Keep Playing

Tinder, Its Affordances and Playful Identity

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Image from Wired

Abstract

The media we use do not only influence the way we are able to express ourselves, they are a key element in how we reflexively understand ourselves. Although in the past narrative was an essential element in the construction of our identity, current media are not merely structured by narrative anymore. According to Valerie Frissen et al. digital media should be understood through play, rather than narrative. It is therefor that they propose a theory of playful identity as a way of understanding the relation between digital media and identity construction. This thesis builds upon and exemplifies this concept of playful identity as proposed by Valerie Frissen et al. It will do so through a case study of the mobile dating application Tinder. With the use of an affordance analysis in combination with a textual analysis the thesis shows how playful identity construction is afforded by Tinder. The four categories of games as defined by Roger Caillois, namely agôn, alea, mimicry and ilinx, function as a framework for an affordance analysis. The findings of this affordance analysis are validated through a textual analysis of user profiles. This mixed method shows that Tinder affords agôn and mimicry as dominant forms of play, supported by underlying alea and ilinx forms of play. In the final part of the thesis these findings are connected to playful identity. Playful Identity as a theory is adapted to an affordance approach. Connecting the analysis to playful identity shows that using playful identity as a concept in a specific case study, is a fruitful approach for understanding media objects and afforded identity construction.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Tinder: a playful technology

 "In our contemporary culture, deeply entrenched with digital technologies, play is the key feature for understanding this culture and 'playful technologies' are the very means by which we […] reflexively construct our identity."[1] With this statement Valerie Frissen and her colleagues touch upon the question how new digital media relate to identity construction. In "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity" communication and media scholars Valerie Frissen, Jos de Mul and Joost Raessens introduced a theory of playful identity.[2] In this article and later, joined by Sybille Lammes and Michiel de Lange in *Playful Identities,* they argue that because we now not only express our identity through narrative media but also digital media, Ricoeur's narrative identity theory needs to be extended.[3] According to them play is essential for the understanding of these digital media and therefore they propose playful identity as a way of understanding contemporary identity formation through media.[4] This thesis is an exemplification of this theoretical argument. By focusing on a specific case it will become clearer how exactly a digital medium relates to identity formation and how play can help to lay bare this relation.

This specific case is the dating app Tinder.[5] Tinder is a very popular dating application for smartphones. After logging in with you pre-existing Facebook account you will see someone else's profile, which you can either like or dislike whereupon the next profile will appear. When two people have liked each other's profile they are a match and can chat with each other.

In version 2.2.3 of the application, after a user had a match, one had the options of "send message" or "keep playing".[6] This is just one example of how Tinder explicitly references the play metaphor and gives an immediate playful feeling to the user. Play and

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[1] Valerie Frissen, Jos de Mul, and Joost Raessens, "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity," in *Contemporay Culture. New Directions in Art and Humanities Research*, ed. Judith Thissen, Robert Zwijnenberg, and Kitty Zijlmans(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013): 75-92, 82-83.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Valerie Frissen et al., "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media, and Identity," in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Valerie Frissen, et al.(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015): 211-24.
[4] Ibid., 29.
[5] Tinder Inc., *Tinder*, purchased in Apple App Store.
[6] Tinder Inc., *Tinder*, purchased in Apple App Store. Version 2.2.3.

games have been used to describe dating and seduction in general, not only in popular culture but also in academic discourse. For example in their sociological research on dating expectations Angela M. Bartoli and M. Diane Clark refer to "the dating game."[7] Although I will analyse affordances rather than semiotics, this playful context of dating in combination with Tinder being a digital medium makes Tinder a very interesting object to analyse in relation to playful identity.

The analysis of the application will be a combination of an analysis of the affordances of the Tinder interface and a textual analysis of user profiles. This way it will become clear how Tinder affords play as well as a first insight in how users actually play. This combination forms a strong base to connect Tinder to playful identity.

1.2 Questions

In this thesis I will answer the following research question: In what way does Tinder afford playful identity construction? To answer this question, I will answer the following sub-questions: In what way does the interface of Tinder afford play? How is the playful attitude that is afforded by the interface reflected in Tinder profiles? How does the play afforded by Tinder relate to identity construction?

My main question addresses the way Tinder invites its users to construct their identity through interacting with, and relating to, its content in a playful way. The three sub-questions are all essential steps in the answering of the research question. The first question aims to get a clear idea of how Tinder invites users to play. The second question builds on the first question. Although this research does not analyse user behaviour, a textual analysis of the user profiles will give insight in how users play with the possibilities and limitations of the interface creating their own content. This question functions as a validation and elaboration of the first. The last question focuses directly on playful identity and aims to connect the work of Frissen et al. to the case of Tinder.

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[7] Angela M. Bartoli and M. Diane Clark, "The Dating Game: Similarities and Differences in Dating Scripts among College Students," *Sexuality and Culture* 10, no. 4 (2006): 54-80.

1.3 Relevance

My thesis will make a small contribution to the research on digital media and identity. It will do so from a specific perspective through a specific case. Most research on playfulness and identity has either kept a very broad approach or focussed on games or on larger social media platforms like Facebook. An example of a broader approach is the PhD thesis of Michiel de Lange.[8] This thesis is closely related to the later collaboration with Frissen et al. but addresses playful identity in relation to mobile media in general.

An example of a more focussed approach is the article "Avatars in social media: Balancing accuracy, playfulness and embodied messages" written by communication, psychology, philosophy and electric engineering scholars, which focuses on larger social media platforms.[9] Also directly in line with Frissen et al., in their collection itself, there has not been any attention for mobile dating applications.[10] This thesis will function as an addition as well as an exemplification of the theory of playful identity as presented by Frissen et al. Compared to the articles in their collection it will relate more directly to playful identity as theorized by Frissen et al. and it will focus on a relatively new and unattended digital platform, Tinder.

Because of the specific play angle this analysis will be different than other research on dating applications and identity. In both the research on identity and dating websites, as the more resent research on identity and mobile dating applications, a focus on self-presentation is dominant. An example of the first is the article "Managing Impressions Online: Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment" by Nicole Ellison, Rebecca Heino and Jennifer Gibbs.[11] A more recent example is "Seeing and being seen: Co-situation and impression formation using Grindr, a location-aware gay dating app" by Courtney Blackwell

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[8] Michiel de Lange, "Moving Circles: Mobile Media and Playful Identities" (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2010).

[9] Asimina Vasaloua et al., "Avatars in Social Media: Balancing Accuracy, Playfulness and Embodied Messages," *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 66(2008): 801-11.

[10] Valerie Frissen et al., eds., *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

[11] Nicole Ellison, Rebecca Heino, and Jennifer Gibbs, "Managing Impressions Online: Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11, no. 2 (2006): 415-41.

Jeremy Birnholtz and Charles Abbott.[12] These articles focus on the way users interact with media to present themselves. A playful affordances perspective will make an interesting addition, for it shows how medium specific affordances relate to the way in which we reflexively construct our identity rather than just express this identity.

This type of research is necessary because it can create understanding instead of fear for the effects of online dating on our identity perception. There are many blogs and posts warning users for the dangers of Tinder. Articles like "Tinder Dating: The Shocking And Dangerous Truth Revealed!" state Tinder is superficial and a danger for your self-esteem.[13] Whether these warnings are correct or not, the over-simplified fear like calls for a deeper more nuanced understanding of how apps like Tinder afford certain actions and how these relate to our identity. These insights also relate more dominant digital media platforms and therefore are a small addition to a broader understanding of the relation between digital media and our identity.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Playful identity

Instead of approaching identity as a direct reflection of the self, I see identity as a product of mediation. The self is not unchanging or stable but changes as its context does. Through self-representation and identification we construct our identity. The medium through which this process takes place can influence this. This approach is in line with the work of Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. They describe the self as an effect of mediation.[14]

Playful Identity theory lies at a junction of two important academic discourses or theories, that of playful media and that of narrative identity. Narrative identity is a concept developed by Paul Ricoeur. It refers to the sort of identity we get access to through narrative

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[12] Courtney Blackwell, Jeremy Birnholtz, and Charles Abbott, "Seeing and Being Seen: Co-Situation and Impression Formation Using Grindr, a Location-Aware Gay Dating App," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 7 (2015): 1-20.

[13] David Wygant, "Tinder Dating:The Shocking and Dangerous Truth Revealed!," [2014] *Your Tango* - 21-06-2016 http://www.yourtango.com/experts/david-wygant/tinder-dating-shocking-and-dangerous-truth-revealed.

[14] Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 6.

mediation. According to Ricoeur, narrative plays an essential part in how we construct our identity because it is through narrative we construct and understand stories about others and ourselves.[15]

Frissen et al. argue that narrative identity needs to be updated. Because the media we use to express ourselves and tell stories about ourselves are not merely based on narrative anymore, nor is our identity. To understand the sort of identity we have access to through new digital media, they propose the concept of playful identity.[16] In *Playful Identities* they adapt the theory of Ricoeur to digital media by replacing narrative with play. Frissen et al. argue that play is a key feature of contemporary digital media. By constructing our identity through media that are structured by play, rather than merely narrative, our identity construction becomes playful.[17]

Ricoeur identifies three phases of narrative identity construction. All these are based on mimesis.[18] According to De Lange, with the current ludic mediations it is necessary to replace these three phases, mimesis1, mimesis2 and mimesis3 with play1, play2 and play3. These three phases of playful identity construction show a similar structure to those of narrative identity but fill up the shortcomings De Lange has identified in Ricoeur's work.[19]

Play1 consists of pre-understanding everyday life as consisting of play and playful interactions. Play2 is the phase where we actively start playing games and use rules to structure actions as play. Play3 is what happens beyond the game where play has become a way of understanding ourselves. We actively appropriate structures of playful technologies to become part of our identity and the way we express this identity.[20]

Although De Lange and later Frissen et al. use this playful identity in a very theoretical sense, to think about how mobile or digital media have effected our mediated identity construction, I would like to argue that the phases of playful identity are also very useful in the analysis of a specific technology through their affordances. A necessary step to make here is to adapt playful identity theory, which focuses on the human experience and processes in the minds of people, to an affordance approach, which focuses on how technology frames these processes. It is because of this I will postpone an extensive

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[15] Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity," *Philosophy Today* 35, no. 1 (1991): 73-81, 73.
[16] Frissen et al., "Homo Ludens 2.0," 11.
[17] Ibid., 21.
[18] WIlliam C. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative: An Introduction to Temps Et Récit* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 3.
[19] Lange, "Moving Circles," 242-43.
[20] Ibid., 243.

discussion of the phases of playful identity until the last part of my analysis. This will allow my adaptation to logically arise from the theory.

2.2 Play

The claim that digital media can be understood through play relates to an old discourse on playfulness. Back in 1939, Johan Huizinga already claimed that play is essential to culture in his influential work *Homo Ludens*.[21] However, the 21st century has been claimed to know a ludificiation of culture, where this play element in culture became even more present, influential and visible.[22] According to Frissen et al., it is because of the medium specific qualities of multimediality, virtuality, interactivity and connectivity that digital media almost always have a ludic dimension.[23]

There have been many attempts at theorizing what exactly 'play' is. In *Homo Ludens* Huizinga identified six characteristics of play. According to Huizinga play is always free, not real, separate from ordinary life in time and location, creating order, creating a tense joyful mood and consisting of rules.[24] This list has however been criticised because it takes for granted certain ambiguities. Play can for instance be unreal but events that happen within play can still be very real outside of play.[25] In play through electronic media especially the boundary between play and seriousness is not as clear anymore.[26] In a digital environment, where play is overly present in digital objects that are not as clearly separable from daily life, but constantly interrupting, a strict definition on the base of these characteristics is not very productive.

Another valued play theorist is Miguel Sicart. Sicart does not discuss characteristics of play as relating to a game, but rather as relating to a way of being in the world, to which games are just props.[27] His characteristics are more flexible and broader applicable than the characteristic Huizinga lists. According to Sicart it is not relevant to ask whether something is play or not, he considers play as a way of being in the world and understanding and

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[21] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950).
[22] Joost Raessens, "Homo Ludens 2.0: The Ludic Turn in Media Theory," Inaugural Address, Utrecht University Utrecht, November 19, 2010.
[23] Frissen et al., "Homo Ludens 2.0," 10.
[24] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*.
[25] Frissen et al., "Homo Ludens 2.0."
[26] Roger SIlverstone, *Why Study the Media?* (London: Sage, 1999), 62-63.
[27] Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2014), 14.

interacting with our surrounding.[28] This way, play can be applied to many other situations then just games.

Roger Caillois takes on a different approach; he tries to theorise play by categorising games.[29] Although he does also define general characteristics of play, his categorisation is very helpful in understanding the specific qualities of a game and how it invites us to play. Caillois describes a direct relation between the types of games, their rules, their structure and the attitude of the player.[30] This way, these categories do not only describe types of games but also types of play. This assumption on the relation between game and player is very similar to the relation between medium and user in an affordance analysis. Caillois' work is therefore very relevant when analysing the relation between playful media objects and the actions they afford.

Caillois proposes a categorization of play into four categories: agôn, alea, mimicry and ilinx. These four all represent an original principle that can be dominant in play.[31] There are games were one of the principles is very dominant but play situations can also contain multiple principles and thus fall into multiple categories.

Each category consists of similar kinds of games. To further specify the difference between games in a category, Caillois places them on a continuum between two opposites, paidia and ludus. Paidia relates to games that are free and uncontrolled and give room for improvisation. On the other side there is ludus. Ludus relates to games where this freedom is encapsulated by conventions and rules.[32]

As I will discuss later in my method section, play will not only be a part of my theoretical framework. It is also in a very direct way part of my method. By using the categories of Caillois to systematically analyse Tinder this theory functions as an important tool in my analysis.

2.3 An affordance approach

There are many different approaches towards the relationship between technology and society. All these approaches have a different answer to the question: which influences

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* [Les jeux et les hommes], trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 12-13.
[32] Ibid., 13.

which? Often considered as opposites in this debate are social constructivists and technological determinists.

Technological determinists see social change as an effect of technological development. These technologies are also developed separate from society and social influence.[33] Research from this perspective is focussed on the essence of technological objects. By understanding the essence of technology we can understand society and how it is affected by technology.

Social constructivists oppose this thought. According to them it is society and people who influence technology instead of the other way around. All technologies are made, shaped and used conforming to users. A social constructivist analysis will point to the social structures in which an object is created and accepted.[34]

As a more nuanced approach Ian Hutchby proposes an affordance perspective. Where technological determinists try to understand technology through their essential technical properties and social constructivists through the social context they emerged from, the affordance perspective focuses on the way technology shapes, although not determines, user actions towards these technologies.[35]

The term affordance was originally coined by James Jerome Gibson. He used it to address the relation between humans or animal and the actionable properties in the world.[36] Donald A. Norman applied the concept to digital technologies in "Affordance, Conventions and Design".[37] Here he makes a distinction between the affordance of an object, the possible actions it allows, and symbolic design elements like buttons, which only advertise a certain affordance but do not add possible actions.[38] The use of affordances is based on physical, logical and cultural constraints together with symbols in the design. Norman uses the term perceived affordance to address the way a design can persuade users to certain actions from a

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[33] Sally Wyatt, "Technological Determinism Is Dead; Long Live Technological Determinism," in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition, an Anthology*, ed. R. Scharff and V. Dusek(West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014): 456-66.

[34] Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek, "Introduction to Part 3," in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition, an Antology*, ed. Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek(West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014): 241-47.

[35] Ian Hutchby, "Technologies, Texts and Affordances," *Sociology* 35, no. 2 (2001): 441-56.

[36] Donald A. Norman, "Affordances, Conventions and Design," *Interactions* 4, no. 3 (1999): 38-42, 39.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 39-40.

wider frame of possible actions. The term affordance however does only relate to the properties of an object that define how an object could be used.[39]

3. Method

3.1 Affordance analysis

To answer my research question I will use a mixed method approach. The base of my analysis is an affordance analysis. This affordance analysis will be validated through an additional textual analysis.

When analysing such a broad element like affordances it is necessary to focus your gaze. Tinder has a complex set of affordances and limits its users in many ways. For this specific research I am interested in the play affordances, the way this application invites, frames and shapes play. Play is still a very broad frame to look through and, as I have shown in my theory section, play can be understood in many ways. The four categories of play and games, as defined by Caillois, will function as a frame for my affordance analysis. By using this frame it will become clear how Tinder affords different kinds of play.

Instead of trying to define in which category Tinder needs to be placed I will use all categories and their principles to analyse Tinder. This way all game elements in Tinder are exposed. The continuum between paidia and ludus is also very relevant. When within a category very different kinds of play are afforded by Tinder, placing them on this continuum will give greater insight in the nature of their difference.

My main research method will be an affordance analysis of the interface of Tinder. For this part of the analysis the corpus includes the basic screens of the interface. These are the swiping screen where user profiles are shown plus the advanced profiles that appear when selected, the edit profile screen which shows the options for creating and changing your personal profile, the settings of the app that show the options for searching other profiles and the conversation screen where you are able to chat with your matches.

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[39] Ibid., 41-42.

3.2 Textual analysis

The affordance analysis will be validated through a selective textual analysis of the user profiles. The textual analysis will focus on the way play comes forward in the user profiles of Tinder and will function as a validation of the findings in the affordance analysis. Where the affordance analysis will show how the interface of the application invites and structures play, the analysis of the user profiles will lay bare how users use the options of the interface in the creation of their own content.

Unfortunately, Tinder makes it impossible to select the profiles you are able to see. This means the textual analysis is influenced by my own preferences, location and profile popularity. My preferences have been as wide as possible, making it possible for me to see both male and female profiles and both heterosexual and homosexual users from the age of 18 within a 160 km range from Utrecht.

In a first observational analysis I will identify patterns in the profiles shown to me. I will look at the photos, the description and the information users have decided to show or hide. From this first observation, I will select some profiles that represent and exemplify the play afforded by the application. By making screenshots I will make it possible to revisit profiles and include them in my analysis chapter.

4. Analysis

4.1 Tinder as a game

I will now systematically analyse whether and how each of Caillois' categories is afforded by Tinder. After first elaborating more on which elements are important for the category I will analyse how Tinder allows users to play this type of game.

4.1.1 Agôn

Agôn or competition games are games where players combat for the winner's position. The start of the game is arranged in a way that all players start equal. The players than combat to

be the best in a predefined quality like speed or memory. Examples of agôn play are sport games like football but also less physical games like chess.[40]

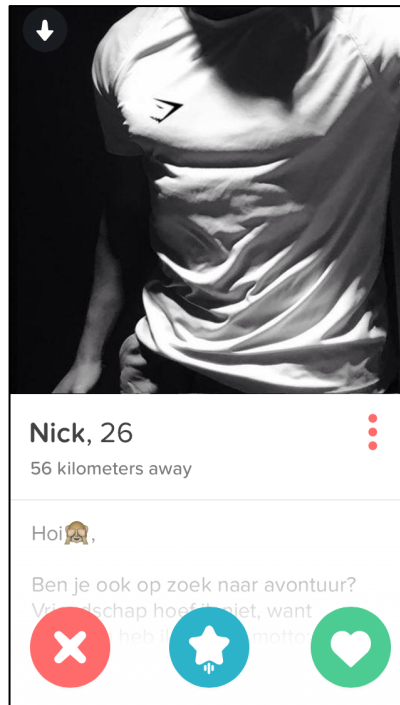Fig. 1: Profile Nick in swiping screen[41]   Fig. 2: Extended profile of Nick[42]

Tinder affords competition in multiple ways. First of all, the interface suggests a system of rivalry. According to Caillois, agôn is always a form of rivalry depending on a specific quality.[43] The swiping screen (figure 1) allows you to judge other profiles and to let your profile be judged by other users. The application uses a green heart and a red cross as a symbol for your choices, enhancing the notion of a positive and a negative judging possibility. The chat screen allows you to see your number of matches, making it possible to compare this.

The interface also shapes the judging process through its design. Tinder frames which quality the users compete in. The application invites you to judge people on their photo. The swiping screen only allows you to see one picture, a name, an age and possibly work/school. The picture is very central in this depiction. Seeing this, the user is able to 'dismiss' or 'like' a profile with a simple swipe to left or right. There is one other ability, namely clicking on the

[40] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 14.
[41] Tinder Inc., "Profile Nick" *Tinder*, purchased in Apple App Store. Version 5.0.2.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 14.

picture to see the full profile (figure 2), which includes photos, name, age, work/school, distance, description, common friends, common interests and Instagram pictures. The user can now swipe right to see more pictures and scroll down to see more information. The extra pictures, work/school, description and Instragram photos depend on whether the user has decided to include these in his or her profile.

The interface advertises the affordance of judgement on the base of physical or photographic appearance. By only allowing users to see a photo at first sight, allowing them only to see more information after taking further actions and centralizing the photos, users are invited to judge people on the base of their appearance in a photo. Centralizing a quality to judge people upon invites users to compete on this quality.

Essential to competitive play is a notion of equal chances. We expect competitive play to be fair. Players compete on a predefined quality and all other differences between players should be equalized as much as possible, giving each player a fair chance to win.[44] On Tinder this sense of fair play is very present. Each user gets the same options to present her- or himself. The qualities users are judged on are free to personal input while at the same time other elements of the game are structured to create equal chances. This can be compared to children playing a simple race game; every child is free to run in her or his own way but they all run the same distance, start at the same point and at the same time. These are the rules of the game and if someone does not obey them, the children will recognise this as cheating and unfair play. In Tinder every user is free to select whichever photo they want and write whatever description they want. However, the game is also structured to give everyone equal chances. There are rules. All users are only allowed to select six photos and write 500 signs.

An important note here is that although Tinder affords competition in many ways, there is not a clear loser or winner at the end. Apart from having fewer matches, there is not a negative effect of being dismissed a lot. Your rivals are made invisible, making it hard to relate to them in a competing manner.

4.1.2 Alea

Alea or chance games are "all games that are based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather

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[44] Ibid.

than triumphing over an adversary."[45] Chance games are very similar to competition games but the winning or loosing does not hinge on personal qualities but faith.

Although Tinder affords competition in many ways, there are also some elements that force users to rely on chance. Fate is quite important in Tinder. The appearance of profiles seems very random. When users are swiping through profiles they have to leave it up to chance or rather an algorithm whether they will come across their perfect match or not. There has been done some research on the algorithm behind Tinder, but this remains very mysterious and hidden from users.[46] It has been confirmed that the showing of profiles happens not in a random order but depends on multiple factors, like the popularity of your own profile. Tinder could have made this an explicit part of the play by, for example, focussing on the gaining of popularity to see more attractive profiles and allowing people to see their own rating. In this way, Tinder does not only afford agôn play but also alea.

Together with the equality in profile options, it is this alea element of Tinder that creates the base of equality necessary for the agôn play. As explained above, it is because of an equal start that players are able to combat on the quality that is at stake. In this case the equal options and feeling of randomness allow users to compete on attractiveness.

4.1.3 Mimicry

All games are a form of as-if-ness. We pretend to be in a temporary, different reality.[47] In mimicry games however the player her- or himself is pretending to be something else. The player disguises her or his personality to take on another.[48] A common example of this type of play is theatre, from children plays to adult theatre performance; we enjoy dressing up and presenting ourselves as someone else.

Tinder allows users to present themselves different from their physical self. Although your basic information is taken from the Facebook account you log in with, this Facebook account does not necessarily contain your real name, age or other information. Furthermore, users are able to add other photos from their phone, which do not need to be included in their Facebook profile.

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[45] Ibid., 17.
[46] Alex Mark, "How Does the Tinder Algorithm Work?," [2015] *Quora* - 08-06-2016
https://www.quora.com/How-does-the-Tinder-algorithm-work.
[47] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 19.
[48] Ibid.

Nevertheless, this kind of pretending is not real mimicry according to the characteristics of Caillois. Caillois makes it very clear that mimicry is make-believe, but in a way everyone knows it is just make-believe[49]. At first sight this does not apply to Tinder because when using an unrealistic profile, the user tries to convince others she or he is the way she or he presents herself or himself in the profile. This is not a case of masking the self to liberate a true personality but rather presenting a fake personality as real.

I would like to argue that the mimicry, as described by Caillois, is in fact afforded by Tinder but in a less obvious way. Tinder does invite us to make-believe we are something or someone else in a way we all know is make-believe, because in fact, in this 'game of Tinder', all users are pretending to be a digital profile. We are masking behind the interface and design of the application. It is clear to everyone that I am not a digital profile, my matches know I am not just consisting of six photos, 500 signs and some basic information.

Tinder affords users to play a game of mimicry with digital profiles. The possibilities and limits of these profiles are determined by the application. Although users have the option to create a fake Facebook profile to connect to their Tinder profile, this is not what Tinder invites you to do, nor is it the most common thing done. The most obvious reason for this is that the eventual goal of Tinder is to meet people in real life, which will be a lot more complicated when you do not look like your pictures.

A way in which Tinder profiles do function as masks is how they allow you to hide information. A common element of mimicry is that a person "forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another."[50] Tinder does not allow you to add jobs or change your education or age. It does however give you the option to hide information. This way, your profile literally becomes a mask to hide behind. This mimicry allows you to experiment with different parts of your identity.

Playing with digital profiles as masks is a more ludus form of mimicry. It is regulated by the restrictions and abilities of the application. It is also formalised in the sense that it is an essential part of the application and all profiles are in the base the same. The restrictions can be understood as the rules governing the mimicry of Tinder.

A more paidia form of mimicry afforded by Tinder can be found in the freer role-playing. A clear example can be found in the option of sending animated GIFs instead of written messages. An animated GIF consists of a series of images endlessly repeating, with a result a video of about three seconds repeating itself, sometimes with a supporting text. For

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49 Ibid., 21.
50 Ibid., 19.

example the images from figure 3 are stills from a GIF of a seal with the text: "sup". Tinder includes a database of these GIFs with the ability to search suitable GIFs by entering search terms. For example, the GIF in figure 3 can be found by searching for 'hi' or 'what's up' Not only does this feature invite users to communicate in a multimedial way, it also invites users to interact using paidia mimicry. By allowing users to let fictional characters speak for them, a playful interaction can take place where the GIFs function as a more free form of mimicry, quickly changing masks.

Figure 3: "Sup." GIF[51]

4.1.4 Ilinx

Ilinx or vertigo games "consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind."[52] In all these games, the player surrenders to the brusque destroying of reality or feeling of vertigo. An example is whirling while dancing. Dancing this way creates a hypnotic and exciting feeling.[53] But also games with speed like skiing or driving sport cars can have this intoxicating pleasurable effect.[54]

A distinctive feature of Tinder is the swiping of profiles. To like or dislike a profile a user can swipe a picture to the right or left side. This aspect of the application can be understood through ilinx. Although there is not a physical disruption of stability, this is a very physical interaction with the application, creating a sense of flow. By allowing the user to

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[51] wolf120, Reddit – 24-06-2016
https://www.reddit.com/r/reactiongifs/comments/46c91u/when_im_at_a_10_on_the_couch_and_my_f
riend_walks/
[52] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 23.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 25.

quickly judge profiles by only a swipe to the right or the left, the physical repetition itself can create a state of flow where the chance of swiping to the wrong side becomes more and more likely. For example after quickly swiping a series of unattractive profiles to the left, a user is likely to mistakenly swipe an attractive profile to the left. This is confirmed by the privileged option to reverse a swipe when you are paying for a premium account. This pattern illustrates the physical flow and attached risk of instability or disruption distinctive of vertigo play.

4.2 Tinder use as play

Tinder affords play through all four categories of games. Agôn and mimicry however are the most dominant and are afforded by different parts of the application. Alea had a more reinforcing role in relation to the agôn play and ilinx was only afforded as a way of physically interacting with the application. Agôn and mimicry were also the categories that were reflected in the analysed user profiles. In the following I will elaborate on the way the user profiles showed signs of perceived affordances. These are the instances where users showed forms of play responding to the matching type of game.

4.2.1 Agôn

One of the patterns in user profiles that show competitive play, is users trying to sell themselves. In a non-competitive dating environment we would expect people to present themselves as they please and leave it to others to decide if this would be their taste. Instead, on Tinder many users try to convince possible matches to like them. Not only do users state they are worth liking, they even sometimes state they are better than others, or even the best. In figure 4 for example, a user states he won a prize for being the best son in law.
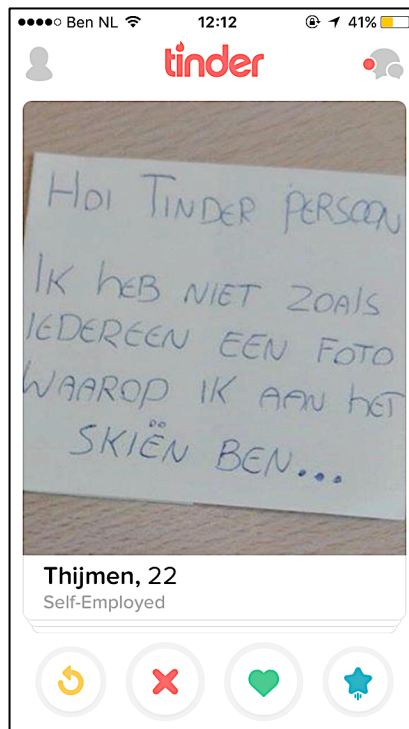
Fig. 4: Tinder profile of Derek[55]   *Fig. 5: Tinder profile of Thijmen*[56]

Doing this, users also actively relate to their 'competition'. Users show awareness of common practices in this competition, as a way to show they are different or better. For example, in figure 5 a picture of a note stating a common surf picture is missing, acknowledges a common pattern of surf photos. At the same time it also acknowledges profiles with surf photos as competition, by actively defending the lack of it. So even though Tinder does afford a clear winner or loser, users do show awareness of their competition.

As the affordance analysis has shown Tinder invites users to compete on looks in the first place and a few more personality traits in the second place. This affordance is reflected in the user profiles. Although users can select any photo they want, most profiles have a portrait picture as first photo. There are clear patterns to identify in the other photos but as explained before these only become visible after clicking on the first photo. Users thus acknowledge physical appearance as primary quality. It is only in the second place, traits like hobbies, sport and friends become important. The first judgement is on the base of looks. Users even reinforce this by including physical information that cannot be detected from the photos in

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[55] Tinder Inc., "Profile Derek" *Tinder*, purchased in Apple App Store. Version 5.1.1.
Translation: Won a price for best son in law of the year… Furthermore: travelling, entrepreneurship, aviation and for further question you will have to ask for my CV ;)
[56] Tinder Inc., "Profile Thijmen" *Tinder*, purchased in Apple App Store. Version 5.0.2.
Translation note: Hi Tinder person, I do not, like everyone else, have a picture of me skiing

their description. A very popular way of doing this is to include your height in the profile description.
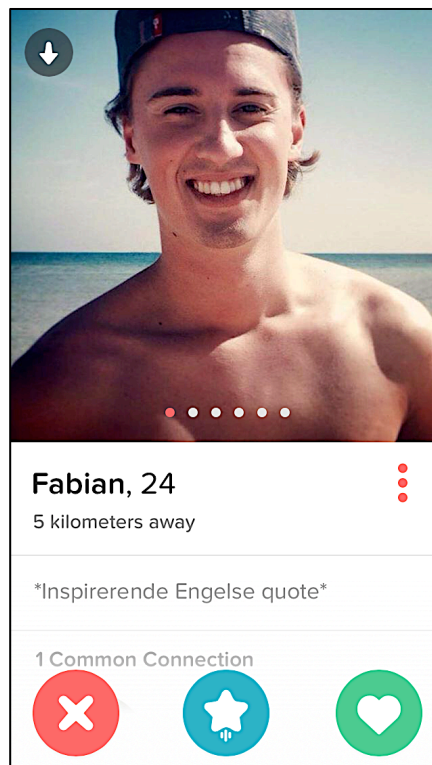

Fig. 6: Tinder profile of Veerle[57]

Fig 7: Tinder Profile of Fabian[58]

4.2.2 Mimicry

The profiles analysed also reflect the mimicry findings of the affordance analysis. There are a few patterns in the profiles that show people are aware of the fictional character of a Tinder profile. This is most apparent in the profile descriptions. While users have the option to describe themselves in 500 signs, hardly any users use all 500 signs. When analysing the actual descriptions, it becomes very clear how users choose which parts of themselves they reveal and which they keep hidden. While some make an effort to summarise themselves in a few words like in figure 6, others only describe themselves with a joke or a quote like in figure 7. This illustrates how users are aware of the fact that their profile does not need to be a

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[57] Tinder Inc., "Profile Veerle" *Tinder*, purchased in Apple App Store. Version 5.1.1. Description is stating education, sport and rowing club
[58] Tinder Inc., "Profile Fabian" *Tinder*, purchased in Apple App Store. Version 5.0.2. Translation: "Inspiring English quote"

complete reflection of their actual self, but it also shows the freedom users experience in experimenting with their identity.

According to Caillois, it is because the mask disguises the conventional self and a true personality is liberated that the mask creates a certain freedom.[59] The profiles show that users experience this disguise of the conventional self and feel free to express their personality in an unconventional way. Where jokes and one-liners are also part of offline self-expression, in many Tinder profiles I have observed that this becomes the only way through which users describe themselves, like in figure 7.

A form of mimicry not directly linked to an affordance of Tinder is the use of emoji in user descriptions. Emoji are small icons that can be used instead of text. Emoji are accessible in all mobile applications and are therefore not a specific affordance of Tinder. Using emoji in the description field like for example in figure 8, was a notable pattern in the textual analysis. Although it is not related to Tinder affordances it is related to mimicry. In a more paidia way users use emoji to express who they are, which can be a linked to role-playing in a similar way as afforded by the GIFs. At the same time it is also a way to challenge other users to decipher the meaning of the emoji, making it a real game with masks.
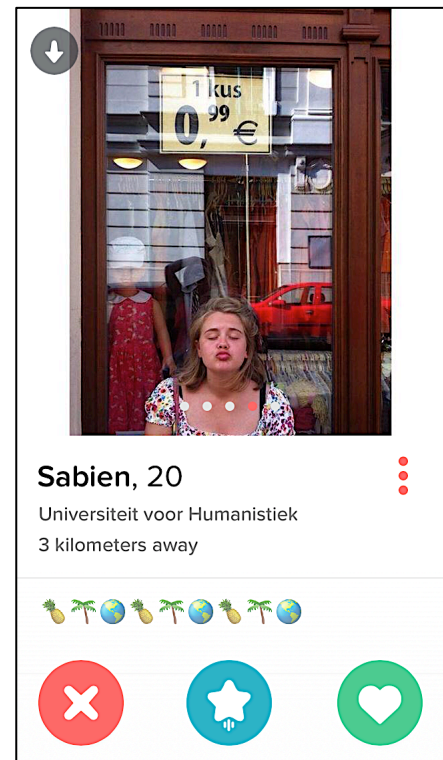

Fig. 8: Tinder profile of Sabien[60]

4.3 Playful identity and Tinder

The affordance analysis and textual analysis have created a clear understanding of the way in which Tinder affords play. In the following I will discuss for each phase of play how it was adapted from narrative identity, how both De Lange in his thesis and Frissen et al. in the book see this phase, the way it can be adapted to an affordance analysis and how this manifests itself in the case of Tinder. Of course this technology still has to be placed in a much broader context where identities are constructed, but understanding how a specific technology affords

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[59] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 21.
[60] Tinder Inc., "Profile Sabien" *Tinder*, purchased in Apple App Store. Version 5.0.2.

playful identity construction allows zooming in to see how different forms of play relate to this construction. This way I will show how specific case studies can be understood through playful identity.

4.3.1 Play1

For Ricoeur the first phase of narrative identity is mimesis1 or narrative prefiguration. This refers to the way we have an implicit preunderstanding of everyday life. We understand everyday actions through narrative because we recognise narrative structures like symbolism, goals and motives.[61]

De Lange argues that we do not solely understand everyday life and our place within it through narrative, but also through play. Play1 is according to De Lange the phase where "the complexities of urban life and the role of mobile media induce a preunderstanding of the world of actions as a playful world of interactions."[62] While play1 is a preunderstanding that takes place before actually playing games, this preunderstanding is reflected in the more paidia play forms. According to Frissen et al. when more casual, paidia play becomes part of our daily life, it thus becomes part of the way we understand it. This happens when we recognise the play of light or when we recognise a competitive aspect in taking the lead when the traffic light hits green. In addition, today's digital media implicitly shape our daily activities as playful through aesthetics or affordances.[63]

This last part already gives an indication of how play1 can be used to understand a specific case on the level of affordances. Digital media can invite us to understand actions and events as play. Play1 can be found in the more paidia affordances in Tinder. By inviting users to interact by using GIFs, Tinder also invites its users to see how dating interactions are playful interactions. In a similar way the affordances that allow you to approach dating as a competition afford play1. For example the red and green buttons invite you to see people as things you can rate good or bad. This invites users to see people as competing entities.

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[61] Lange, "Moving Circles," 39.
[62] Ibid., 243.
[63] Frissen et al., "Homo Ludens 2.0," 35-36.

4.3.2 Play2

With narrative identity mimesis2 is the phase where people actively construct stories about others and themselves. This is where configuration takes place.[64] Using elements like a plot and characters people construct stories. Writing as well as reading these stories adds to the configuration of narrative identity. Narrative structure allows people to follow, retell and apply it to their own lives.[65]

In Play2 it is the playful interactions that are used to construct coherence. De Lange identifies time, place and actions as unities where coherence is created through play.[66] According to Frissen et al. where play1 is more about paidia play, play2 refers to more ludus play. Here play takes place in a more explicit regulated way.[67] Where in play1 people understand daily life through play, in play2 they actively structure their actions, and thus their identity construction, through play.

By analysing the playful affordances of a case it will become clear if and how a technology invites people to play. To connect this to play2 it is necessary to look at how this play structures actions. Play 2 therefor relates to the more structuring, ludus play affordances of Tinder. The competition play in Tinder is constructed through predefined qualities that are at stake, a clear judging process and equal options for users to start with. By using Tinder it is these play structures that structure the action of the user. In a similar way, the ludus mimicry play afforded by Tinder, consisting of playing with a digital profile as a mask, structures the action of experimenting with other parts of one's personality. It is the play affordances that frame the elements of the self to be explored on Tinder. These two forms of play are supported by the ilinx play, which structures the whole experience as physical play.

4.3.3 Play3

Mimesis3 is the phase of reconfiguration in narrative identity. People understand themselves as readers and writers or their own life. Fictional narrative is applied to life itself.[68] All three phases include understanding through narrative structure but in relation to different things.

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[64] Lange, "Moving Circles," 22.
[65] Ibid., 40.
[66] Ibid., 247.
[67] Frissen et al., "Homo Ludens 2.0," 36.
[68] Lange, "Moving Circles," 40-42.

Mimesis1 refers to the understanding the narrative structures already present within daily life, mimesis2 refers to the understanding of fictional narrative and narrative structure itself, and mimesis3 refers to the understanding of ourselves by actively applying narrative structures outside of fictional narrative. As J. P. Connerty points out in his reading of *Time and Narrative*, the three are closely and reciprocally related.[69] This distinction, however, clarifies how the different relations to narrative are all essential to the construction of narrative identity.

In the adaptation to play De Lange identifies a similar reflective understanding. In play3 people reflectively understand themselves as players.[70] According to Frissen et al. this means a person internalizes the structure and content of the medium through which one expresses her- or himself. In the case of ludic technologies these are multimediality, interactivity, virtuality, and connectivity.[71] People use structures of play outside of the game. By recognising play around us in play1 and actively playing in play2, we are able to internalise these structures and use them beyond the structured game and in the understanding self and the construction of our identity.

Play3 can be less directly connected to affordances, compared to play1 and play2. Where understanding daily life through play and constructing coherence through playing can both be afforded by a medium, internalizing structures of play is an active appropriation by the user. It is because of play1 and play2 that a user is able to appropriate structures of play while there are no specific affordances, apart from play1 and play2 affordances, that shape this appropriation.

However, validating the affordances of Tinder by analysing user profiles does not only give more insight in how users respond to the play affordances analysed in section 4.1, it also gives insight in how users play beyond the affordances of the application. In the user descriptions analysed, people often used emoji to describe themselves. As I have stated before, this play does not directly relate to the play affordances of Tinder. This could however be interpreted as a sign of play3 of playful identity construction. Users actively express themselves through playful multimedial interactions. Although appropriation of play is an internal process, using these structures outside of the by the application afforded play can be interpreted as a result of the internalization of these structures.

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[69] J. P. Connerty, "History's Many Cunning Passages: Paul Ricoeur's Time and Narrative," *Poetics Today* 11, no. 2 (1990): 383-403, 393.
[70] Lange, "Moving Circles," 255.
[71] Frissen et al., "Homo Ludens 2.0," 38.

5. Conclusion

5.1 From affordance to identity

The affordance analysis of Tinder has shown that all four categories of play were in a way afforded by Tinder. Alea and ilinx play were afforded by the swiping part of Tinder, while mimicry and agôn affordances were more overall present. Agôn and mimicry were the most dominant categories, that were afforded by Tinder on multiple levels, in both paidia and ludus forms and in different parts of the application. Mimicry and agôn were also the forms of play that were found in the user profiles. The textual analysis of user profiles validated the findings of the affordance analysis. Users showed they were interacting with other users and with the application using both competition and mimicry play.

The affordance and textual analysis helped to connect Tinder to playful identity. Tinder affords both the understanding of life through as play and the structuring of events using play. In relation to play1, Tinder focuses on the playful elements recognisable in dating life like the popularity competition between single people, simple role-playing and jokes. In relation to play2, Tinder also affords users to structure action through more ludus rule-based play. Through mimicry, agôn, and ilinx, users play the game of Tinder and start using and experiencing the specific play structures. Following playful identity theory, it is these two steps that will lead to an appropriation of play by users; play3. Although my analysis has shown some signs that this is actually happening, my method does not suffice to make big conclusions regarding how users appropriate and the effects this has. My analysis has however shown how play1 and play2 and therefore play3 are afforded by the application, for it is play1 and play2 that make play3 possible.

5.2 Reflection and further research

Because of the scope of this thesis, I have focussed on the relation between the affordances and the actions they triggered. This means there are also interesting aspects and approaches I have not been able to address. One of these is the notion of performativity. Performativity is closely related to subject this thesis touches upon. As Raz Schwartz and Germaine R Halegoua demonstrate in their article "The spatial self: Location-based identity performance

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on social media," it is a very useful concept for analysing identity formation and digital social media.[72] The notion of performativity does however direct attention to the repetition and performance of identity by users, something that would make my analysis too complex for a thesis of this scale.

Using playful identity in the analysis of a specific media object has shown that playful identity is more than just a theoretical concept regarding identity formation in the digital world. As a theoretical concept it can be used to understand how the play affordances of digital media relate to the phases of mediated identity construction. This analysis has been a first attempt to do so. However, the methods used in this analysis were unable to address the actual process of appropriation by the user. Therefore, further research must be done on play3. Methods like ethnographic research, which focus on the actual effect media have on human behaviour, will be more successful in addressing the relation between Tinder and play3.

Nonetheless, this thesis forms a good framework for approaching media objects using playful identity. By understanding the ways a media object affords users to understand life as play and structure life through play, this also provides a framework for understanding the process of appropriation of these structures. For it is in relation to these affordances that users start constructing their own identity using play, where users step outside the game but keep playing.

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[72] Raz Schwartz and Germaine R. Halegoua, "The Spatial Self: Location-Based Identity Performance on Social Media," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 10 (2015): 1643-60.

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