lock is placed in front of the two-headed beast and a set of keys next to the lovebirds indicate how to unlock it. A tipped scale next to the lovebirds hints at an unbalance.*

We both stop, silently agreeing that the sandbox is finished. No new figurines will be placed, but one little change will be made. The heart between the tank and the two-headed beast is laid on top of the tank. Noting the need to use an abundance of love, of understanding, and trust to fight the conflicts of the world. The heart leaves a small heart-shaped mark in the sand. Its absence creates a surprising desolate feeling. This is just a sandbox filled with small figurines. Just something, a child would play with. How can this superficial indent in a heap of sand make us feel so lost?

The silent choosing and placing of figurines is only the first part of the sandboxing method. It revolves around a few activities, which through their simplicity help create a collaborative storytelling process. The following steps are necessary when sandboxing is done collaboratively:

- 1 Choose a relevant and common interest; while it gives a certain focus, make sure not to be too restrictive and pronounced. This is the agential cut.

- 2 Two or more people can work in one sandbox. While the figurines are placed, everybody is silent. Each figurine becomes part of the common story field of the sandbox for the participants to work with.
- 3 Work with the placing of the figurines until everybody stops finding new pieces and (re)placing them.
- 4 In the process of making sense of the configuration, we notice and articulate the placing and meaning of the figurines. You can reflect on and explain their groupings, opposites, and other possible relations.

Besides these simple steps, Strand has used the past seventeen years to collect a huge number of different figurines and objects. While working with the sandbox, the active search, the walking through the room, looking, trying to find or discover a certain kind of figurine on one of the various shelves, is part of the sandboxing method. While the arrangement of the artefacts seems random, Strand's method demands that the eight categories of artefacts, as presented in the first paragraph of the introduction, are presented on each shelf or table. With Barad (2007) and Latour (2021) the room as space, the time and context, and the matter in the form of shelves, boxes, and artefacts are actors and acting with us, because they are *there*, present in the room. As Haraway (2008, p. 4): "Figures collect the people through their invitation to inhabit the corporeal story told in their lineaments."

Storytelling becomes a tangible venture, turning the 'telling' away from words to ambiguous artefacts, which can be interpreted through associations invoked by their symbolism or the concreteness of their appearances, the way they feel, their placement in the sandbox, or their proximity to other figures. You can set the object on top of the sand or bury it underneath or place it off balance. You can level the sand or build dams and dig holes. In more than one way sandboxing takes you back to your childhood, letting you play; but play using the knowledge and experiences of your adulthood.

Now, we must make sense of the configuration in front of us. The heart-shaped dent will allow us to remember the need for caring and compassion, as the two-headed beast becomes our focus. In our interpretation, the storytelling becomes a re-storying of one

of the most dominant and destructive binaries of the cutting together/apart of humans: that of cutting the feminine and masculine apart, at the same time cutting them together with stereotyped, opposite sexes.



Figure 2. The different opposites. Furthermore, each grouping of figurines can be seen as opposing the groups close by.

### The analysis?

With Shklovsky's (2015) term of defamiliarization we introduce the term enstrangement as a counter to the process of estrangement, the fear of the Other. Enstrangement depicts the way of making seemingly ordinary things feel strange and complex by looking at them from a different angle. Re-storying needs a moment of enstrangement and sandboxing offers that in building a miniature of the familiar in unfamiliar circumstances and in doing so, secures the enstrangement necessary for the re-storying to emerge. With enstrangement comes the possibility to ask how this setting enables us to re-see, re-story, everything around us. This element of enstrangement takes place in sandbox configurations and provides for a re-storying of the mundane, the familiar, in an unfamiliar, awakening process that unlocks us. Boje (2001) uses the term *antenarrative* to depict the motor of re-storying. Ante—as in an emergent pre-cedent or ante-cedent and as a bet on the future to come.

It is the two-headed beast, which turns into the fulcrum of the setting. Through it, we can begin to explain and maybe even understand the different. Better yet, we can find a way to understand, to explore different possibilities for re-storying the future by unlocking the fulcrum; the congealed narratives of binaries unhelpful for a future to come.

Like the original placing of the artefacts became a dance between the two of us, one position taken, leading to a new way of seeing the figurine in one's hand, maybe hesitating, before putting it down, not in its intended place, but in a new one. An even better one? Or just a different one, creating a new cycle of wonder or determination. The ensuing exploration of the possible of sensemaking becomes a new dance (Strand and Sparholt 2017). This time, words are our tentative way to understand what we un/knowingly have built, slowly melting our understanding together, helping each other along the way. We come from different storytelling universes, as might be sensed in the configuration of the sandbox; we need to find words and expressions which can help us understand each other, articulating our many ways of knowing (Heron and Reason 2006).

With the two-headed beast, we have a symbol that marks the second agential cut of a founding difference (Barad 2007). Such cuts matter as they set the boundaries for what is made meaningful from here on out, and it leaves marks on various bodies that are enabled



by the field of possible becoming (Strand 2021). With the two-headed beast, the cut is still in progress. The two heads fighting each other, maybe waiting for the cut to become complete. Our initial discussion takes us into the realm of the cut society deals between the feminine and the masculine within each person. The two-headed beast becomes the symbol of the pain this cut creates. The love birds become the symbol of the beginning of a healing process, joining the two parts together to fly as one.

However, the materiality of the sandbox configuration enables us to point towards another problem of this agential cut: healing the two parts might turn them into an oneness, which is then set in stone. Indifferent to the world around them, apparently able to fly, without having the possibility to move. Leaving a narrow window of normality and other forms of life outside, un-normal, non-existent. Embracing both sides to transcend the apparent binary, might be a first step to turn towards caring and kindness (stereotyped as feminine), away from fear and aggression (stereotyped as masculine). While the binary is a challenge, not just for society but for every single person, who is unable to embrace their whole of humanness, bringing both parts together in the individual person is just one step forward. The need for an awareness of flexibility, change, and transformation regarding gender norms and characteristics, should be an ongoing process. Cutting off certain gender characteristics denotes a limit, which imposes a threat to the wholeness of humanity. We need a new way of storying, a new way of re-storying the hero's journey, to become the journey of life, of caring and kindness, rather than fighting and conflict. More than that, we need to understand, as Latour (2021) and Haraway (2016) point out again and again, how everything is entangled, depending on everything and everyone else.

Dividing the binary into a female and male part, with the female being caring and kind and the male aggressive and hard, shows our dependence on existing notions and biases of gender theories. Creating a new story from our sandbox setting means surpassing this binary, at the same time needing to surpass the limits of our way of doing research, maybe even the language, we use. As the individual is cut apart from one of its inherent traits, localised in the opposite gender, we need to find a way to reconnect the parts, and more

than that, to become more than our parts; synergy to become human, a truly true *human* human (Strand 2023).

The two-headed beast is just one of several binaries in our sandbox. Figure 2 shows the different oppositions, often a 'good' (the owl = knowledge and wisdom) versus a 'bad' (the three 'wise' monkeys, here, interpreted as a way of not acknowledging the state of Earth, the climate crisis, the ongoing conflicts around the world) grouping. As such, like the gender binary, it denotes existing fears, existing preconceptions: not seeing, not hearing, not speaking, as impaired, made ignorant, conditioned by industrialism.

Still, the sandbox, its figurines, and their placement can take us one step further. Because of the ambiguity of the different parts in play, we need to acknowledge them in another way. The enstrangement of the process means a new way of creating a story, a new way of a living storying process (Boje 2001). The sensemaking of the sandbox configuration is on-going, each time a new look on the setting brings new pieces to light. Also, you can change the placement of the figurines, depending on you and your collaborators coming to an agreement on the changes. Because of this process, sandboxing can be seen as a counterpart to the ongoing processes of division and particularisation and individualisation, we can detect in Western societies. Bauman (2013) and Latour (2021) explain about the falling apart of society into ever smaller pieces, making it impossible to act as a community. Because a community needs more than proximity, it needs the will to act on behalf of the inhabitants and agencies within said community, no matter if these themselves can act. According to Bauman (2004) a community can be defined as a group of people sharing a set of values, and a commitment to support each other. He shows how industrialisation has made it possible to divide communities, turn them into individuals who must fight for themselves. Reading Bauman through Latour and Haraway, these individuals become multi-species and agencies, interdependent in the critical zone, staying with trouble of the whole. This way, we include resources like animals, plants, infrastructure as inhabitants and agencies within the community. As Bauman and Latour show these agencies including humans are turned into a question about money (knowing the price of everything, but the value of nothing), the values of a person have been turned into the price for their labour; the money, they can use to be a 'good' con-

sumer. Likewise, animals and plants, etc., can be priced and defined by metrics, efficiency, and quantity, at the expense of reducing of the senses, not-seeing, not-hearing, not-speaking, turning everything into non-sense.

Latour shows how we need actual communities to be able to act on the crisis and conflicts, happening now and becoming even more severe soon. We are by no means isolated as an individual, instead we are part of the whole of Earth, Gaia, in Latour's words. We can define, describe, measure, and label the world, its inhabitants, and even the Universe, without understanding the intricate interactions and dependencies between the actors. As Theweleit (2020) shows, the very way our Western culture and language works gives us an advantage when colonising new places. But it is a language and culture of death and destruction which makes it near impossible to avoid the forced submission of others. "Others" being anyone and anything which is not a white, cis, hetero male.

Even in storytelling, we have the division into smaller parts, which can be counted, measured, explained. The hero's journey (Vogler 2007) being one example of a structure, which can be divided into time frames, with clear instructions on what needs to happen next. This works fine when writing a story. The structure is a given, the hero's development as well, the writer or storyteller can fill in the blank spaces, creating interesting characters (each with its own purpose for the hero and his journey), the plot can even be twisted and surprising if only it follows through and connects all the dots of the journey. This form of worldbuilding has its own set of rules, the basic framework laid out in Tolkien's *On fairy-stories* (1964), a more elaborate explanation found in Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2014). These examples are taken from an Anglo-American culture, but structuring a story, including the way characters act and develop, can be found in other cultures as well. Sandboxing offers a different kind of worldbuilding, inspired by Margaret Lowenfeld's world technique (Lowenfeld 1950).

### Concluding remarks

All the above stands in stark contrast to sandboxing. The story structure is gone, instead the story emerges through the intra-act of matter and meaning and is therefore not so much told as it is invoked through the complex between of figures, placement, cuts,

associations, in a continuous dance of meaning and mattering (Poulsen and Strand 2014). As the story congeals between the two of us, we feel our way through to an understanding, which evolves every time we revisit the configuration, every time we continue our contemplation. There is no hero, even if the two-headed beast can be seen as our pro- or antagonist. Even the opposites, we see in our sandbox, will be seen as something completely different by other participants. Their story would become different, connecting the sandbox with their experiences and life story, as the sandbox triggers their imagination and subsequent story.

The point being, much of the opposition, of the conflict, and separation, we find in our society, might be explained by Bauman and Theweleit's analysis of our society's implicit need to measure and describe every little bit of being human, beginning with the world around us, our work and spare time, till now, our body, gender, and sexuality. With Barad's agential cuts, making it possible to differentiate between the normal and usual on one hand, and the obscure and Other on the other hand, material storytelling in the form of sandboxing understands objects as socio-material knots (Haraway 2008) or onto-semantic constructs (Barad 2007), which through their relation and proximity to other artefacts gain meaning and create the story. The story, which turns into meaning through the contemplation with one another.

The two-headed beast, about to tear itself apart, might be seen as a symbol for humans, trying to tear themselves apart, to become what is expected of them: be a real man, be a real woman, be a good worker, a good consumer, at the expense of the whole. And never a good person because you cannot measure and price value, nor the value of the whole.

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