

Master Thesis / Kandidatspeciale

# Play in the Workplace

An empirical study on the nature and effects of organizational play

## Leg på arbejdspladsen

Et empirisk studie af legens natur og effekter i en organisatorisk kontekst



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May 15th, 2020

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Number of characters: 253,428

Number of standard pages: 111.4



## Abstract

This thesis explores the effects and potential of introducing play in a workplace setting and investigates to what extent these effects vary in different organizational contexts. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of organizational play as well as contribute with empirical findings to a research field currently dominated by theory.

Through the perspective of interpretivism, the thesis follows a multi-method qualitative research design, comparing the findings from two individual case studies. The empirical foundation of the analysis comprises secondary data in the form of company documents together with primary data collected through participant observation as well as eleven semi-structured interviews. Interviews are conducted with employees and management from Pentia and Nestlé Nordic, who both exhibit play in the workplace. As the nature of the study is explorative, the analysis follows an inductive approach guided by research objectives rather than existing theory. In the comparative part of the analysis, however, Schein's Culture Framework (1984) is applied in order to develop a common frame for the comparison of the two unique organizational contexts.

The findings of the thesis suggest that play is a multifaceted concept that is challenging for employees to define and relate to. As a result, even the most playful organizations do not perceive themselves as playing. Common positive effects of organizational play are found to be positive affect, cognitive restoration, and positive effects on interpersonal relations, whereas common negative effects are people feeling uncomfortable, play being perceived as transgressive, or a waste of time. The two case organizations experience different effects, which are partly attributed to cultural differences, including if the organizations focus on teams or individuals as well as if play is an integrated part of the culture or just appears as fun break activities. Besides culture, differences are also attributed to individual differences, whether the nature of play is spontaneous or orchestrated and the level of psychological safety in the organization.

More exploratory studies of organizational play are needed in the future, however, as the language of organizational play is still very limited, we recommend future researchers to critically consider whether interviews is the most suitable method to sufficiently explore the potential and effects of organizational play.

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 Problem Definition.....	6
1.2 Purpose and Structure .....	6
1.3 Clarification of Concepts .....	8
1.4 Delimitation .....	9
<b>2. Literature Review .....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 The History of Organizational Play.....	10
2.2 Definitions of Play .....	11
2.3 Myths about Play .....	15
2.4 Domains of Effect.....	16
2.4.1 Play and Creativity.....	16
2.4.2 Play and Positive Affect.....	19
2.4.3 Play and Interpersonal Relations.....	19
2.4.4 Play and Learning .....	20
2.5 Potential Negative Effects of Play .....	21
<b>3. Methodology .....</b>	<b>23</b>
3.1 Research Philosophy.....	24
3.1.1 Interpretivism.....	24
3.2 Quality Criteria.....	26
3.2.1 General Criteria.....	26
3.2.2 Reliability and Validity .....	26
3.2.3 Specific Interpretivist Quality Criteria.....	26
3.3 Approach to Theory Development .....	27
3.4 Qualitative Research Design .....	28
3.5 Research Strategy .....	29
3.5.1 Case Study.....	29
3.5.2 The Choice of Two Cases .....	30
3.5.3 Case Selection .....	31
3.5.4 Critiques of the Case Study.....	32
3.6 Time Horizon.....	33
3.7 Data Collection.....	34
3.7.1 Secondary Data .....	34
3.7.2 Interviews.....	35
3.7.3 Observations.....	38
3.8 Analyzing the Data.....	41

<b>4. Analysis .....</b>	<b>42</b>
4.1 <i>Case Study #1: Pentia</i> .....	42
4.1.1 Case Description .....	42
4.1.2 Definitions of Play and Fun .....	43
4.1.3 Perceived Purpose of Play.....	46
4.1.4 How Play Unfolds .....	48
4.1.5 Summary of Definition, Purpose and How Play Unfolds .....	55
4.1.6 Effects of Play .....	55
4.1.7 Summary of Effects .....	61
4.2 <i>Case Study #2: Nestlé</i> .....	62
4.2.1 Case Description .....	62
4.2.2 Definitions of Play and Fun .....	63
4.2.3 Perceived Purpose of Play.....	64
4.2.4 How Play Unfolds .....	65
4.2.5 Summary of Definition, Purpose and How Play Unfolds .....	72
4.2.6 Effects of Play .....	72
4.2.7 Summary of Effects .....	76
4.3 <i>Organizational Culture</i> .....	77
4.3.1 Schein's Culture Framework .....	77
4.3.2 Culture in Pentia.....	77
4.3.3 Culture in Nestlé .....	80
4.4 <i>Comparative Analysis</i> .....	83
4.4.1 Similarities .....	83
4.4.2 Differences .....	85
4.4.3 Reasons for Differences .....	88
4.4.4 Summary of Comparative Analysis .....	92
<b>5. Discussion.....</b>	<b>94</b>
5.1 <i>Discussion on Empirical Findings</i> .....	94
5.1.1 Separating Short-term and Long-term Effects of Organizational Play .....	94
5.1.2 Individual Differences.....	96
5.1.3 Myths of Play and Mental Models .....	98
5.1.4 The Paradox of Intentionality .....	99
5.2 <i>Discussion on Methodological Challenges</i> .....	101
5.2.1 The Selection of Cases .....	101
5.2.2 Interviewees .....	102
5.2.3 Data Collection Method .....	103
5.2.4 Quality Criteria .....	104
5.3 <i>Contributions to the Field of Organizational Play</i> .....	106
<b>6. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>7. References .....</b>	<b>110</b>

## Appendices

Appendix 1 – *Interview guide*

Appendix 2 – *Interview P1: CTO, Pentia*

Appendix 3 – *Interview P2: CEO, Pentia*

Appendix 4 – *Interview P3: HR Manager, Pentia*

Appendix 5 – *Interview P4: COO, Pentia*

Appendix 6 – *Interview P5: Backend Developer, Pentia*

Appendix 7 – *Interview P6: User Experience Architect, Pentia*

Appendix 8 – *Interview P7: Backend Developer, Pentia*

Appendix 9 – *Interview P8: Frontend Developer, Pentia*

Appendix 10 – *Interview N1: Supply Chain Specialist, Nestlé Nordic*

Appendix 11 – *Interview N2: Talent Attraction Specialist, Nestlé Nordic*

Appendix 12 – *Interview N3: Nutrition Expert, Nestlé Nordic*

Appendix 13 – *Observation notes, Pentia*

Appendix 14 – *Observation notes, Nestlé Nordic*

Appendix 15 – *Interview Data Table*

Appendix 16 – *Example of Coding*

Appendix 17 – *Pentia Culture Profile*

Appendix 18 – *Flyer 1: Nestlé Employee Clubs*

Appendix 19 – *Flyer 2: Elastic Band Training*

## 1. Introduction

Today, society is characterized by increasing complexity, rapid technological change, global competition and great uncertainty, which all are challenging demands from an organizational perspective. According to Bove-Nielsen (2003), this leaves managers with three major challenges that need to be considered on a daily basis:

*“The first is the need for faster, better and far greater quantum leaps in innovation. The second is the need for extreme flexibility, adaptability and improvisation. The third is the need to address and deal with the escalating mental, emotional and social work-related problems in the workplace. All three problems can be treated with the same remedy – play. [translated]”* (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 18).

Thus, play in the workplace may be a solution to problems connected to both innovation, environmental complexity and employee well-being.

Other researchers have also highlighted play as an important topic to discuss in connection with work in contemporary society, because organizations are increasingly reliant on the creativity and knowledge of employees (Hunter et al., 2010: 88) and because knowledge, ideas and services constitute up to 80% of the economy in most Western countries (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 92; OECD, 2005). Further, as the landscape of work is changing and as new generations enter the labor market, new requirements for engagement in the workplace emerge (West, 2015: 13) for which play can be a part of the equation.

Play has been subject to increasing academic attention during the last decades because of its ability to be *“a major catalyst for innovation, learning, communication and well-being [translated]”* (Thorsted, 2013: 26). Researchers have suggested a number of positive outcomes of play, such as increased creativity, productivity and group cohesion (West, 2015: 13), enhanced job satisfaction and task involvement as well as decreasing stress and burnout (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 162-63). Nevertheless, despite this increasing interest, Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) still argue that play is *“among the least studied and least understood organizational behaviors.”* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 82).

Until now, most of the academic literature on play in a work context is theoretical (West, 2015: 33), and an adequate understanding of its role in an organizational context has not yet been developed (Statler et al., 2009: 88). Further, there is a gap in empirical studies on organizational play, where previous research has not adequately explored how people engage in organizational play or what specific positive or negative effects it may have (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 163). As the workplace is a unique setting and environment, there is a possibility that organizational play unfolds differently and/or results in different outcomes compared to play in other settings (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 164). These are some of the many reasons why we are inspired to carry out research in this field of study.

## 1.1 Problem Definition

As mentioned above, there is little empirical research on the possible effects of organizational play and what role the organizational context has in connection with play. Therefore, this thesis strives to answer the following research question:

- *How does play at work affect employees' working lives and to what extent does it vary in different organizational contexts?*

Further, four research objectives aim to operationalize the research and guide the steps needed to answer the research question. The following four research objectives are created with inspiration from Saunders et al. (2016: 46-47):

- Define play as a phenomenon
- Identify and explore specific examples of how play unfolds in an organizational setting
- Identify and explore specific examples of effects that play has on work tasks, employees and the organization in general
- Compare examples and effects of play in the workplace from different organizations and thereby investigate whether organizational context has an impact on the effects of play.

## 1.2 Purpose and Structure

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the effects and potential of introducing play into the workplace and whether the potential and effects are moderated by the unique organizational context. This is

done by exploring how play is currently encouraged and facilitated in organizations, how it is perceived by employees and management, and what effects they experience from it. The current research on adult play is limited, and even more so when it comes to organizational play (West, 2015: 15). We, therefore, intend to contribute to the academic field by providing an empirical study on play in two authentic organizational settings in Pentia and Nestlé Nordic (referred to as Nestlé in this thesis).

Play is a complex concept with various existing definitions (Petelczyc et al. 2018: 164), which is why our first research objective is to define play as a phenomenon. This objective is addressed in two ways. Firstly, it is critically discussed in the literature review, where a nuanced review of the existing academic literature is presented. Secondly, employees from the two case organizations are asked to define what play is and what it means to them, which is analyzed in the initial part of each case study.

As play is a multifaceted concept, and as empirical studies of play in the work context are scarce (West, 2015: 33; Petelczyc et al., 2018: 163-64), we further find it important to identify and explore specific examples of how play unfolds in the two case organizations, which is the second research objective. In order to explore the effects of a phenomenon, the initial step is to understand the phenomenon itself. This is done through an empirical data collection of semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Here, employees are asked about their experiences with play in the organization, what incentives they have to engage in organizational play and how it is facilitated by the organization. All of these experiences are analyzed in the two separate case studies.

Having developed an understanding of how play unfolds in the organizations, the third research objective follows to identify and explore specific examples of effects that play has on work tasks, employees and the organization in general. Again, this objective is answered through the empirical data with employees sharing their stories and experiences as well as our own experiences and interpretations from observation studies. Like the previous analysis, the effects are analyzed separately for the two case studies.

In order to answer to what extent the effects of play vary in different organizational contexts, the fourth and last research objective compares the examples and effects from the preceding analyses. As the two organizational settings from the two individual case studies are unique, a common frame for

comparison is needed. Here, the organizational culture framework by Schein (1984) is introduced and applied in order to understand each context more in-depth. A comparison follows of how play is unfolding and affecting employees' working lives and whether or not the organizational context can be concluded to moderate the effects.

### 1.3 Clarification of Concepts

The following section clarifies some of the key concepts applied throughout the thesis. First, many definitions of play exist in the academic literature, and researchers have not yet settled on a common definition of play or its role in the context of the workplace (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 163-64). It is therefore important to explicitly state how play is defined in this thesis. We apply the definition by Mainemelis and Ronson (2006), who define play as: *"a behavioral orientation consisting of five interdependent and circularly interrelated elements: a threshold experience; boundaries in time and space; uncertainty-freedom-constraint; a loose and flexible association between means and ends; and positive affect."* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 84). Furthermore, this thesis studies play as both a diversion from work tasks as well as internal to work tasks (ibid.: 92). This definition is explained in further detail in chapter two, where it is critically discussed and justified against other existing definitions.

Second, it is important to clarify what is meant by employees' working lives, since this, to the best of our knowledge, is not an existing academic concept, but one that was created for the purpose of this thesis. This concept is intended to cover everything connected to the employees' daily lives in the organization, delimited from their private lives. Thus, this thesis only explores the effects of organizational play that are connected to the organization and to the individual in the organizational context. As the nature of our study is exploratory, the concept is broadly defined, and it should therefore be possible to capture all potential effects of play. Hence, the concept covers effects on work tasks, interpersonal relations, the organizational context and individual effects, such as emotion and cognition, all of which we argue to be a part of one's working life. As a result, the employees are studied both individually and as a group.

## 1.4 Delimitation

We delimit our research to cover play as it is experienced by knowledge workers in the Nordics. Additionally, we focus on play in an organizational context, thereby delimiting our research from potential effects on the employees' private lives. To be able to investigate the role of the organizational context on the effects of play, two very different organizations, who both exhibit play in the workplace, are compared. The two case companies, Pentia and Nestlé, will be properly introduced in sections 4.1 and 4.2. As every organizational context is unique, this study only covers the effects of play in the two respective case companies, which cannot be statistically generalized to all knowledge-based organizations.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The History of Organizational Play

One of the first signs of the presence of play in organizational theory is recorded by March (1976), who argues that organizations need to implement a technology of foolishness in order to overcome the heavy focus on rationality, consistency and goal-orientation. This focus is problematic, because it prevents the exploration of new purposes (March, 1976: 127). According to March, foolishness can be implemented in organizations by encouraging organizational play (ibid.: 130). He describes playfulness as *“the deliberate, temporary relaxation of rules in order to explore the possibilities of alternative rules.”* (ibid.: 127). Therefore, play allows people to act irrationally and experimentally without a pre-defined goal or purpose, but only for a limited period of time (ibid.). In that way it stimulates change and acknowledges reason at the same time because *“at some point either the playful behavior will be stopped or it will be integrated into the structure of intelligence in some way that makes sense.”* (ibid.).

The reason why play has not entered the organizational world before is to be found in the industrial age, which was affected by the thoughts of Frederick Taylor’s Scientific Management, where focus was to improve labor productivity by task efficiency (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 49-50). At that time, play and work were not integrated and the relationship between them could be described as follows:

*“When we are at work we ought to be at work. When we are at play we ought to be at play. There is no use trying to mix the two. The sole object ought to be to get the work done and to get paid for it. When the work is done, then play can come, but not before”* (Ford, 2007: 65–66 cited in Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2012: 83).

This stresses how play and work were not to be integrated in the industrial age and how play was suppressed by the industrialist way of acting and thinking (Mainemelis & Ronson 2006: 83). Even though the above-mentioned literature argues that play was not a part of working life, there are recordings from the 1920s stating that organizations competed against each other to the benefit of sales and culture (Thorsted, 2013: 162). In addition, Thorsted (2013) argues that play was used in the 1950’s as a medium for learning and training (ibid.). This is in line with the explanation that play appears when profit and learning is in place (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 36). In this line of argumentation, the learning organization arises when the organization has learned how to make a profit (ibid.). When

the learning has manifested into the organization, the leaders will discover that it is as important as profit. As a result, the leaders learn to adopt play into the organization (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 36.).

Regardless of the different perspectives on when and why play entered the organizational world, there is wide agreement that play became a part of the popular business literature and practice in the late 1970's and early 1980's (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2012: 83; Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 36). The entrance of play in the organizational world came because the mindset changed from the industrialist thoughts to a more organic organizational model, where human traits now are the most valuable asset for an organization (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 51).

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) was one of the first researchers to study play and its effects on adults in an empirical setting (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 172). He introduced the term autotelic, which describes the intrinsic motivation that humans have when they play (Statler et al, 2011: 239). He created the term flow to describe *“the experiential state which is present in various forms of play (...), which denotes the wholistic sensation present when we act with total involvement”* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975: 43). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) investigated play in the context of rock climbing, dancing etc., but he did not investigate it specifically in an organizational setting.

In the 1980's play started to appear as what Thorsted (2013: 163) describes as *“in between playing [translated]”*, where play is used as energizers or icebreakers, but it was not until the 1990's that play started to manifest itself into the organizations for real (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 36). In the 1990's play started to be implemented with the purpose to change the organization, boost innovation, increase learning and improve the well-being and unity of the organization (ibid.). In the same period, organizations started to support employees playing with new ideas, and to provide autonomy for employees to choose to turn work tasks into play. In addition, organizations started to hire employees, whose hobbies and passions were reflected in the work (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 83). Since then, and up until today, the academic field of play in an organizational context has received increased attention and gained more popularity (West, 2015: 59).

## 2.2 Definitions of Play

Play is a word and experience that everyone from kids to adults is familiar with. However, as a concept, it is complex (Dodgson, 2011: 177), especially in the context of the workplace. As

demonstrated, play has received more attention in the literature during the last decades. Nevertheless, theorists have not yet reached consensus in terms of definitions or the role of play in organizational settings, mainly because the research in this field is spread across many different academic disciplines (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 163-64). Furthermore, play has been studied in three different ways; as a trait, as an organizational feature, and as an activity (ibid.: 164-65). Play as a trait argues how individuals are different in terms of the trait playfulness, which is defined as: *“a stable tendency to approach activities in a nonserious manner. Playful individuals tend to have more innovative attitudes and higher intrinsic motivation and are less orderly compared to those who are less playful.”* (ibid.: 170). Play as an organizational feature is similar. It addresses how organizations differ in playfulness, which is about: *“how much they encourage and support playful activities.”* (ibid.). Lastly, play as an activity is defined as: *“a type of activity or behavior that any individual can engage in”* (ibid.). This fragmentation of definitions is problematic, since the definition and conceptualization will likely impact empirical findings (ibid.: 165). Therefore, the following sections discuss different definitions from the academic literature as well as choose the definition applied in this thesis.

Almost every academic text addressing adult play has a reference to Huizinga (1949), who appears to be the founding father of play as a more serious concept that is central to understand and shape both culture and civilization (Hunter et al., 2010: 88). Huizinga (1949) defines play as:

*“a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious”, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.”* (Huizinga, 1949: 13).

Thus, in Huizinga’s terminology, play is characterized by voluntariness, absorption, non-seriousness, non-materialism, boundaries in space and time, fixed rules, community feeling and stepping temporarily out of “real life”.

Many of the more contemporary definitions of play borrow elements from Huizinga’s definition, however, criticism has followed as well. One criticism is that Huizinga’s (1949) argument about play

not being able to generate profit has to be seen in a historical context and is not valid anymore (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 120). Huizinga's book was written during the industrial age, when physical products rather than knowledge created value (ibid.: 92). Contemporary literature has also created the term serious play, which according to Statler et al. (2009: 96) are: *"those activities which differ qualitatively from work, yet purposefully benefit the organization"*. These benefits can be many different things, including the ability of play to unleash: *"a creative potential that will materialize in innovative products (...) and ultimately superior business performance."* (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2012: 83). Thus, according to the play literature from the last decades, organizations are, indeed, able to profit from play.

Another important work in the literature is *"Man, Play and Games"* by Caillois (1958). Contrary to Huizinga, who primarily addresses play, Caillois primarily addresses the game (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 120). Caillois agrees with Huizinga on many of the elements of play (ibid.: 119), but he expands the theory to: *"view games in particular as Agôn (competitive), Alea (chance), Mimicry (imitation), and Itonx (disorder)."* (Hunter et al., 2010: 88). In connection to this, Caillois conceives play as a spectrum ranging from the luden, which are rule-bound formal games, to paidia, which is spontaneous play (ibid.). Caillois' way of theorizing has also been argued to expand: *"the way play is expressed within different contexts and for different purposes."* (ibid.). In line with this, Bove-Nielsen (2003: 119-128) argues that play and games can be utilized strategically by organizations but with different purposes. Here, play can be a catalysator for creativity and innovation, whereas games can be implemented to increase efficiency (ibid.).

Just as play and games are sometimes confused with each other, the same thing applies to play and fun. One definition of workplace fun is that it is: *"a multidimensional construct that involves any social, interpersonal, or task activities at work of a playful or humorous nature which provide an individual with amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure"* (Fluegge, 2008: 15 cited in Petelczyc et al., 2018: 170). Evidently, this definition overlaps with the definition of play. However, some important differences separate play from fun: *"Playful activities are carried out with the goal of having fun. However, fun activities do not have to meet the other criteria of play and therefore encompass more than play"* (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 170).

As mentioned above, play encompasses more than just fun and enjoyment. Looking at some of the more current definitions of play, Petelczyc et al. (2018) have compared different definitions on the following seven features: *“time and space, whether play is freely chosen, positive affect as an outcome, and whether play is social, incorporates rules, is absorbing, and involves make-believe.”* (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 165). Evidently, all of these features, except positive affect, have roots back to Huizinga (1949). Petelczyc et al. (2018) advocate for the definition by Van Fleet and Feeney (2015) because of its focus on adult play, because it is one of the most recent definitions, and because it focuses on only three core features (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 168). Van Vleet and Feeney (2015) define play as: *“an activity or behavior that (a) is carried out with the goal of amusement and fun, (b) involves an enthusiastic and in-the-moment attitude or approach, and (c) is highly interactive among play partners or with the activity itself.”* (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015: 640). With these three features, they try to distinguish play from leisure, as: *“Play is one type of leisure activity, but not all leisure activities are play”* (ibid.). With their definition, they also acknowledge that play can take different forms, e.g. it can be cooperative vs. competitive and planned vs. spontaneous, as long as it involves the three core components (ibid.). Thus, their definition only qualifies something as play, if it includes all three components at the same time.

Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) propose a less rigid definition, consisting of 5 elements: *“We define play as a behavioral orientation consisting of five interdependent and circularly interrelated elements: a threshold experience; boundaries in time and space; uncertainty-freedom-constraint; a loose and flexible association between means and ends; and positive affect.”* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 84). Though consisting of five interdependent elements, their definition is less strict, since all of the five elements do not have to be present at the same time in order for an activity to be regarded as play (ibid.: 91). However, the more each element is present, the more play-like the activity will be (ibid.). Furthermore, when looking at play in an organizational context, Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) differentiate between two forms: *“First, play can be a form of diversion from work tasks (...) Second, play may also be internal to work tasks, that is, a way for engaging with one’s work.”* (ibid.: 92). Consequently, these two forms of play can have different effects on employees and the organization.

In this thesis, we investigate play as an activity and as an organizational feature, thereby not focusing on individual personality traits. We want to investigate both the types of play activities taking place

in organizational settings as well as how the organizations facilitate them. This allows us to understand the effects of play on employees as a group and whether these effects are influenced by each unique work context. Petelczyc et al. (2018: 170) categorize the definition by Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) under the trait perspective, however, we disagree with this categorization, as Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) write: *“Play is not a set of activities but a way of organizing behavior in relation to any activity.”* and they further draw on other studies that describe play as: *“a set of qualities that is superimposed upon an activity regardless of its content”* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 86). Thus, we see no focus on individuals and, therefore, this definition may as well belong under the organizational feature approach. Moreover, the way that the five elements are explained is similar to other activity approach definitions, such as Huizinga’s (1949). Furthermore, this definition has its origin in a study solely focusing on play in a work context (ibid.), whereas the definition by Van Vleet and Feeney (2015) stems from an article focusing on adult play in the context of close relationships. Lastly, we find the definition by Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) to be more insightful, as it encompasses more elements of play, thereby giving us the opportunity to study play in richer detail. We therefore argue that the definition by Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) is applicable to this particular study.

## 2.3 Myths about Play

Even though there has been a change from the industrial age, it still affects the present ideas about play, which makes it difficult to capture the value and advantages that play can provide to organizations (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 85). Play in an organizational setting is often accompanied with several misunderstandings and myths (ibid.). According to Bove-Nielsen (2003), the four most common myths about play are: *“1. Play is related to age - that is what children do. 2. Play and work are each other's opposites. 3. Play is a superfluous human function, at least in adults. 4. Play is unproductive (as opposed to work). [translated]”* (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 85).

The myth that play is related to age is widely spread in organizations. Play is still seen as something we do for fun and not at work, because when adults work, it is serious (Thorsted, 2013: 130). This myth is starting to soften up, but there is still a long way to go (ibid.: 131). The idea of adults not playing is inconsistent with the idea that humans can evolve, learn and play throughout their entire lives (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 86). According to Bove-Nielsen (2003), this myth needs to end because the best performers, business people and even organizations, are the ones that keep playing (ibid.).

The second myth that play and work are each other's opposites (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 85) also stems from the industrial age, where people often did physical work. According to Statler et al (2009) "*we can say that at first glance work and play appear to have a relationship of mutual exclusivity*" (Statler et al., 2009: 89). This means that work is categorically not play and vice versa (ibid.). But in accordance with globalization and the development, including that employees often bring their work home and that they are always "online", this separation between play and work cannot be adopted anymore (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 88). In order to take full advantage of human potential, these should be integrated (ibid.). The problem with integrating the concepts is that the opposition to integrate play and work still "*carries a strong set of embedded value assumptions (such as, work = good, play = bad)*" (Statler et al., 2009: 89). This shows that the cultural and economic heritage from industrialism still affects the overall assumptions of the relationship between play and work (ibid.).

The third myth that play is a superfluous human function and the fourth myth that play is unproductive (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 85) are also a heritage from industrialism. Today, play is seen in many activities in the organization, where it provides enjoyment and adds a significant value to the organization (Statler et al, 2009: 88). According to Bove-Nielsen (2003), people who do not play at work become dull and lack of play can even lead to mental illness (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 90). Play has shown to have a positive effect on learning, personal fulfillment and performance (Statler et al, 2009: 96). This indicates that the myths about play being superfluous and unproductive for adults is not true in the post-industrialist society. In order to cope with these myths, researchers have introduced the term serious play which is "*a way to describe instances in which play and work are deliberately and meaningfully juxtaposed*" (Statler et al., 2011: 239).

## **2.4 Domains of Effect**

As mentioned, organizational play can add significant value to companies (Statler et al., 2009: 88) and positive effects have been found in several different domains. The following sections provide an overview of four positive domains of effect, including effects on creativity, positive affect, interpersonal relations and learning.

### **2.4.1 Play and Creativity**

Creativity is defined as: "*the generation of ideas that are novel and potentially useful*" (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 92), where the degree of novelty depends on how different the ideas are compared

to prior work and on the prior experiences of the audience (Schilling, 2017: 20). Further, according to Amabile (1998: 78), creativity is facilitated by three components, which are expertise, creative-thinking skills and intrinsic motivation.

Looking at the definitions, it is clear that play and creativity are two separate concepts, so why are they interesting to study together? Firstly, one of the components of creativity is intrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1998: 78), which can be facilitated through play (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 99). Secondly, play has been found to facilitate five cognitive processes that are relevant to creativity: *“problem framing, divergent thinking, mental transformations, practice with alternative solutions, and evaluative ability”* (ibid.: 93). In general, the research on play in the field of psychology argues that the capacity to even think imaginatively is developed through play activities, arguing that play helps people to become cognitively mature (Statler et al., 2009: 90). Thirdly, play and creativity share certain similarities, e.g. they both involve creating novelty and disregarding the familiar (Russ & Christian, 2011: 239). Furthermore, some studies indicate that creativity can be trained through play: *“the ability to respond creatively to novel problems does not seem to exist in a vacuum; rather, it requires some practice which play provides.”* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 102). That is also why Bove-Nielsen (2003: 186-87) argues that allocating time to play is one of the three key elements in creating radical innovation in companies.

As mentioned earlier, Mainemelis and Ronson (2006: 92) claim that there are two types of play going on in the workplace; either it is a form of diversion from one’s work tasks or it is a way of engaging with one’s work tasks. Pertaining to this, they have found that both types can be sources of creativity:

*“We argue that when play is a form of engagement with an individual’s organizational tasks it facilitates the cognitive, affective, and emotional dimensions of the creative process, while when play is a form of diversion from an individual’s organizational tasks it fosters the peripheral social-relational dynamics that encourage creativity in the first place.”* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 81).

Thus, play as engagement affects creativity directly, whereas play as diversion affects creativity indirectly.

The way that play facilitates creativity indirectly is connected to the concept of psychological safety, which is defined as: *“the belief that one is free from evaluation, and that one will be accepted unconditionally, regardless of how he behaves in a given situation”* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 105). This will make individuals feel less anxious about experimenting, asking questions and sharing their ideas with others, which are all elements of the creative process (ibid.). Dodgson (2011: 184) provides a similar argument, stating that when organizations make a commitment to play in the workplace, it helps to create an environment where mistakes and failures are accepted, which in turn facilitates innovation. This is a central benefit from play, since the fear of being judged is one of the most common mental barriers inhibiting creative thinking in organizations (Kelley & Kelley, 2012: 115). Besides psychological safety, diversionary play also facilitates creativity because it provides the mental breaks that are important for incubation, especially in knowledge-intensive jobs (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 103). However, this positive effect depends on what type of work tasks the employee has. If the job does not provide any opportunities to be creative, then play can have the opposite effect (ibid.: 104). Thus, it is important to take the type of job and work context into account.

Having established that play can be a facilitator of creativity, the question of how to utilize it naturally follows. Here, theorists disagree as to whether it is possible to implement play in the workplace with the strategic aim of enhancing creativity. Most theorists argue against this, pointing to the autotelic nature of play, meaning that play is a goal and intrinsic reward in itself (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2012: 82). Similarly, Statler et al. (2009: 102) suggest that: *“whenever play is conscripted in the name of ‘creativity’ to produce strategic innovation, it ceases to be playful at all”* (Statler et al., 2009: 102). Thus, it will no longer satisfy the definition of play if it is instrumentalized. Conversely, West et al. (2016: 72) argue that organizations can, in fact, gain benefits such as the promotion of creativity, collaborative relationships and intrinsic motivation by taking an instrumental approach to play. They argue that this ambiguity is what has led to the concept of serious play, which they define as: *“a situation in which participants accept the ambiguity of intentionality and engage in play to achieve serious results.”* (West et al. (2016: 73). Whether or not it is possible to design and facilitate serious play in an organization in order to achieve specific business objectives, the existing literature is not sufficiently clear on how this should be done in practice (Statler et al., 2011: 241).

### 2.4.2 Play and Positive Affect

As mentioned previously, play is connected to emotions, and many definitions, including the one applied in this thesis, include positive affect as an outcome of play (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 165-67; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 86). According to Mainemelis and Ronson (2006): *"Play involves affect that varies in its degree of intensity (from relaxation to frantic joy) and complexity (from simple feelings such as fun to complex feelings such as emotional relief)." (ibid.: 90).* Emotional relief is a theme repeatedly mentioned in the literature of play. According to Lee et al. (2019: 6), play in the organizational context can work as a buffer to alleviate emotional exhaustion, which in turn can result in favorable attitudes towards the organization, increased work enthusiasm, better performance, better health, improved customer satisfaction and promote innovative behavior. One explanation for this is: *"that the opposite of burnout is joyful feeling and stimulation derived from happiness at work. In particular, as AET [Affective Events Theory] suggests, play in work is likely an effective way to alleviate individual feeling of emotional exhaustion."* (Lee et al, 2019: 6). Another argument for play causing positive affect is its inherent element of uncertainty: *"the uncertainty or ambiguity of play is associated with positive affect, with the "fun" or "enjoyment" that people experience while playing."* (Statler et al., 2011: 238). Further, Statler et al. (2011: 240-41) describe how serious play can also transform one's emotional level of experience, e.g., helping one to cope with ambiguity and paradox as well as overcoming psychological defense mechanisms. In general, play can create a safe space for the expression of emotions (Statler et al., 2011: 240; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 96). The reason is that *"it allows the players to choose to some degree the limits within which they will act or imagine."* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 96). This is also how the positive affect element of play ties to psychological safety and the opportunity for enhanced creativity in connection with play: *"Research has shown that positive affect induced in a safe context stimulates divergent thinking and mental transformations (...) Play fosters creativity because it allows both the positive and safe experience and expression of emotion."* (ibid.: 97).

### 2.4.3 Play and Interpersonal Relations

Prior literature has suggested that play influences interpersonal relationships and the social climate in organizations in various ways. For instance, many studies suggest that play helps to tear down hierarchical barriers and helps to increase trust among coworkers (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 175; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 105; Lee et al., 2019: 3). One reason for this is that employees get the opportunity to relate to each other personally in a context free from pressures normally connected to

work, which can alter what may otherwise be a mechanistic relationship (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 105). Moreover, play facilitates the creation of informal social bonds and makes individuals feel a sense of belonging (ibid.) and solidarity (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 175). Huizinga acknowledged this in his book *Homo Ludens* (1949), in which he argued that the community feeling not only happens during play, but also lasts after the play or game is over:

*“A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. Of course, not every game of marbles or every bridge-party leads to the founding of a club. But the feeling of being “apart together” in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.”* (Huizinga, 1949: 12).

This aligns with studies suggesting that play in the workplace contributes to a friendlier organizational atmosphere in general (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 175). It is, however, important to emphasize that all of these impacts on social processes are most likely to happen, if the nature of diversionary play is social (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 108). Thus, social benefits may not be as likely to result from solitary play.

As mentioned above, play can reduce hierarchical boundaries. In addition, it can also help to break down functional barriers and connect people from different departments, who would not interact otherwise (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 108). This means that diversionary play has the ability to create weak social network ties between members in the organization as well as outside the organization (ibid.: 107). As a result, play can help colleagues from different departments to not only maintain social bonds between one another but also help facilitate creativity and innovation (ibid.: 108). According to social network theory, the more weak network ties you have, the more access you will get to remote information, diverse perspectives and creative inputs in general (ibid.: 108; Capaldo, 2007).

#### **2.4.4 Play and Learning**

As described earlier, some organizations have introduced play as a means to learning and training (Thorsted, 2013: 162), which makes sense, since the literature argues for a relation between play and learning, e.g., suggesting that play develops one’s social and cognitive skills (Lee et al, 2019: 4). One

of the arguments for why play results in learning is that the pleasure and involvement or flow of the play experience encourages people to spend time and effort on what has to be learned (Starbuck & Webster, 1991: 80). Moreover, the relationship between play and learning seems to be tied to the concept of psychological safety and the threshold-experience element of play that separates it from “ordinary” life. Thorsted (2013) describes it as follows:

*“Through play we can observe the consequence of an action without immediately triggering a sanction or reaction from practice. That is, the play creates a space for organizational and/or educational experiments, while also providing a training ground for being human in a present and authentic relationship with others [translated]” (Thorsted, 2013: 157).*

Therefore, play does not only allow people to learn how to perform new tasks but also to develop personally as human beings. An example of this is the case study by Kolb and Kolb (2010: 45), in which players reported learning to control negative emotion and competitiveness, getting the courage to fail and developing empathy and personal authenticity as an outcome of the space that the game created. Kolb and Kolb (2010) provide two arguments for these results:

*“First, the absence of extrinsic evaluation in the space freed individuals to set their own learning agenda in their own terms. Second, the space provided a safe environment where players were given an unlimited opportunity to learn and discover through recursive practice.” (Kolb & Kolb, 2010: 47).*

They conclude that deep learning can be promoted in formal organizational contexts if the workspace allows employees to self-organize and at the same time creates boundaries for play, allowing for employees’ intrinsic interests to come alive (Kolb & Kolb, 2010: 47).

## **2.5 Potential Negative Effects of Play**

The above-mentioned domains of effect are all positive. According to Petelczyc et al. (2018) *“it is imperative that research on play take a balanced perspective in examining both the positive and negative outcomes arising from play at work in order to advance the field and contribute to the academic debate.”* (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 163). The following paragraphs, therefore, disclose some of the literature that has focused on the negative effects of play.

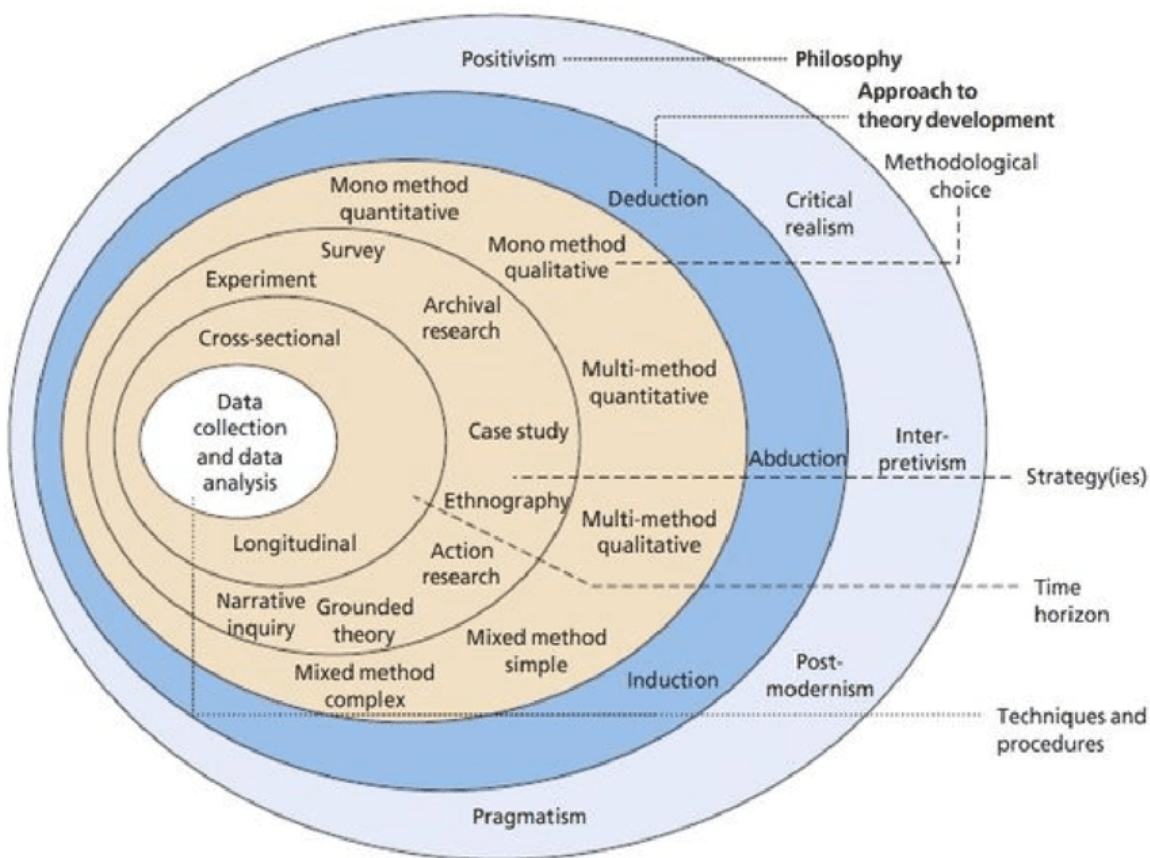
According to Thorsted (2013), play can cause humans to feel personally intimidated or excluded from the fellowship (Thorsted, 2013: 166). The reason for this is that when people play, they show who they are, by putting themselves at risk, which can lead to a possible exploitation (ibid.).

One theorist, who has focused on the negative aspects of play and its relationship with power, is Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen. He believes that “*Power is the god of play but cannot show itself.*” (Andersen, 2009: 156). He states that when play comes as competition or learning activities, the management’s purpose will overrule the playing and therefore “*involve play on the unambiguous terms of power*” (ibid.: 147). He argues that from the power perspective, play needs to be controlled, which means that “*play has to empower but is not supposed to play with power*” (ibid.). This indicates that play is only brought into the organizations as a controlled entity (ibid.). In addition, he argues that if play is brought in as a learning objective, it cannot include too much fun because then the playing will retract attention from the learning objectives and become dysfunctional (ibid.). His overall idea is that there is a coupling between play and power. Andersen (2009) does, however, argue that there has been a radical change in the coupling between power and play, where people start to “*recognize play’s independent value and functionality*” (ibid.), but even after the change he states that playing is still observed by power.

Another negative effect from play is that not everybody appreciates playfulness in workplaces (Lee et al, 2019: 7). Employees with negative feelings about play at work often see playing as unnecessary and, in addition, they think they will make fools of themselves if they participate (ibid.). If people have a negative attitude toward playing at work, they may “*alienate themselves from their work and are likely to yield a sense of dissonance which may lead to distraction at work and disengagement with their jobs*” (Lee et al, 2019: 7). In addition to how employees perceive themselves, play can also have a negative effect from how participants are perceived by their colleagues (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 178). This includes people, who believe that the workplace is a domain for serious work tasks only. As a result, they see people playing during the workday as distracting, underperforming and slacking (ibid.). In continuation of this, people may see playing as a way of exploiting the organization by participating in fun activities that do not benefit the organization, while still getting paid (ibid.).

### 3. Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodological choices made in order to answer the research question of the thesis. These include the underlying philosophy of science, approach to theory development, choice of methods, research strategy, time horizon and techniques and procedures for data collection and analysis. The research ‘onion’ model (Model 1) by Saunders et al. (2016: 124) is applied throughout this thesis in order to address the important methodological decisions in a systematic manner. The following sections address each layer of the ‘onion’ from the outer layers toward the center of the model.



**Model 1: The Research ‘Onion’**

Source: Saunders et al., 2016: 124

### 3.1 Research Philosophy

As we have chosen to apply the research ‘onion’ model when planning and designing this thesis, the first important thing to consider is our research philosophy, since this will impact not only our methodological choices but also the way we interpret our findings (Saunders et al, 2012: 128).

As our research question is: *How does play at work affect employees’ working lives and to what extent does it vary in different organizational contexts?* we have chosen to follow the interpretive paradigm (Saunders et al, 2012: 142). We have chosen this, because we are interested in understanding and explaining what is going on in organizations rather than changing it (ibid.: 143). Moreover, we have chosen interpretivism because we believe that all organizational contexts are complex and unique and because we want to understand the phenomenon of organizational play from the point of view of employees (ibid.: 137). To provide a more in-depth description of interpretivism, the next sections cover its ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

#### 3.1.1 Interpretivism

##### 3.1.1.1 Ontology

Ontology addresses the nature of reality and is about how we as researchers have assumptions about how the world works (Saunders et al, 2012: 130). On a continuum from objectivism to subjectivism, the interpretivist ontology finds itself at the subjectivist end because of its focus on complexity and multiple interpretations and meaning-making (Saunders et al., 2016: 141). Consequently, there is not one true nature of reality but rather multiple realities:

*“As different people of different cultural backgrounds, under different circumstances and at different times make different meanings, and so create and experience different social realities, interpretivists are critical of the positivist attempts to discover definite, universal ‘laws’ that apply to everybody.”* (Saunders et al., 2016: 140).

Accordingly, we need to study play as a phenomenon from the perspectives of different organizations and different groups of people. Furthermore, the nature of reality in this study is not seen as external from us as researchers but, rather, as: *“socially constructed through culture and language”* (Saunders et al., 2016: 136).

### 3.1.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and how it is produced (Egholm, 2014: 28). Thus, depending on the underlying research philosophy, knowledge can be many things, including objective facts or subjective feelings and attitudes. As interpretivist researchers, we are looking at feelings and attitudes (Saunders et al, 2012: 132). The reason for this is that interpretivists perceive business situations and human behavior as both complex and unique, and as critics argue against positivism: “(...)rich insight into this complex world are lost if such complexity is reduced entirely to a series of law-like generalizations” (ibid.: 137). Thus, we need to focus on the details of the situation as well as try to understand the subjective meanings behind individuals’ actions (ibid.2: 140). The epistemology of our research philosophy also indicates what kind of knowledge is considered to be credible and valid (Egholm, 2014: 28). Therefore, different philosophical perspectives have different quality criteria (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010: 37), which is elaborated in section 3.2.

### 3.1.1.3 Axiology

Axiology addresses the role that values and ethics play in the research process (Saunders et al., 2016: 128). As previously argued, language has a constructing role, according to the interpretivist paradigm, and as a consequence knowledge will always be value bound (Egholm, 2014: 148). This means that we cannot be separated from what we are studying (Saunders et al., 2012: 140) and that we have to acknowledge how our backgrounds, including personal, cultural, and historical experiences will impact our interpretations (Creswell, 2014: 37). Therefore, there may not be one definitive truth about how play affects the working lives in Nestlé and Pentia, but many possible truths. Furthermore, as the analyses and findings are shaped by our subjective interpretations, this study may bring different insights if it is conducted by other researchers.

### 3.1.1.4 Typical methods

Most often, interpretivists adopt an inductive approach, doing in-depth investigations of small samples, using qualitative methods of analysis (Saunders et al., 2016: 136). Likewise, Creswell (2014) states that: “*The researcher’s intent is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. Rather than starting with a theory (as in positivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning.*” (Creswell, 2014: 37.). This is also the case in this thesis, in which we adopt an inductive approach, use a multi-method qualitative design and choose a comparable case study strategy in the form of semi-structured interviews and observation studies. These are all presented and justified throughout this chapter.

## 3.2 Quality Criteria

As mentioned in the previous section, all philosophical perspectives have different quality criteria. The following sections present the quality criteria on which this thesis will be evaluated.

### 3.2.1 General Criteria

There are some criteria that can be applied no matter research philosophy: coherence and consistency (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010: 38). Coherence means that there should be a clear coherence between the different parts of the thesis (ibid.). This criterion will be used as a reminder to hold all choices up against the research question and make sure that the different parts have a clear common thread. Consistency means that the use of concepts, methods and theory is consistent throughout the entire thesis (ibid.). This criterion will be applied and fulfilled by using another criterion called transparency (ibid.: 39). This is done by explaining, outlining and arguing for how the different choices are made and in addition how the different concepts, methods and theories are applied and understood.

### 3.2.2 Reliability and Validity

In quantitative studies, the quality criteria normally used are reliability and validity (Saunders et al., 2016: 205). Due to the fact that interpretivism focuses on the context of the research, the intention is not for others to be able to fully replicate the study (ibid.). This means that these criteria are not applied to measure the quality of this study. Instead, parallels can be adopted with, for instance, dependability, which ensures that all changes in the research are recorded to disclose the emergence of the research results (ibid.: 206). This criterion is followed, and modifications in the research focus are noted in the study. Another criterion that can be applied is credibility, which is a parallel to internal validity, where the focus is to ensure that the *“representations of the research participants’ socially constructed realities actually match what the participants intended”* (ibid.). This criterion is applied by making sure to internally discuss the meanings and include as many aspects of the problem as possible (ibid.).

### 3.2.3 Specific Interpretivist Quality Criteria

A criterion that can be adapted specifically for interpretivist studies is relevance (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010: 49). This means that if the research provides interesting knowledge, then the quality is

high (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010: 49). This criterion is applied in the thesis because the purpose and intention of the research is to contribute with new knowledge about how play affects employees' working lives and how it varies in different organizational contexts, which has not been adequately addressed in the existing research. Another specific criterion of interpretivism is reflectiveness, which includes the researchers' considerations of how they have affected the research process (ibid.: 50). This quality criterion is applied in the thesis by the discussion of how we as researchers co-create the information collected and in addition the subjectivity of our choices of focus points in the analysis.

All of the above-mentioned quality criteria are applied throughout the thesis with the aim of ensuring good quality research. An evaluative discussion follows in section 5.2.4.

### 3.3 Approach to Theory Development

Moving to the second layer of the research 'onion', the approach to theory development is discussed. According to Saunders et al. (2016: 144), it is crucial to understand the way that theory is developed in the study. In our thesis, the reasoning is primarily based on a curiosity regarding how play affects the working lives of employees in different organizations. Before investigating the phenomenon, we have read a significant amount of the existing literature in the field. This could indicate that the thesis uses deductive reasoning, but due to the fact that the purpose of the thesis is not to test the already existing theories, this is not the case. Instead, our approach is inductive, meaning that "*theory follows data rather than vice versa*" (ibid.: 147), and the already existing literature is thereby used to get an overview of the subject and to identify the gaps existing in the literature (Silverman, 2005: 79).

According to Saunders et al. (2016: 147), the inductive approach is beneficial in studies that are particularly concerned with the contextual aspects of a phenomenon. Accordingly, we find it suitable for this thesis, as our research question is concerned with the contextual impact of the organization on the effects of play. Moreover, the inductive approach has been found to be appropriate with new topics or in fields where the existing literature is scarce (ibid.: 149). This is a valid argument for the inductive approach within this thesis, since the research field of organizational play is very limited (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 163-64; West, 2015: 15; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 82). One of the strengths of the inductive approach is that it includes the variable of humans' interpretations of their social world (Saunders et al., 2016: 147). It has, however, been criticized because no researcher comes into a field without any prior knowledge or ideas (Silverman, 2005: 79). This critique is, as earlier

mentioned, taken into account and we acknowledge that in order for us to study the chosen field, prior knowledge and literature is helpful in order to identify a gap in the existing research.

Even though the dominant approach of the thesis is inductive, we also include abductive elements. The abductive approach can be described as: *"Instead of moving from theory to data (as in deduction) or data to theory (as in induction), an abductive approach moves back and forth, in effect combining deduction and induction"* (Saunders et al., 2016: 148). The abductive approach is included in the thesis in order to clarify the cultures of Pentia and Nestlé and thereby create a foundation for comparison. The abductive elements in the form of Schein's culture framework (1984) enter after patterns are found in the data and, therefore, work as a secondary reasoning. This is chosen because *"the organizational culture has a strong influence on how inclined employees are to play."* (West, 2015: 49), and can therefore be an explanatory factor regarding how play unfolds in different organizational settings.

### 3.4 Qualitative Research Design

The next layer of the research 'onion' concerns the choice of doing either a mono-, multi-, or mixed methods study. This thesis is a multi-method qualitative study, meaning that we use several qualitative data collection techniques, but do not mix qualitative and quantitative methods (Saunders et al., 2016: 168). Here, we use both primary and secondary data. Our primary data collection techniques comprise semi-structured interviews as well as qualitative observation studies. Our secondary data sources are various company documents. Using multiple methods has several benefits, including that: *"it is likely to overcome weaknesses associated with using only a single or mono method, as well as providing scope for a richer approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation."* (ibid.: 166). This corresponds well with our interpretivist research philosophy and our research question, since we are interested in complexity, depth and richness in the data, enabling us to report various perspectives and paint a larger and more holistic picture (Creswell, 2014: 235) of play in the workplace as a phenomenon. As previously mentioned, qualitative methods are also the typical method applied within interpretivism because we as researchers *"need to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the phenomenon being studied."* (Saunders et al., 2016: 168).

One of the advantages of doing qualitative research is that we are able to gather data in the natural setting, in which participants experience the phenomenon we wish to study (Creswell, 2014: 234). In our case, we want to study play in the workplace, which is naturally better to do in the specific workplace instead of in a laboratory. Studying play directly in the workplace allows us to gain insights into the specific contextual factors that supposedly shape how play affects employees' working lives.

A characteristic of qualitative research that can be challenging, is that it is emergent. Even though we carefully create a research strategy and procedures, some phases of the process may change along the way, as we enter the field and start to collect data (Creswell 2014: 235). This can both be a blessing and a curse, since it allows for flexibility and insights that cannot be anticipated beforehand. However, it can also be challenging to change course in the process or prevent us from satisfying the expectations of the organizations we collaborate with.

### 3.5 Research Strategy

The fourth layer of the research 'onion' deals with the decision on one or more research strategies. The research strategy chosen for this study is the case study, which is described and justified in the following sections.

#### 3.5.1 Case Study

As mentioned above, we have chosen the case study as our research strategy, and we apply the definition by Yin (2009), which is twofold. The first part is:

*"1. A case study is an empirical inquiry that*

- Investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when*
- The boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident."* (Yin, 2009: 18).

As our research question is to investigate the contextual impacts of how play affects the employees' working lives, this corresponds well with the choice of a case study when looking at the first part of Yin's definition presented above. Like all other research strategies, case study research comes with challenges. As much as studying individuals in their natural setting can be an advantage, this can be

a challenge as well, since we do not have the control over the environment in which we collect our data (Yin, 2009: 83). Hence, it may be necessary for us to adjust the needs of our data collection plan according to real-world events (ibid.). For example, we had to interview one of the employees at Nestlé during lunch hour in the canteen full of people instead of in a closed meeting room, in order for her to set aside the time for us. Another example is that our data collection was affected by the outbreak of Covid-19 in Denmark in March. The significance of these examples is addressed in the interview and observation sections. The second part of Yin's definition is:

*“ 2. The case study inquiry*

- *Copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result*
- *Relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result*
- *Benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.”* (Yin, 2009: 18).

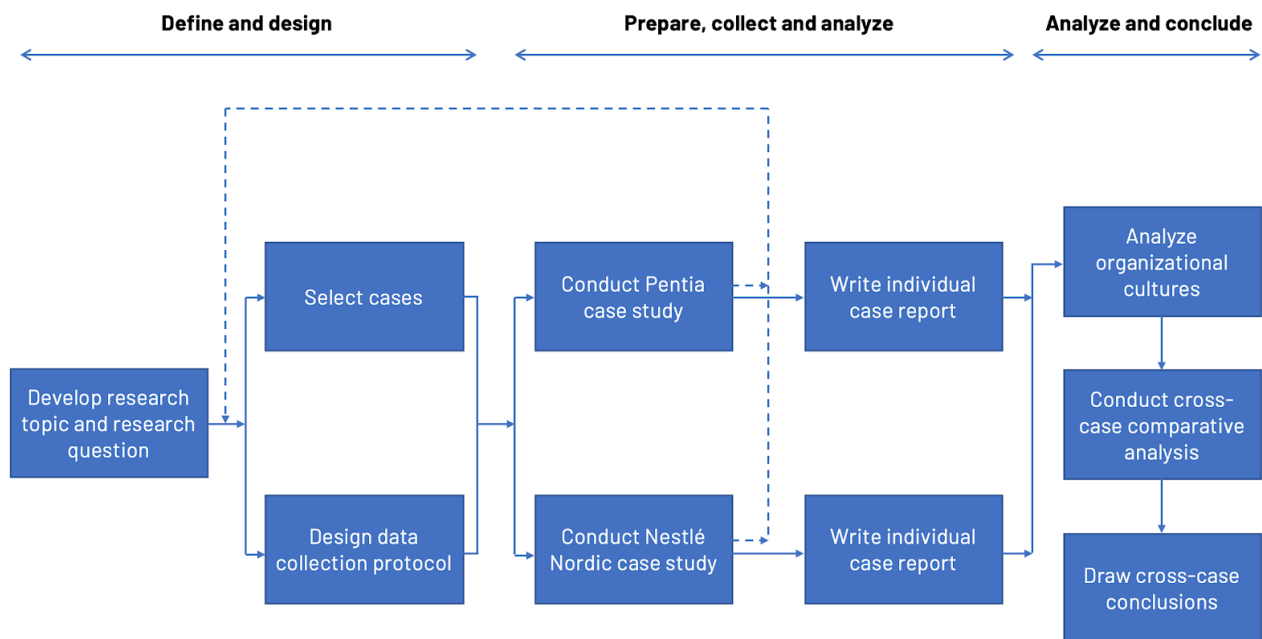
This aligns with our choice of the multi-method qualitative research design described above, which, according to Yin (2009) is one of the benefits of the case study: *“the case study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations – beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study.”* (Yin, 2009: 11).

### **3.5.2 The Choice of Two Cases**

We have chosen to conduct two comparable case studies, meaning that we intend to cover two cases of play in the workplace at Pentia and Nestlé respectively, and then make cross-case comparisons and conclusions. One of the reasons why we choose to cover two cases in the same study is the assumption that organizational context impacts how play unfolds in organizations and what effects it will cause, which is based on existing research (Petelczyc et al. 2018: 181; West et al., 2016: 72; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 85; West, 2015: 49).

As our research question is two-fold, this is also reflected in the structure of our case studies and analyses. First, the cases of Pentia and Nestlé are presented and analyzed as two individual cases in order to answer the first part of the research question regarding how play affects employees' working

lives. Subsequently, an analysis, comparison and conclusions across these cases follow in order to explore to what extent the effects of play vary in the two different organizational contexts, which is the second part of the research question (For an overview of the structure, see Model 2).



## Model 2: Structure of the Thesis

(made with inspiration from Yin, 2009: 57)

One of the advantages of choosing more than one case is that: *“The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust.”* (Yin, 2009: 53). According to Yin (2009: 60-61), this argument holds true even for studies consisting of only two cases. It is, however, very important how those two cases are selected, which is elaborated in the following section.

### 3.5.3 Case Selection

The case selection for this thesis has happened through purposive sampling, where the researcher uses his or her judgement to select the best fitting cases in order to answer the research question (Saunders et al., 2016: 301). This technique is often used in case studies with small samples and when

the researcher wishes to select cases that are particularly informative (Saunders et al., 2016: 301). Creswell (2014) further argues:

*“The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question. This does not necessarily suggest random sampling or selection of a large number of participants and sites, as typically found in quantitative research.”* (Creswell, 2014: 239).

Consequently, the choice of Pentia and Nestlé as our cases for this thesis is not random.

According to Yin (2009: 91), it is important to define some operational criteria before screening the different case candidates, which is why we set up two criteria: 1) the organization has to have some kind of manifestation showing an active choice of allowing more playful behavior; and 2) not have play as a part of their products/services. With these criteria in place it is, however, not easy to identify suitable case organizations. Firstly, it is not possible to find such companies through a Google search, and secondly it cannot necessarily be seen from the outside. Therefore, some kind of ‘inside’ knowledge is needed. For this study, we mobilized our network, starting with consultants who in the nature of their work have visited many different organizations. We presented our criteria and received a list of suggestions that included both Pentia and Nestlé. We contacted Pentia directly and arranged a meeting with their CEO, CFO and HR manager to discuss whether we saw a fit for both parties before deciding to collect any data. The contact to Nestlé materialized through a mutual friend, who was already collaborating with them on a start-up project and was able to establish the contact. The two cases are described in further detail in chapter four.

### **3.5.4 Critiques of the Case Study**

Even though the case study strategy has many advantages, we find it important to discuss some of its shortcomings as well. According to Yin (2009), criticism often refers to the investigator: *“Too many times, the case study investigator has been sloppy, has not followed systematic procedures, or has allowed equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions”* (Yin, 2009: 14). This criticism thereby addresses both the lack of stringency that advocates of quantitative methods usually criticize qualitative methods for (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 234),

and the point about case studies being subjective and biased (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 219). Flyvbjerg (2006) argues against both of these complaints. Firstly, in terms of stringency, he argues: *“the critique is fallacious, because the case study has its own rigor, different to be sure, but no less strict than the rigor of quantitative methods.”* (ibid.: 234-35). Consequently, qualitative researchers are advised to thoroughly document as many steps of their procedures as possible (Creswell, 2014: 252), which we strive to do in this study. Secondly, in terms of subjectivity and verification bias, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues: *“researchers who have conducted intensive, in-depth case studies typically report that their preconceived views, assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses were wrong and that the case material has compelled them to revise their hypotheses on essential points.”* (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 235). This is something we also experienced. Our starting point was to investigate the impact of play in the workplace on the employees’ creativity, which we assumed to be a positive relationship based on the existing theoretical literature. However, in the process, we had to acknowledge that the language and organizational knowledge about play in the workplace was too limited to take this step, which led to the present research question. Thus, in our case, the case study has not led us to just verify our preconceived expectations.

One of the other big criticisms against case studies is that one is not able to use them as the basis for scientific generalization (Yin, 2009: 15). This is, however, incorrect according to Flyvbjerg (2006: 225), who argues that it depends on the specific case and how it is selected. If selected strategically, the case can increase generalizability (ibid.: 229). Yin (2009) further argues: *“The short answer is that case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes.”* (Yin, 2009: 15). Thus, with a case study we are able to make analytical generalizations, meaning that we can expand and generalize theories, however, we are not able to make statistical generalizations (ibid.).

### 3.6 Time Horizon

The next layer of the research ‘onion’ relates to the choice of a time horizon for the study. The main consideration about the time horizon in this thesis is that the subject regards how play affects employees’ working lives and how it varies in different organizational settings and, therefore, the main focus is to explore how play is currently exercised in the different settings. According to Saunders et al. (2016: 200) the cross-sectional study often involves the study of a specific phenomenon at a specific time. We therefore choose a time horizon that is cross-sectional because

the purpose is to look into a single phenomenon, and because the time allocated for the thesis is relatively short.

### **3.7 Data Collection**

The following paragraphs address the center part of the research ‘onion’, which describes how the data is collected and analyzed. The first part explains the use of documents and secondary data. The second part explains how the interviews are planned and conducted, and the third part explains how the observations are planned and executed. Lastly, the fourth and fifth parts present how data is processed and analyzed.

#### **3.7.1 Secondary Data**

Before contacting and visiting Pentia and Nestlé, documents, such as their websites, a Great Place to Work report and articles are used. According to Yin (2009: 103), documents can, prior to visiting an organization, produce invaluable information. In this thesis the documents help choosing and understanding which type of interviews and observations that can be of interest regarding the purpose of the thesis. In addition, the documents provide general information about the organizations, which means that we do not waste time asking questions about information that can be found through a Google search in the interviews. Except from the documents found on the internet, this thesis uses documents received from Pentia and Nestlé. These documents are used to get a deeper understanding of the two organizations. From Pentia, we received a culture profile, which describes all internal processes, cultural elements, and values in Pentia. From Nestlé, we received flyers about different activities and clubs around Nestlé as well as an evaluation report of their health initiatives from 2018-19.

A disadvantage of using secondary data is that it is collected with another purpose that might be inappropriate for the research purpose (Saunders et al., 2016: 332). Because of this dilemma, we have carefully considered the secondary data we use. In addition, both observation and interviews are conducted. By doing this, it is possible to use other sources to confirm or reject the information in the documents and thereby avoid being biased by documents provided by the organizations.

### **3.7.2 Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews are chosen as the primary data collection method. A semi-structured interview means that the researcher prepares a list of themes and some key questions, but still allows space to deviate from the interview guide in the interview, thereby making room for interesting subjects brought up by the interviewee (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010: 55). This approach is applied because the structured approach is not appropriate in an interpretivist perspective. The reason is that the purpose in interpretivism is to understand the complexity and ambiguity of a phenomenon (ibid.: 67). Furthermore, as the nature of our research is exploratory, questions need to be open and to rely on the contributions of the interviewees (Saunders et al., 2012: 171).

#### **3.7.2.1 Prior Preparations**

Prior to the interviews, an interview guide with some key questions is created. The purpose of the interview guide is to ensure that the interview provides useful data in accordance with the purpose of the research (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010: 56-57). The interview guide, therefore, includes questions about play, creativity, activities and the employees' feelings and conceptions of these. It is important that the questions both allow for the creation of new knowledge and to improve the interpersonal relation in the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014: 185). The interview guide consists of one line of questions for all the interviewees and another line of questions that only target the managers and HR. The guide is prepared on the foundation of the initial thought of investigating how play influences creativity, which explains the questions regarding this. (The interview guide can be seen in Appendix 1).

#### **3.7.2.2 Selection of Interviewees**

The selection of the interviewees is made in collaboration with our contact persons in the organizations. The participants are chosen from what in Brinkmann's (2013: 58) terminology is called maximum variation cases in order to get as nuanced a picture of the organizations as possible. In both Pentia and Nestlé, we asked to speak with people at different hierarchical levels and from different departments with different seniority and furthermore to talk to both users and non-users of the activities. Our contact persons in the organizations then nominated the employees that we talked to (For an overview of the interviews, see Table 1). As the subject of the thesis is not sensitive in terms of business secrets or personal information and since both organizations agreed to share the data and findings with each other, the thesis does not have full anonymity.

Appendix name	Title	Company	Duration of interview (min)	Interview method
<b>Interview P1</b>	CTO	Pentia	50.29	Physical
<b>Interview P2</b>	CEO	Pentia	25.06	Physical
<b>Interview P3</b>	HR Manager	Pentia	48.06	Physical
<b>Interview P4</b>	COO	Pentia	37.14	Physical
<b>Interview P5</b>	Backend Developer	Pentia	29.51	Physical
<b>Interview P6</b>	User Experience Architect	Pentia	37.40	Physical
<b>Interview P7</b>	Backend Developer	Pentia	29.18	Virtual
<b>Interview P8</b>	Frontend Developer	Pentia	26.50	Virtual
<b>Interview N1</b>	Supply Chain Specialist	Nestlé	28.07	Physical
<b>Interview N2</b>	Talent Attraction Specialist	Nestlé	33.28	Physical
<b>Interview N3</b>	Nutrition Expert	Nestlé	46.28	Virtual

**Table 1: Overview of Interviews**

### 3.7.2.3 Conducting the Interviews

For this thesis, eleven semi-structured interviews are conducted. The eleven interviews have a time frame between 25 minutes and one hour, which is the available time allotted by the organizations. The interviews are conducted in Danish because all of the interviewees have Danish as their primary language and, therefore, they are possibly more comfortable in speaking Danish than English. Besides being more comfortable in Danish, we also assume that speaking in their mother tongue provides us with more detailed and nuanced answers. Each interview is conducted by one researcher, while the other researcher takes notes, manages time and makes sure that all the predefined themes are discussed.

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014: 183) the first minutes of an interview are crucial, and the purpose is to give the interviewee a clear understanding of the interviewer and their purpose to make the interviewee feel comfortable to speak freely. With that in mind, the first part of the interviews is

an introduction to the thesis and researchers and the interviewees are asked if they have any questions and if it is okay to record the conversation for transcription purposes.

In order to increase the researcher's credibility and the interviewee's confidence, we begin with questions about the interviewee's job role in the organization. This is assumed to make the interviewee more relaxed. The researchers have to make sure that whenever possible, the questions are grounded in the experiences of the employees and not as an abstract concept (Saunders et al., 2016: 407). This aspect is considered by using open questions, which "*allows participants to define and describe a situation or event*" (ibid.: 408). In addition, probing questions are used to further explore the responses that could have significance to the study (ibid.).

As mentioned earlier, the language about play in the workplace is limited or even non-existent in our two case companies. Management and employees simply do not perceive activities or ways of working as play. The first time this is evident to us is at the initial meeting with Pentia's CEO, CTO and HR Manager before agreeing to do the study. Even though they are able to explain several concrete examples of activities and behaviors at Pentia that fit into the academic definition of play, they still argue several times that they do not play. Instead, they categorize these behaviors and activities as fun, which is one of their three core values. Similarly, Nestlé do not perceive their initiatives as play. In their terminology, these initiatives are called NCouragers. Therefore, it is evident to us that we need to adjust our questions to the specific language of the case organizations in order for the interviewees to understand them and to provide in-depth answers. Thus, we changed the wording of some of the questions in the process. However, we always made sure that the interviewees talked about the same overall themes. We find this to be an important methodological consideration, as we are aware that play and fun are two distinct theoretical concepts according to the academic literature (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 170). Thus, when we e.g., ask Pentia employees about fun, we still refer to what is defined as play in the literature.

#### **3.7.2.4 Context of Interviews**

In an interpretivist approach, it is not only important what knowledge we gain but also how the knowledge is created (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002: 113). At Pentia, six of the interviews were conducted in their office in a meeting room. Due to the Covid-19 virus, the last two were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams. At Nestlé, two of the interviews were conducted in Nestlé's office.

One in a meeting room and another in the cafeteria during lunch hours. Due to the Covid-19 virus, the last interview was also conducted remotely using a phone call. According to Saunders et al. (2016: 403), the locations should be convenient for the participants, which is why our participants chose how the interviews could best fit in their busy workdays.

The interview hosted in the cafeteria can be criticized because the surroundings are noisy, and the conversation can be overheard by others. Another critique at Nestlé is that they decided that an intern could benefit from listening in. This means that the interviewee can possibly be affected by having a colleague in the room, who can judge and repeat what is said. This can potentially affect the confidentiality and willingness of the interviewee to report negative things about the organization.

The interviews conducted remotely have the disadvantage that it is more difficult to establish a personal connection (Saunders et al., 2016: 421). This can lead to the participants being reluctant to engage in the interview and therefore decrease the reliability of the data collection (ibid.). The reason why these interviews are still conducted remotely is that remote access was the only way to collect the last data and therefore a necessity.

#### **3.7.2.5 Transcription**

All the interviews conducted are recorded for transcription purposes. In addition, notes about immediate thoughts are written. By writing down our immediate thoughts, we make sure to collect events that are not evident on the recording (Saunders et al., 2016: 411).

The transcriptions are in Danish and the quotes included in the thesis are translated along the way. The transcriptions are made on an ongoing basis because this allows us to “*recognize meanings in the data*” (Saunders et al., 2016: 571). This makes it possible, due to the inductive approach, to undertake some initial analysis and to decide what is missing and when the data is sufficient (ibid.). (The transcriptions can be found in Appendices 2-12).

#### **3.7.3 Observations**

Observations are chosen as the final data collection method, because they can support or reject the information found in the interviews and in addition work as a complementary data source.

### 3.7.3.1 Participant Observation

Observations involve “*the systematic viewing, recording, description, analysis and interpretation of people’s behavior*” (Saunders et al., 2016: 354). Observations make it possible to observe the interactions and social contexts in the organizations (ibid.: 357). The observations in this thesis are identified as participant observation. The purpose and strength of using participant observation is the high level of immersion obtained by the researcher and thereby the discovery of what meaning people attach to events (ibid.). This allows the researcher to develop “*a deep and nuanced understanding of the meanings of informants*” (ibid.).

The observations in this study can be classified as observer as participant (Saunders et al., 2016: 358) because in both Nestlé and Pentia our identities are known to the employees, who are briefed about our presence, and because we do not participate actively. The benefit from this kind of observation is that the purpose of the researcher’s presence is known for all concerned, which makes it possible to focus on the researcher role (ibid.: 360). The disadvantage of this observation position is that the researcher does not experience the emotional involvement of how it feels to fully participate in the activities (ibid.). Another issue to address is the observer effect, which is the problem that the researcher may affect the behavior of those being observed (ibid.:364). Both at Pentia and Nestlé, we attempt to avoid this by trying to fit in and not make memorable notice of ourselves.

### 3.7.3.2 Initial Plan with Observations

The choice of the observation role is based on the purpose of the research project, which is to understand how play at work affects employees’ working lives and to what extent it varies in different organizational settings. The initial purpose of using the participant observation is to complement the interviews and thereby get the chance to obtain a deeper understanding of the organizations. Furthermore, the purpose is to observe how the organizations use the playful features during the workday. The idea is that the study benefits from this because in addition to knowing the interviewed employees’ subjective opinions and personal experiences, we get to experience it ourselves and furthermore to observe situations that the interviewees perhaps cannot or forget to describe themselves.

The initial plan and agreement with Pentia and Nestlé was to observe respectively three half days and two half days. The days in Pentia should be a normal workday (Mon-Thu), a normal Friday and the

day they celebrated Carnival. In Nestlé, the plan was to observe two half days, where we would get to experience many of their activities in use and, in addition, get to walk around and get impressions of the organization. (To get an overview of the planned and conducted observations, see Table 2).

Date of observation	Company	Time	Status
19 February 2020	Pentia	11-13	Completed
21 February 2020	Pentia	12-16	Completed
13 March 2020	Pentia	12-15	Not Completed
10 March 2020	Nestlé	12-16	Not Completed
02 April 2020	Nestlé	08-12	Not Completed

**Table 2: Overview of Observations**

### 3.7.3.3 Conducting the Observations

As earlier mentioned, the research process is emergent, which means that the initial plan may not be possible to execute once the researcher enters the field (Creswell, 2014: 235). This we experienced in regard to the observations. Due to the Covid-19 virus, the observations that we conducted before the lockdown were only two half days at Pentia and in addition, one meeting room activity in Nestlé. The missing observations may be a source of an observer bias, meaning that the researchers do not have enough time to get an in-depth understanding of the situations. Furthermore, the researchers may use their own subjective views to interpret situations, which results in a less rigorous understanding (Saunders et al., 2016: 364). Because of this change, the purpose of the observations changed as well. Instead of using the observations as a substantial amount of data and a separate data collection method, the observations are now used partly as a data source in the analysis, and partly as a verification of the interview-based analysis. This includes the assumption that if the observations made at Pentia verify the findings of the analysis, then we presume that the observations at Nestlé would have had the same quality and effect.

In addition to using the half days of observation at Pentia as a verification tool, more informal and casual observations are used for the same purpose. The casual observations include the observations made when conducting interviews and when entering the organizations. These include impressions of the workspace, artefacts, employees etc. (Field notes from observations can be seen in Appendix 13 and 14).

### 3.8 Analyzing the Data

As earlier mentioned, all the recordings of the interviews and notes (both observation notes and notes from the interviews) are transcribed in order to create an overview of the collected data. Because of our inductive reasoning approach, the analysis is formed by “*exploring [the data] to see which themes or issues to follow up and concentrate on*” (Saunders et al., 2016: 570). In between the interviews we consider what has not been covered. This makes the analysis ongoing and thereby the process emergent because we are able to adjust the future data collections.

When all the data is collected, we conduct a thematic analysis, which involves “*a researcher coding her or his qualitative data to identify themes or patterns for further analysis, related to his or her research question*” (Saunders et al., 2016: 571). This is done by creating a data table (see Appendix 15) where we use our research question and research objectives to create multiple categories that can guide the data processing. Subsequently, we read all the transcriptions and code the data from these categories. This provides us with an understanding of which patterns and subjects are re-occurring the most, and which patterns our data suggests an analysis could focus on (in order to see an example of the coding, see Appendix 16).

Because our study is based on primarily an inductive reasoning, the themes are derived from the data and may also modify the research question (Saunders et al., 2016: 579). This is exactly what happened in our process. We experienced that the original idea of investigating how play affects creativity was too specific because the organizations did not know how to talk about play. We therefore originally collected the data with this purpose, but as the patterns showed other themes for us to investigate, the research question changed to address how play affects employees’ working lives and to what extent it varies in different organizational contexts.

## 4. Analysis

The following analysis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is a case study on Pentia, which consists of a case description, followed by an analysis of how they define play, the purpose of play, how play unfolds in Pentia and its resulting effects. The second chapter is a case study on Nestlé with the same structure. The third chapter contains two separate analyses of respectively the culture in Pentia and Nestlé. This part of the analysis is based on Schein's culture framework (1984) including artefacts, values and basic assumptions. This leads to the final chapter, which is a comparative analysis, disclosing the differences and similarities in employee experienced effects of play in the two organizations, which helps to investigate how the different organizational contexts influence the effects of play.

### 4.1 Case Study #1: Pentia

The following parts address the first and second research objectives about defining play as well as identifying and exploring specific examples of how play unfolds in an organizational setting. The organizational setting that is focused on in this section is Pentia.

#### 4.1.1 Case Description

Pentia is a digital consultancy firm with 80 employees; 74 in Copenhagen and 6 in Aarhus (Appendix 17: 9). Pentia was founded by five fellow students and friends, who believed it was possible to build a company that was the best in its area of business while keeping their fellowship and brotherhood (ibid.: 2). They built the company on the foundation of '*fun before money*', meaning that the employees should have a work life consisting of fun as the dominant factor (ibid.). This value is still present in the DNA of Pentia. Today the core values in Pentia are Fun, Respect and Responsibility (ibid.: 4).

Pentia operates with flexible working hours but makes a virtue of the employees not exceeding 37.5 hours per week (Appendix 17: 3). The employees are expected to have 6 hours of progress on customer projects every day and the remaining 1.4 hours are meant for enhancing their skill levels and gaining new knowledge (ibid.). Furthermore, Pentia has a one-hour knowledge sharing-, update- and information meeting every Friday afternoon, followed by 0.9 hours of "free play" (ibid.). (For an overview of the weekly schedule, see Model 3).

Mandag	Tirsdag	Onsdag	Torsdag	Fredag
6 timers projektarbejde	6 timers projektarbejde	6 timers projektarbejde	6 timers projektarbejde	5,5 timers projektarbejde
				1 times videndeling
				0,9 timers "fri" tid
1,4 timers opkvalificering	1,4 timers opkvalificering	1,4 timers opkvalificering	1,4 timers opkvalificering	

### Model 3: Weekly Schedule, Pentia

Source: Pentia Culture Profile, 2019: 3 (Appendix 17)

Pentia's employees are encouraged to engage in activities during working hours to have a break and they are allowed to use the office after working hours to host social events (Appendix 17: 37). Pentia operates from a large open office space on Islands Brygge. They have a pool table, ping pong table, candy bar and a room with video and arcade games (Appendix 13). Furthermore, Pentia's decor is playful with, for instance, LEGO in a meeting room, a large Star Wars graffiti painting covering an entire wall and toilet signs as Star Wars figures (ibid.).

Pentia's manifest emphasizes that the *"best solutions are created in an open, positive and playful environment, where everyone feel encouraged to explore unconventional ideas"* (Appendix 17: preface). This means that a big part of having fun is that the employees have fun with their work tasks and not only engage in fun break activities.

#### 4.1.2 Definitions of Play and Fun

Since play and fun are theoretically multifaceted concepts, the employees are asked to define them. The CTO explains how you cannot be forced to play or have fun:

*"Bad fun is when we say: "now we have a good time goddamn it!" When someone says to you that now you must have fun. The fun you create yourself is definitely the most fun because*

*it comes from within yourself, which is why it is so important with these frameworks and not to dictate on how to have fun.” (Interview P1: 12).*

Here, he touches on the element of intrinsic motivation as well as the element of voluntariness, acknowledging how coercion destroys play. Similarly, the COO argues how forced play is never really fun (Interview P4: 19). Further, the CTO talks about how you need to have mental energy to be more likely to play: *“Removing some of the things that make people stressed out makes it easier for them to have fun while being here”* (Interview P1: 5). This is also why both the CTO and HR Manager argue that Pentia tries to remove some of the negative ‘unknowns’ from the role as a consultant by e.g., not allowing employees to work overtime (Interview P1: 5; Interview P3: 24).

When defining play and fun in Pentia, another recurring theme in the interviews is the discussion on whether play is the obvious things, such as the possibility to play FIFA during working hours, or if play and fun is inherent in work itself. The CEO explains it like this:

*“We won that award: ‘Europe’s funniest workplace’ a few years ago, and there were a lot of newspapers and TV stations visiting, and they think that the fun was our candy bar, pool table, arcade machines and more. But that’s not what we think is fun. Fun is doing the interesting tasks, fun is also having an informal environment (...) For us, it is about having respect for each other, being able to talk to each other about work as well as other things. That’s fun for me”* (Interview P2: 3-4).

Likewise, the HR Manager describes how both the obvious playful artefacts as well as work tasks are important elements of fun in Pentia:

*“for us, it is all you can have on gaming consoles, computers, table tennis, table football, all of this, besides the projects we’re doing, be it web projects, or digital projects, so that’s what you have to find funny, to do digital projects, and work with digital projects and products, and if you think it is fun to work with good people, then it is a good place to be”* (Interview P3: 8).

Thus, both of them highlight how work tasks and the relationship with colleagues are important elements of fun. Similarly, an employee describes how the key is the balance between these elements:

*“to me it is probably the balance between work and the 'fun fun' or the 'festive fun', and it is not fun if one takes over. It is also not fun if it is just work and we can't just have a nice relationship with each other, and it is also not fun if it is all just funny hats and table football, and we really don't create any value for our customers. I wouldn't think that was fun either”* (Interview P6: 19).

On the contrary, however, one employee only mentions the obvious examples: *“It sounds childish, but I think play is these activities we have together at work such as pool and table tennis and gaming machines and FIFA and VR and Pacman machines and everything like that”* (Interview P8: 3). Other employees in Pentia define play and fun less concretely, e.g., that it involves practicing (Interview P4: 3), that it involves the people around you and the surroundings (Interview P7: 1), or that it allows you to *“be a kid in the workplace”* (Interview P8: 8).

This shows that play is a challenging concept to define and that it can mean different things to different people. Additionally, these examples indicate that Pentia does not really have a language or common terminology for play in the organization, making it difficult for employees to put it into words and for us to ask the right questions. Further, as mentioned in the literature review, play and fun are not perfect synonyms. Therefore, the definitions mentioned here could be mixed definitions of fun and play, dependent on how the employees understand the questions. When asking employees specifically about the difference between fun and play, they provide us with various answers. According to the CTO, fun is an umbrella term, under which play can fit: *“Fun covers play, fun, snowball fight. Again, it is about creating the frame, and then you fill out what you think is fun yourself. If you become more specific, then you are starting to dictate what is fun”* (Interview P1: 13). Some employees also think that fun is easier to relate to as an adult: *“I think that fun may be a little more understandable to a person above 6 years old, I mean, play sounds very LEGO brick-sand box-ish, whereas fun may be something you can do in all age groups”* (Interview P8 :12) and *“I don't know if it was play, it would sound a little childish. But to me, play and fun are close to being synonyms.”* (Interview P7: 5). Nonetheless, even if some of the employees find the term play to be

childish, they still enjoy it and see the positive aspects of it: *“you have fun playing. So, whether you call it fun or play is a bit the same”* (Interview P8: 12).

Besides from fun and play, the HR manager also talks about a dichotomy between play and work (Interview P3: 25). Here, he argues that the work in Pentia is really serious, and that sometimes fun connects better with seriousness than play does. Therefore, even in a company like Pentia, where fun is one of their three core values, play can still have connotations to something frivolous, unprofessional or childish. However, he does acknowledge similarities between the concepts:

*“We also think it's fun to work. And then it is just a matter of, I don't know how well work and play go hand in hand, but of course in some cases, if you play well together, then you may also work well together. Because there are some rules in both sets, that is, there are some rules in a game, and some rules in going to work, so in that way it connects nicely”* (Interview P3: 25).

Hence, he comments on the rule element of play, which, as recalled from the literature review, figures in some definitions of play. According to West (2015), rules may even increase participation because: *“individuals may feel more secure within the boundaries of a game, or structure of an activity.”* (West, 2015: 38). Rules are also important, because *“they determine what “holds” in the temporary world circumscribed by play”* (Huizinga, 1949: 11), which also means that when rules are transgressed, the play-world breaks down and the game ends (ibid.). In Pentia, there appears to be many rules in the different activities, be it written or unwritten, which is perceived positively by some employee groups and as a constraint to others (Interview P3: 25; Interview P5: 4-5). Thus, it seems that the rule element is present in the definition of play in Pentia.

#### **4.1.3 Perceived Purpose of Play**

In the literature review, we touched upon the theoretical discussion on whether the nature of play is autotelic and thereby contains a purpose in itself (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2012: 82), or if the concept serious play makes it possible for organizations to implement play with more extrinsically motivating features (West et al., 2016: 73). Accordingly, we find it interesting to discover what kind of purpose employees associate with play in Pentia. Much in line with this discussion, the COO questions if systemized play is really play by saying:

*“you can of course put it in system, and that's also part of what you try to do with some of the LEGO tools, right, it's because you want to reach a certain goal with them, and it becomes more a work tool than it becomes play in reality, right, it just has some similarities to play, which are interesting.”* (Interview P4: 20).

When asking the employees, however, many of them can see a functional purpose with playing in the organization. For some employees, play is connected to their core value, fun, and the desire to live up to this value (Interview P3: 24; Interview P5: 6). Further, fun is connected to the history of the company: *“It is very important to those who founded the company. From the start it has been their values that it should be fun to go to work”* (Interview P5: 6). This statement is particularly interesting, as it comes from one of the recent new hires, which says something about how these narratives of the founders and values are continuously shared and recreated in the organization. Other employees also attribute play and fun in the organization to the founders and management being the type of people, who want to put the human before the profit and to ensure the wellbeing of employees (Interview P8: 10; Interview P6: 17). These employees, however, also connect the wellbeing of employees with increased productivity or quality of work (Interview P8: 10; Interview P6: 14), which indirectly makes play an economic benefit to the company. This is echoed by the CTO: *“We do it to create the best workplace in the world, but also because it makes financial sense and so it makes sense for the customers we have”* (Interview P1: 13). He explains how some workplaces implement initiatives like playful activities to encourage employees to stay longer at work but how this has never been the purpose at Pentia: *“We would like it to be integrated with a 37-hour working week. Because if they have been playing billiard for 10 minutes, they are still 100% effective when they return to work”* (ibid.: 5). He further argues how trusting employees is important: *“It has all these things that can really distract from working if you see it from the outside: table football, PlayStation you name it ... and we trust that they will use it, so that it promotes a piece of work.”* (ibid.).

Lastly, some of the employees perceive play in the organization as an employee benefit that helps to retain existing employees as well as attract new talents, which is important in the IT-industry, where there is a huge demand for talented developers (Interview P7: 5; Interview P8:10; Interview P4: 16). This is also why they make an effort to take pictures of certain play activities to be able to post them on social media (Interview P4: 16). Thus, from the empirical data it seems that play in Pentia has several functions. People perceive the purpose of allowing play in the organization differently, which

shows that employees have not been told to play during work hours for a specifically desired outcome.

#### 4.1.4 How Play Unfolds

As should be evident by now, play is a complex and ambiguous concept that is difficult to sharply define and delimit. Therefore, to be able to investigate the effects of play on the employees' working lives, we must first understand how play unfolds in the organization as well as what types of playful activities are happening and how they are perceived by the employees. From the eight interviews with management and employees as well as from our observations and the culture profile, it is clear that Pentia offers an abundance of different playful activities, initiatives and opportunities for employees.

##### 4.1.4.1 Carnival and Game Day Traditions

One of the playful activities often mentioned is the annual carnival, which is a normal workday in February, where everyone must wear a costume at work (All Pentia interviews; Appendix 17: 94). In the afternoon the organizers announce the winners of three different categories for best costume, and the employees play an activity called “beat the cat out of the barrel”, eat carnival buns and after working hours they are welcome to stay for a Friday bar (See carnival day program below).



#### Carnival Day Program 2020

When they say that the carnival is a normal workday, they really mean it, as costumes are also worn in client meetings. Here, they share an example of how the CEO was dressed as the Green Lantern superhero in a crisis meeting with a client one year (Interview P2: 4; Interview P4: 9). When asked about how it went, the COO responds: *"They certainly got scolded"* (Interview P4: 9), which hints that the customer found it to be unprofessional. However, the CEO explains how it helps to create an informal atmosphere in the office, and how the customers are warned in advance: *"we just got a new customer (...) and we have warned them ... I have to sit in a Pippi Longstocking costume, and I like that. It's pathetic and I think it's funny. Our customers think it's funny,"* (Interview P2: 4). Thus, it seems that some customers find the carnival amusing, whereas others find it problematic. This can be due to different customer preferences, but it could also be argued that it is influenced by the specific setting. Other things being equal, the signing of a new customer is a very positive event compared to a crisis meeting with an unsatisfied customer. Therefore, it could be argued that some customer settings have better conditions for play to unfold and be accepted than others.

The annual carnival is also an example of how play can become an integrated part of work as opposed to being a break activity. In the terminology of Mainemelis and Ronson (2006: 92), this is called play as engagement, meaning that employees turn their work into play. An example from this year is in a client meeting, in which an employee dressed like Harry Potter used his magic wand to point at the slides he presented (Appendix 13). Thus, he played another character than his normal self and personality, indicating a threshold experience (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 86-87) even though it was a serious situation with a brand-new client. This made everyone in the meeting laugh loudly, indicating positive affect as an outcome (ibid.: 90; Appendix 13). One can also argue that this is an example of what Thorsted (2013: 49) terms everyday play, which is the highest of the organizational play levels. This is when play has become such a supporting part of the culture that it is only natural to include play in collaboration, internal processes etc. (ibid.). One employee also highlights the fact that the carnival is a tradition in the company: *"Pentia has always done that and they keep doing it (...) just as some families also have traditions like 'we always eat this on the night before Christmas' or 'we always do this at Easter'"* (Interview P6: 11-12).

Another important tradition in the company is the biannual game day. Twice a year the office is closed, and everyone plays games together instead of working on customer projects (Interview P1: 6; Interview P7: 2). A part of the day is planned beforehand with e.g., team exercises, whereas the rest

is up to the employees and their interests (Interview P1: 6; Interview P4: 7). This is also why the content of the game days have changed over the years:

*“Game days 5-6 years ago were exclusively computer games on the network, but that has changed according to staff composition and age, number of people, etc. It changes all the time and it has to because that way you can see that it continues to be fun”* (Interview P1: 13).

However, to allow employees to choose their own activities can also result in groupings, as people from the different functions have different interests: *“And the interests will be - not 100% professionally divided - but there are more developers who play FIFA than there are UXs and designers who do”* (Interview P4: 7). This again shows that what is perceived as play and fun is a subjective opinion.

#### **4.1.4.2 Employee Managed Clubs**

Pentia has a lot of different clubs with activities taking place outside of working hours. These include clubs for board games, card games, running, yoga, wine, books, bathing, and e-sports (Interview P1: 7; Interview P6: 6-11; Interview P8: 3-7; Interview P7: 1-5; Interview P3: 8;20). These clubs are initiated and managed by employees but sponsored with facilities, money and merchandise by Pentia (Interview P8: 7; Interview P1: 7). One of the employees argue that this kind of support from the management team makes him and his colleagues more likely to engage in and spend time on playful activities (Interview P8: 7). The employee-led clubs activate not only the employees who are members of the specific clubs, but other employees and their families as well. For example, the clubs post pictures and results in the Microsoft Teams platform for everyone to see (Interview P1: 7) and the e-sport team streams its matches against other companies online so that everyone can watch it and cheer for the team from their computers (Interview P8: 3). Further, this has helped to connect the department in Copenhagen with the department in Aarhus, as two of the e-sport players are from the Aarhus office (ibid.). Thus, these clubs have the potential to informally connect employees, family members etc. who are not normally working together.

#### 4.1.4.3 Spontaneous Play

Besides these scheduled events, activities, and traditions, a lot of play emerges spontaneously in Pentia. Typical occasions for spontaneous play are when employees need a break from their work tasks (Interview P4: 11; Interview P8: 5; Interview P1: 6), which in the terminology of Mainemelis & Ronson (2006: 92) is called diversionary play or according to Thorsted (2013: 46) in-between-play. Examples of these activities include table tennis, table football, billiards and PlayStation games (Appendix 17: 37). Most often, these spontaneous activities are initiated via the online platform Microsoft Teams (Interview P4: 11; Interview P3: 12; Interview P7: 2; Interview P1: 6; Interview P2: 5), in which they have a specific channel for almost every activity (Interview P8: 5; Appendix 13). It differs a lot how often the different employees make use of these play opportunities. Some people never play, some do it every once in a while (Interview P6: 7), yet others do it almost ritualistically, e.g., playing billiards every day straight after lunch (Interview P8: 3). Others use it with differing frequency, depending on work pressure: *“I really enjoy playing table football, but it’s turned a little bit up and down depending on my work tasks”* (Interview P6: 7).

Other occasions for spontaneous play to develop can be something as random as the weather. An example of this is if snow falls, then a snowball fight is immediately arranged, and everyone runs out to play for 20 minutes together (Interview P1: 12; Interview P2: 4). Another example is bathing together in the summertime: *“suddenly, when you are standing down here as a relatively new employee, and then all of a sudden ten half-naked people will run out to the harbor, while customers are in the house and stuff like that”* (Interview P3: 20). Again, all of these examples are manifestations of play being a part of the Pentia culture, meaning that employees feel that it is legitimate behavior to engage in spontaneous, informal activities in the middle of the day, without sanctions from the management.

Besides the already covered examples of play and playful activities, more examples can be seen in Table 3, in which the playful activities in Pentia are compared on the five elements of play from the definition by Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) described in the literature review. Since employees do not explicitly regard all of these activities as play, we have chosen to categorize them on the five elements in order to better understand which activities are more play-like than others. In line with our interpretivist research philosophy, the allocation of check marks is made on the basis of our subjective interpretations of the empirical data from interviews and observations.

5 elements of play					
Examples of play in Pentia	A threshold experience	Boundaries in time and space	Uncertainty-freedom-constraint	A loose and flexible association between means and ends	Positive affect
Carnival	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Table football		✓	✓	✓	✓
Game days	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
1 hour of "free play" every Friday		✓	✓	✓	✓
Board game club	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Running Club		✓			✓
Yoga Club		✓			✓
Nerf gun war	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Snowball fight	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bathing/swimming		✓		✓	✓
Pool/billiards		✓	✓	✓	✓
e-sport team (Counterstrike)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Card (game) club		✓	✓	✓	✓
Table tennis		✓	✓	✓	✓
Festoon competition (Christmas decorations)		✓	✓	✓	✓
Monthly social events		✓			✓
Friday bars		✓			✓
"Prisoners on the fort"	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

**Table 3: Activity overview, Pentia**

#### 4.1.4.4 Planned versus Spontaneous Play

As is apparent from the previous paragraphs, play is both planned and facilitated as well as occurring spontaneously in Pentia, which influences how play unfolds in the organization. The CEO also calls the planned activities *"a formalized way of playing"* (Interview P2: 5). According to an employee, some structures must be in place for play to occur in the organization at all: *"if people trust that the frame is there and the company is in favor of it, then things will come automatically, but you have to make sure the frame is there"* (Interview P1: 7-8). He elaborates that the frame has to allow for

spontaneity, but that the frame should also make people know when to stop and get back to work (Interview P1: 12).

In Pentia there seems to be internal agreement, that play works the best, when employees participate voluntarily and spontaneously, because it prevents forced or coerced play and allows people to engage in play when they feel a need or motivation to do so (Interview P3; Interview P6: 10; Interview P8: 4; Interview P1: 12). This is also why the management tries to involve the employees, when planned activities are being prepared, allowing them to contribute with ideas (Interview P1: 11). However, there can also be disadvantages to spontaneous play, such as uncertainty and awkwardness for new employees (Interview P5: 3-4), as well as interruptions for those who are still concentrating on work tasks or phone calls with customers (Interview P6: 15-16). Besides making it easier for new employees to navigate in playful activities, orchestrated play also ensures more participants in the different games (Interview P8: 4-8), which can make play itself more enjoyable as well as help to dissolve some of the more established groupings.

#### 4.1.4.5 Voluntariness

As has been suggested from our interviewees as well as in the literature, forced play is not fun or stimulating or even play at all (Huizinga, 1949: 7; Interview P4: 19; Interview P1: 12). Hence, the COO advocates that nothing should be forced, but that the structures for play should be there: *"And therefore, it is perhaps better that it is something that is very accessible and easy to get to, without requiring anything special, and without being met with especially many reservations if you use it"* (Interview P4: 20). The degree of voluntariness, however, is perceived differently by the employees. Some employees feel that everything is voluntary: *"Some people at work do not participate in any of the activities. So, there's nothing compulsive about anything"* (Interview P8: 7). Also, some employees think that the ones not participating should engage more: *"I feel it is reasonably voluntary, but there are some who should take it in more than they do (...) I know with the board game club, it can be hard to recruit new members"* (Interview P7: 4). Contrastingly, another employee questions if it is truly acceptable to say no: *"I don't think it's okay, at least not for everything. (...) If you always said no, then I think you would have a conversation at some point"* (Interview P5: 3-4).

The carnival is another example of how voluntariness is perceived differently in Pentia. An employee explains how costumes are obligatory on this day. If employees do not want to participate, they have

to take a compensatory day off (Interview P8: 8). The CTO, however, states that this was a rule previously but has been loosened a little, since it was perceived as a little harsh (Interview P1: 12). Likewise, the COO says that they have never really sanctioned employees for not wearing a costume, because they do not want to make people feel uncomfortable (Interview P4: 15). Moreover, the HR Manager says that people are encouraged to take part in it on their own terms, meaning that they can come in a full costume or just wear a small mask (Interview P3: 16). Thus, there seems to be a little confusion as to whether this rule still exists or not. Further, there are different perceptions as to whether anyone has deliberately chosen to avoid the carnival. One employee says that he has never experienced anyone taking a compensatory day off on the day of the carnival (Interview P8: 8), whereas another says: *“there are also some, who have taken the day off today, but I cannot know, is it because they have other plans, or is it because they do not want to participate in the carnival?”* (Interview P6: 20). This indicates that rules, norms and attitudes regarding the carnival are a little blurry.

Thus, even though there are no formal rules forcing employees to participate in playful activities, there are indications of more informal, social rules or norms strongly encouraging employees to engage in play and fun. This indicates that some forms of play could be perceived as forced, where people participate, not because they believe in them, but rather because they want to be perceived as legitimate actors in the organization. Thus, there are indications that some employees may participate due to social obligation and the fear of being socially excluded, however, in our eight interviews in the organization, we did not talk to anyone, who actively wanted to say no or stay out of all playful activities, and the overall impression of play in the organization was positive.

#### **4.1.4.6 Participants**

As already hinted previously, some employees are more prone to play than others. There can be many reasons for this, however, the ones mentioned the most are professional groups and their interests as well as whether you have children at home. Some of the employees with children at home convey that they are more time conscious than employees, who are not parents, and that this makes them prioritize differently (Interview P5: 2; Interview P6: 6; Interview P8: 9). The ones who are not playing as often, however, still report that they find the opportunity for play in the organization really nice (Interview P5: 2; Interview P6: 7). Regarding the other argument, many state that the different professional functions find different things interesting (Interview P4: 7; Interview P5: 3-4). For

instance, it is mostly the backend department that enjoys playing Counterstrike or FIFA (Interview P4: 7; Interview P5: 3-4). Hence, it seems that the motivation and desire to play in Pentia varies with professional function as well as one's individual stage in life.

#### **4.1.5 Summary of Definition, Purpose and How Play Unfolds**

Summing up, play and fun mean different things to different employees and play is therefore hard to define as a general concept on behalf of Pentia as a company. To some, play is mostly the fun activities during breaks and informal interactions with colleagues, whereas to others it is also inherent in work itself. Common for all, however, it seems that play should be voluntary. In terms of the purpose of play, employees again show different perceptions. Some see it as a way of 'walking the talk' when it comes to organizational values, and for others it is an employee benefit resulting in employee retention and easier talent attraction. Thus, Pentia is not telling employees to play for a specific, strategic outcome. When exploring specific examples of how play unfolds in Pentia, it is clear that Pentia offers several playful opportunities to employees and that play unfolds both spontaneously and as a part of planned events and activities. Even though voluntariness is highlighted by employees as an important characteristic of play and fun, the level of voluntariness is perceived differently in the organization, thereby indicating that norms can be a little blurry. Lastly, the various perceptions of play in the organization also result in some employee groups being more prone to participate in playful activities than others.

Having developed an understanding of how play unfolds in Pentia, this first half of the case study analysis now serves as the basis for the next part of the analysis, which explores what effects from play that employees experience in Pentia.

#### **4.1.6 Effects of Play**

This section answers the third research objective about identifying and exploring specific examples of effects that play has on work tasks, employees and the organization in general in the context of Pentia.

#### 4.1.6.1 Organizational Effects

In Pentia, their way of doing business and playing as a company has created an informal frame, which, according to the management, has affected a good client retention (Interview P2: 6). This is expressed by, for instance, the HR manager, who says *"the clients we had when I started are still clients today"* (Interview P3: 7). The client retention comes from both Pentia being good at what they do, but also that the clients find the employees cozy to work with (Interview P2: 6). The informal frame has changed the client relationship because the clients are buying in on the work ethics and values in Pentia, where they can end up, as mentioned earlier, having a meeting with Pentia's CEO in a Pippi Longstocking outfit (Interview P2: 4). According to the CEO, Pentia's clients think this is fun and they can see that the employees are still working even though they are celebrating Carnival (ibid.).

Even though playing has developed an informal frame and created good client relations, one employee still expresses how it is difficult to sit in an open office and have Skype meetings, when the clients can hear people having fun in the background. She says that *"it does not always send the right signals to the client you are talking to"* (Interview P6: 15-16). This could indicate that not all clients appreciate the playful atmosphere and that the employees find it disturbing to try to be taken seriously if other employees are playing loudly.

Another effect that play has on Pentia is that they can easier recruit new employees, as applicants have a positive impression of them (Interview P2: 6). As one of the backend developers expresses it: *"as a developer it is not difficult to find a job"* (Interview P7: 1) and *"I chose to apply to Pentia because it seemed as a fun place to work"* (Interview P7: 4). Before, this employee worked in a corporate IT organization with a stricter distinction between time for fun and time for work. This confirms the management's impression of Pentia being in a favorable position in terms of recruiting. In addition to the effect on recruitment, Pentia has a 30-35% lower employee turnover compared to their competitors (Interview P1: 8). According to the CTO, this affects that the knowledge base in the company is very strong, because they keep building it up instead of changing it (ibid.). Even though Pentia builds up a strong knowledge base, it can also be a disadvantage that people stay for so long, because if employees stay too long, Pentia relies on habits instead of bringing new ideas to the table (Interview P4: 25).

Pentia measures the happiness of their employees on the annual engagement survey from Great Place to Work. They are constantly in the top five and score 95% positively on employee engagement, which is very high (Interview P1: 8). The CTO argues that play is a contributing factor to this result (ibid.). In addition to being on the Great Place to Work list, Pentia won the title of *Europe's Funniest Workplace* in 2017. This has affected that their playfulness has become more publicly known and has affected that a lot of the focus on Pentia is on the psychical artefacts, such as the candy bar, pool table etc. (Interview P3: 23). This can be argued to be one of the negative effects, because it can result in people applying for a job in the organization only because of the benefits of the playful atmosphere and not because of the work itself.

Another negative effect is that because the employees are allowed to play every day, it can have the function of sedatives, meaning that the employees get so used to the benefits that they do not notice them anymore. This affects that *"things that suddenly can become a problem is crazy"* (Interview P2: 3). A final consideration that the COO mentions, is that she does not believe that the employees play enough with their client projects (Interview P4: 16). The reason for this is that when they work on projects with clients, they want to be seen as a serious business partner (ibid.). This statement contrasts the fact that the playing also seems to be the basis for the positive client and employee retention and relationship. Consequently, there are indications that Pentia still has some unexploited areas of play.

#### **4.1.6.2 Effects on Work Tasks**

In addition to organizational effects, we found evidence that playing has an impact on how the employees in Pentia perform their work tasks. The play activities that the employees engage in during the workday are used as a way of distancing themselves from work tasks, resulting in a break that gives the employees renewed energy and a new perspective on how to solve tasks when returning to work. (Interview P6: 7). Likewise, it is mentioned how the small intervals of play during a workday provides *"a break in the everyday life, meaning that you do not just work from 8 to 16 to perform a task and then go home again"* (Interview P8: 5). The acceptable breaks during the day provide more efficient employees, as one employee expresses about a former workplace: *"what I had been doing the last two hours could have been done in 15 minutes if I had had a break"* (Interview P8: 10). This indicates that even though they take out time to play, they save time in the end.

Another effect that employees mention as possible, but do not have concrete evidence of, is that when the employees do different activities or play different games, they change their approach to problem solving (Interview P4: 19). The COO expresses how she believes that if they play games that include associations and creativity, then the employees will develop more creative thinking skills, where they will be able to use play in the projects as well (ibid.). She says that *“it makes people less stiff in their way of thinking, so that it can jump around more easily”* (ibid.: 18). She points this out from a theoretical position, but if this happens in Pentia, then playing will affect work tasks by providing different solutions. This idea could possibly be the explanation why employees think they can easier return to solve a task after a playful break.

Another effect that many of the interviewees describe is how the playful activities make the employees collaborate better (Interview P1: 11; Interview P8: 4; Interview P3: 18). This happens *“when you meet your colleagues in a different setting”* (Interview P8: 3). As an example, they play *‘prisoners on the fort’* with the sole purpose of winning and playing (Interview P1: 11). This unfolds new sides of the employees and makes them interact in a new way across hierarchical layers (ibid.). Further, it contributes to the employees getting to know each other better and seeing each other in different situations, which positively affects the collaborations on tasks because *“you can use the new knowledge and cognizance to your colleagues to better understand their choices and actions”* (ibid.). Additionally, good collaboration may require that you *“need to know their boundaries, personality and how to talk and act in accordance with that”* (Interview P8: 4). This means that it is not solely business when colleagues interact, but rather includes a social layer (ibid.).

#### **4.1.6.3 Individual and Group Effects**

The overall effect that many interviewees mention is that play provides fun and laughter to their working day (Interview P4: 9; Interview P5: 1; Interview P7: 1; Interview P8: 4). It affects that *“you meet your colleagues in another way and makes it more fun to go to work”* (Interview P8: 3). Further, the fun element is also used as an argument for why employees stay in Pentia (Interview P7: 4), and that it makes it possible for employees to combine hobbies and work (Interview P8: 4). The fun activities make the employees laugh and makes it possible for them to *“make fun of themselves and not being that formal”* (Interview P4: 9). The activities offered by Pentia are also things that most people do not have access to at home, which makes it more interesting to participate in (Interview P8: 4).

Except from bringing fun into the employees' workday, the COO explains how it makes it possible to *"take off the mask you usually wear to put on another mask, but you are not as nervous about being put out to public ridicule, which gives access to a more honest part of yourself"* (Interview P4: 10). Another employee, who is relatively new in Pentia, agrees and states that having fun with her colleagues on the traditional game day made her start to show her true self in the workplace: *"in a way that is not as stiff and where you do not wear your work personality"* (Interview P5: 2). This demonstrates how the informal interaction with a focus on playing instead of working makes it easier for the employees to show their authentic personalities.

Another effect from play is how it makes the employees more loyal towards the organization (Interview P5: 3). An employee expresses that because she sees the CEO in a Pippi Longstocking outfit and the fact that the managers can make a fool of themselves *"melts her heart"* and makes the organization unique (ibid.). Another employee agrees and argues that because the management participates in the activities, it makes you *"feel like you can approach them, believe in them and makes you want to work for them because you feel supported by them"* (Interview P8: 7).

An effect resulting from Pentia's playful atmosphere is additionally that it improves and creates social relations (Interview P6: 3; Interview P7: 2; Interview P8: 6). One employee states that the activities *"make it possible to meet with someone that I am not on a project with"* (Interview P6: 4), and in addition increases the collaboration afterwards (ibid.). This indicates that the social activities make it possible to socialize across projects and departments. These social relations are very important to the employees and are one of the main reasons why it is fun to go to work (Interview P7: 1). Play provides a possibility for the employees to get a closer relationship (ibid.: 2), and makes it possible to interact with your colleagues outside work situations (Interview P8: 4), which according to another employee *"makes it possible to get to know each other, so that we do not have to pretend"* (Interview P4: 10). The social relations that are created through the informal interaction facilitated by play, creates a feeling of unity across functions (Interview P4: 15; Interview P5: 3) and further it makes the distance between employees shorter (Interview P3: 16). The possibility to play also affects that no days are the same, which challenges the employees on both social, emotional and work levels, providing a nice dynamic in the workday (Interview P5: 7). The playful activities also explain why there is such an informal atmosphere in general (Appendix 13; Interview P4: 9). According to the COO, the

informal atmosphere has been created through many years of doing it *'the Pentia way'* (Interview P4: 8-9).

Another impact that play contributes with is breaking down the functional roles and hierarchy (Interview P2: 5; Interview P4: 10). An example of this occurs when the student worker beats the CEO in table tennis, which according to the CEO creates equality (ibid.). The CEO describes how there is a difference between equality of status and equal worth, and that Pentia strives to have equal worth but not necessarily equality of status because there are still decisions that cannot be made by the democracy (Interview P2: 4).

In addition to all the positive effects, the employees mention some negative effects. One employee describes the freedom to play during a workday as a source of feeling guilty (Interview P6: 14). She gets this feeling if a colleague is looking for her, while she is playing. She fears that her colleagues believe she spends too much time playing (ibid.). This indicates that the idea of play being perceived as unserious and the fear of being seen as a slacker (Petelczyc, 2018: 178) also is present in Pentia. The employee expresses how she feels ambivalent, because in addition to feeling guilty, she believes that she will be more productive when she returns to work after playing (Interview P6: 14). In connection to this ambivalence, it can be argued that when employees ask themselves *"do I play too much"*, it says something about the employees' sense of the norms. In some ways, the frames for play in Pentia seem loose, since employees are trusted to know when to stop (Interview P1: 12), however, new employees find it challenging in terms of practicalities such as time registration: how much time are you allowed to register for play, and when have you spent so much time on play that it becomes your own expense? (Interview P5: 6-7). Thus, even though the frames are loose and there is a lot of trust from the management, time registration can be argued to work as a disciplinary tool. This is also supported by the statement that employees, who have been working at Pentia for a long time, do not really get confused about time registration anymore (ibid.: 7). Therefore, employees gradually become familiar with the norms.

Another recurring theme in Pentia is how the feelings and attitudes toward playing activities vary in the organization (Interview P4: 12; Interview P1: 12; Interview P2: 7; Interview P3: 8). The CEO expresses how people, who find it to be unserious and who have different values, have resigned from the company (Interview P2: 7). The CTO agrees by arguing that *"no one in Pentia thinks our way of*

*doing business is bad, and if they did, they have resigned*” (Interview P1: 7). This paints a picture of an organization, where the employees have to buy into the values in order to stay. Even though this indicates that the management believes that all employees like the “Pentia way”, the interviews show that some employees still find that the activities can be very transgressive (Interview P4: 15). Some employees choose to stay home on days like the Carnival celebration (ibid.), and others who feel that way try to cope with this unpleasant feeling (Interview P5: 3-4). One employee explains how she, as a new employee, experienced one of the theme days as very intrusive because it was very personal, and she had to say things she was not comfortable with (ibid.: 4). Further, she expresses how the spontaneous activities, such as table football, has so many internal rules that it can be awkward to participate (ibid.: 4). This shows that as a new employee it can be very difficult to participate in the activities, both because of how challenging it is to bring one’s feelings to the table and in addition to know the rules of the games (ibid.). Another perspective on the everyday play is that not all employees feel they have time to play (Interview P4: 18). If this is the case, it contradicts Pentia’s idea that the employees should have six hours of progress on client projects a day (Appendix 17: 3), which should make time available for other activities.

Except from people having difficulties participating in the activities or not having time to participate, some employees express how they think that it is a waste of time to have two game days a year (Interview P4: 16). It is expressed how these employees believe that the game days should be spent on developing new professional skills or learning about new technologies instead (ibid.: 21). This could indicate that the structured playing (carnival and game days) is perceived very differently. From the interviews and observations, it seems that the differences are somewhat linked to the different departments and somewhat to gender. During the observations, it was only male employees who engaged in activities, and from the interviews it seems that it is the developers, who are the fondest of the initiatives. According to the COO, the UX department wants to change the game days *“because they belong to the same group that do not necessarily have the same [positive] relationship to games as the backend developer group has”* (ibid.: 22).

#### **4.1.7 Summary of Effects**

All in all, the organizational effects are a better client retention and relation, and in addition it is easier for Pentia to recruit new employees and retain existing employees. On the negative side, the noise from the activities is disturbing for some employees and clients, and in addition, Pentia risks that

people apply for jobs just because they have heard about the playful artefacts. Moreover, the analysis questions if the employees are getting so used to the benefits, that they are taken for granted.

The most frequent effects on work tasks are that it works as a break providing new energy, it changes the approach to problem solving and perhaps provides more creativity into the work tasks. In addition, it creates better collaboration, because the employees get to know each other better. The effects on the employees have shown to be very diverse. The analysis shows a lot of positive effects, such as having fun, social relations, loyalty and the possibility to show one's true self. But in opposition to the positive effects, it has also shown to be the foundation of feeling awkward, guilty and simply not thinking that all of the structured play is a good idea.

## 4.2 Case Study #2: Nestlé

The following chapter is a case study on Nestlé, which includes a case description of Nestlé, followed by an analysis. As with the analysis of Pentia in the previous chapter, the first part of the analysis answers the first and second research objectives with a definition of play and the identification and exploration of specific examples of how play unfolds, but now in a completely different organization.

### 4.2.1 Case Description

Nestlé is the world's biggest food and beverage company and their vision is to promote nutrition, health and well-being in the world (Nestlé.com). To specify, this thesis only studies the Nordic branch of Nestlé, comprising of Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark.

In Nestlé an initiative called NCouragers started in 2015 (Interview N3: 2) which are: *"Nestlé Nordics' energetic ambassadors with the primary ambition to unfold Nestlé's culture and possibilities to all the people interested to know more about Nestlé as a great place to work."* (Nestlé.dk, a). NCouragers focuses on mental, social and physical health (Appendix 18) and has introduced a great number of activities and clubs to get the employees to focus on these different health issues (Interview N3). The NCouragers team plans many nutrition and health competitions where the employees compete in teams. This includes losing weight, eating healthy and exercising (Interview N2: 4).

Nestlé has their Nordic headquarters in Ørestaden where they are distributed on four different floors with a semi-opened office space (Appendix 14). On each floor there are signs of the NCouragers initiatives (ibid.). For instance, there are elastic bands and other equipment for physical training (ibid.). Furthermore, Nestlé has made a collaboration with Pleaz, which is a digital platform to activate and energize the employees with fun and challenging activities during meetings (Pleaz.dk). All these activities are to stimulate the health of the employees, but they can also be seen as fun and playful activities. The Nordic CEO of Nestlé, Michiel Kernkamp, says that the employees should prioritize in the following order: 1. Health, 2. Family and 3. Nestlé (Nestlé.dk, b).

According to the employees of Nestlé, they have a high-performance culture and are measured on different KPI's. Moreover, all employees are continuously making personal development goals (Interview N1: 2-3).

#### **4.2.2 Definitions of Play and Fun**

When asked about fun in the workplace, the employees mention laughing together, joking with each other, an informal tone, and spontaneous fun social breaks in between work tasks (Interview N2: 10; Interview N1: 7). It is, however, challenging to get Nestlé employees to define play in a workplace setting, since they do not associate play and work with each other. One employee explains how she thinks that people would perceive it as unserious, if Nestlé explicitly called their activities play: *"I think the word play can quickly be perceived as, maybe it is only children who do it, even if everyone should play, because it is also where the creativity unfolds"* (Interview N2: 14). Hence, she acknowledges some benefits of play, such as increased creativity, however, she thinks that people would perceive it as childish, unprofessional and something not worth prioritizing in a busy workday. Thus, it seems like the dichotomy between play and work, as described in section 2.3, lives in Nestlé. She further argues that it has something to do with the organization and its products and image: *"I think it would work really well at LEGO, because they (...) use play a lot in their wording of everything and stuff like that"* (Interview N2: 13). Thus, she thinks that play is more legitimate in a company producing toys than in a company producing food, which indicates that industry can also be a factor in terms of the acceptance of play in professional settings. Another employee agrees that naming activities play in Nestlé could affect the employees' interpretations of the initiatives as well as the number of participants (Interview N3: 16). Thus, since Nestlé does not label any of their activities play, they do not have a common language for play in the organization. The statements are,

therefore, mostly on a hypothetical level, which means that we cannot conclude on an empirical definition of play from the interviews alone.

#### 4.2.3 Perceived Purpose of Play

The examples of playful initiatives and activities investigated in Nestlé are a part of their health program called NCouragers. The Nordic Lead for the NCouragers program explains health like this:

*“not only is it an absence of illness, but it is also a mental presence and a balance of our mental, physical and social health, which is both about not being stressed and being in balance mentally and to feel socially part of our company and our team and feel that we are accepted for who we are and then at the same time we also have to physically move, not being inactive at work, but also being offered some healthy alternatives in the canteen”* (Interview N3: 2).

She argues that the purpose of the initiatives is not an employer branding strategy to attract new talents, but a focus on the wellbeing of existing employees: *“We care about your health and your happiness and therefore we are focusing on mental health, physical health and social health (...) We are here for you. We are not here to look like we are a fantastic workplace. We are here to make a difference for you”* (Interview N3: 16). Further, one of the employees connects the NCouragers program with Nestlé’s purpose and products, because: *“nutrition is a huge part of Nestlé”* (Interview N2: 12). This is also supported by the company vision: *“Enhancing quality of life and contributing to a healthier future”* (Nestle.com). Thus, the NCouragers program can be seen as a way of ‘walking the talk’ and not only promote quality of life externally, but internally as well.

Another employee argues that an additional purpose from the perspective of the management could be increased business performance:

*“In principle, my health is my private matter and that is my basic attitude, but at the same time I think it is good that the company cares about it, because they know that healthy, happy employees who get 7-8 hours of sleep and eat properly and make sure you feel good and that your family is well, then you perform better too”* (Interview N1: 10).

He therefore presents the purpose of the program as a win-win for the employees and the company, even though he is critical towards the blurry lines between working life and private life that the program creates.

As the focus of the activities is different areas of health, it is also evident from these examples that the purpose is not play or fun in itself and also not perceived that way by employees. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these initiatives do not include elements of play.

#### **4.2.4 How Play Unfolds**

Before investigating the effects of play on the employees' working lives in Nestlé, we map out the different activity offerings as well as analyze which ones can be considered to be play. This step is necessary and important, because Nestlé does not perceive their offerings as play, nor have they implemented them with a purpose of encouraging playful behavior in the organization. From the three interviews with employees as well as from documents, including three flyers and an evaluation report, it is clear that Nestlé offers many different events and activities to the employees in connection with the NCouragers program, which are presented in the following.

##### **4.2.4.1 Sports**

As the NCouragers initiative is a health program, it naturally includes a lot of sports activities. Examples include a sport called padel, which occurs monthly (Interview N3: 5), the opportunity to bike, run or stand on balance boards while working on your computer or being in Skype meetings (Interview N3: 6; Interview N1: 11; Nestlé Nordic, a) and elastic band training (Interview N2: 6; Interview N1: 12; Interview N3: 5; Appendix 19). The latter can either be a spontaneous, individual activity (Appendix 19), or a planned 10-minute group activity facilitated by an instructor (Interview N3: 5). When it occurs in the group setting, it can be argued that it is an example of a playful activity containing the element of a threshold experience (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 86-87). The Nordic Lead of the program explains the sessions like this:

*“For example, we always start elastic training by saying you have to make the ‘power pose’, because it dissipates energy and it gives a formation of endorphins, which makes us laugh. And then sometimes we say it's like Superman, and it is, at least in my view, that you play you are a hero.”* (Interview N3: 11).

Thus, the playful activity has the ability to create a threshold between convention and illusion (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 87) in such a way that you can become a superhero during play, even though you are not a superhero in reality.

#### 4.2.4.2 Competitions

Many of the playful activities in Nestlé occur through competitions, for instance to encourage the use of the bikes available in the office: *“bike competitions are run, where you compete in teams (...) who can bike the fastest to Vevey, our headquarters”* (Interview N3: 6). Other competitions are bigger and include many different behaviors and activities. These include elements of gamification, which can be defined as: *“the use of game design elements in non-game contexts”* (Deterding et al., 2011: 1 quoted in Petelczyc et al., 2018: 186), which is exemplified in the competition ‘Forever Healthy’, where employees are awarded and deducted points for e.g., certain amounts of sleep (Interview N1: 9). Hence, to sleep a certain number of hours a night, to refrain from eating sugar or to work standing up (Interview N1: 9; Interview N2: 6-7) are not playful activities in themselves, however, when they are integrated into a competition with game elements, they are transformed into play. In the competition employees compete in teams of five, which can be formed either cross-functional or within existing work teams (Interview N2: 6; Interview N3: 15). One of the reasons for making the competitions is to encourage more people to participate, and in the most recent version of the competition, there were up to 200 employees participating (Interview N3: 14; Interview N2: 6).

#### 4.2.4.3 Meeting Room Activities

One of the more recent initiatives in Nestlé is a digital platform for meeting rooms, which encourages employees to take active breaks and do fun individual or social exercises during virtual or physical meetings (Interview N3:6; Nestlé Nordic, b). An example of these exercises could be:

*“something where you stand two against two and have to compete or have to do some clapping exercise, which is typically a little transgressive, but which causes both brain hemispheres to get a little out of function, and you create some energy and smile some more”* (Interview N3:6).

Another employee explains it in a similar way with a group ball activity:

*“So I would say, it is few who can, when they just try it, catch the balls (...) so most people lose them and you stand there laughing and you get bent down so you get some things activated in the body”* (Interview N2: 9).

Thus, both of them highlight the social and physical aspects of these activities. Another employee, who does not use the platform, describes it as *“pure play”* (Interview N1: 11), and the Nordic Lead of the program also argues for play elements inherent in the activities:

*“we have incorporated a lot of play, for example throwing with balls. And it has typically turned out to bring out the inner child in even the top management when I have run these activities for them, because then such a thing arises ... I think a kind of instinctive feeling of being a boy again and standing with his balls.”* (Interview N3: 11).

Thus, she touches upon the intrinsic motivation of play, even within adult professionals.

According to the definition applied in this thesis, the activities do have elements of play to them. As mentioned before, many of the activities make people laugh together, which indicates positive affect as an outcome (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 90). Further, we are told and have observed that these activities normally last about five minutes (Interview N3: 6; Interview N1: 7; Appendix 14), which marks clear boundaries in time (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 87). One can also argue that there is a loose and flexible association between the means and ends (ibid.: 90), because employees just do it for the fun and energy, not as a deliberate and reliable method to achieve certain meeting goals. Because play in this sense takes place as break activities, it falls under the terminology of diversionary play (ibid.: 92) or in-between-play, which is the lowest level of organizational play (Thorsted, 2013: 46).

#### **4.2.4.4 Celebrations, Clubs and Social Health**

As previously mentioned, Nestlé’s definition of health includes the aspect of social health, which is why the NCouragers program also includes events and activities that are more focused towards socializing than physical activity. Examples of these include celebrations of Easter and Christmas as well as more unconventional celebrations like International Coffee Day and Whole Grain Day (Interview N3: 6).

As another social offer outside of working hours, Nestlé have different clubs, including an art club, a wine club and a golf club (Interview N2: 4-5; Appendix 18). The way it works is that an employee takes the initiative to start a club, and then Nestlé contributes with resources. Additionally, some clubs just emerge within departments. For instance, the Sales department hosts poker nights outside of working hours (Interview N2: 11).

What is particularly interesting about these social events, compared to the rest of the events in the program, is that they primarily occur outside of working hours:

*“So I think I would put it like this, that when it is purely social events, then many of them are outside working hours, and that is also strategic, because if it is within working hours, it should have more elements than just social, and I think that it works better too, because then people can more easily justify going to an event in the middle of working hours, if it has an element of health or an element of mental health, rather than being only social”* (Interview N3: 9).

Hence, it can be interpreted as if physical and mental health are perceived as more legitimate than social health in the organization, and that some of the norms from the industrial society are still part of the employees’ mental models, making social play and fun too unserious and distinct from serious work tasks. It can also be interpreted as a result of the performance culture of Nestlé, which was briefly described in the case description and will be elaborated further in section 4.3. Besides the already presented examples, Table 4 offers a more comprehensive list.

5 elements of play	A threshold experience	Boundaries in time and space	Uncertainty-freedom-constraint	A loose and flexible association between means and ends	Positive affect
Examples of play in Nestlé Nordic					
Forever Healthy Competition		✓	✓		✓
DHL run		✓			✓
Friday bar		✓			✓
Table football tournament		✓	✓	✓	✓
Elastic band training	✓	✓			✓
Mindfulness session		✓			✓
Whole grain day		✓			✓
Meeting room activities (Pleaz)		✓	✓	✓	✓
Golf Club		✓		✓	✓
Wine Club		✓		✓	✓
Art Club		✓		✓	✓
Tribe (innovation project – 30% of your time is “free play”)		✓	✓	✓	✓
Balance boards or bikes by the desks		✓			✓
Poker night	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Padel sports		✓	✓	✓	✓
Easter Egg Hunting		✓	✓	✓	✓
Christmas Calendar		✓	✓	✓	✓
Bike competition – “Who arrives at Vevey first”		✓	✓		✓

**Table 4: Activity Overview, Nestlé**

#### 4.2.4.5 Planned versus Spontaneous Play

From the examples above, it is evident that most of the play activities and events are planned, such as the scheduled group activities, competitions and celebratory events, whereas only few things happen more spontaneously, such as the use of balance boards, elastic bands or the digital platform in meetings. They do, however, see an increase in spontaneous activities after having run the NCouragers program for five years:

*“Well, you can say that with Pleaz [the digital platform], it has become such a thing that you do spontaneously, but I also find that more and more people spontaneously go and get a balance board and spontaneously pick up the bike (...) So more spontaneous activity has emerged because of the culture but also the workplace makes it so clear that there is room for it”* (Interview N3: 9).

This indicates that attitudes, perceptions and norms of play and unconventional activities in the office can change over time, which may increase the possibility of more spontaneous play in Nestlé in the future.

Nevertheless, most playful activities in Nestlé are still carefully planned and advertised internally to employees. Here, it can be difficult to please everyone, as too little information and limited ambassadorship from managers may result in too few participants (Interview N3: 11-12), whereas too much internal advertising may annoy some employees (Interview N1: 5). One employee explains how having the planned events and activities in her calendar helps her to make use of it more: *“I have it in my calendar, so it gets sent out and you can choose to accept so that it appears in your calendar, because otherwise you often forget about it.”* (Interview N2: 4). Therefore, carefully planning and making initiatives visible to the employees can encourage more people to participate, however, at the same time it is a manifestation that Nestlé is still on the lowest organizational play level. They are not yet at a point, where play is natural for everyone to include in internal processes, which is a characteristic of the highest organizational play level in Thorsted’s terminology (Thorsted, 2013: 49).

As discussed earlier, planned play can be experienced as more forced than spontaneous play and lose its element of intrinsic motivation, however, the employees at Nestlé do have the option of involvement in the program, as it is a program primarily driven by volunteers (Interview N3: 3). Furthermore, an employee argues that there is a really open culture in terms of contributing ideas, and she feels comfortable going straight to the Nordic CEO, if she has a good idea (Interview N2: 3), demonstrating that employees can easily start new initiatives themselves.

#### **4.2.4.6 Voluntariness and Participation**

According to the interviewees, participating in the NCouragers is 100% voluntary, resulting in some employees participating a lot, whereas others do not participate at all (Interview N3: 5; Interview N2:

4; Interview N1: 5). Many different reasons for this are mentioned in the interviews, including organizational culture, age, professional function and to what extent you care about your physical health (ibid.). One of the employees, who does not use the activities, argues that he is too old, that it is about creating habits and that it is something you do not prioritize, if you have a very busy workday (Interview N1: 5-6). In his view, some of the employees, who use it the most, are the people from Sales, because they are very competitive (ibid.: 9). Further, the Nordic Lead of the program mentions how the IT department rarely participates:

*“a good example is IT, (...) who may be socially different (...) they are insanely social within their own group, but they are not so social outside of it. And it also means that they typically do not participate in the activities where you are social with everyone”* (Interview N3: 5).

Therefore, it could seem as if certain activities attract some departments more than others, indicating different interests and priorities across functions.

In terms of participation, there is a pattern of age and stage in life, where the Nordic Lead divides employees into a green, yellow and red group (Interview N3: 5). Here, the green ones are the ones who are really open to try out the different initiatives and activities, typically young people without children and who really care about physical health, whereas the yellow ones are typically young parents or employees higher up in the professional hierarchy, who are often really busy (ibid.). The red group, on the other hand, is not connected to life stage, but linked to the fact that different departments have different interest as mentioned above (ibid.).

The overall perception of the interviewees seems to be that the initiatives are not yet being used by that many employees (Interview N1: 8; Interview N3: 10), however, they have a KPI called ‘activation’, which shows that there is a 50% increase in employees who participate actively (Interview N3: 4). Also, they experience an increase in the number of people who want to volunteer as facilitators (ibid.). In terms of the number of participants per activity, an employee mentions that normally they are around 5-15 participants in the weekly mindfulness session, however, when the competitions run, the same activity attracts around 30-35 people (Interview N2: 4), indicating that employees are more engaged, when activities are gamified.

#### **4.2.5 Summary of Definition, Purpose and How Play Unfolds**

Summing up, it is hard to find a common definition of play in Nestlé, as their activities are not labelled as play and since employees do not associate work and play with each other. Fun, on the other hand, is associated with laughter, an informal tone and social breaks. In terms of the purpose of play, the perceptions of the employees are highly influenced by the branding of the NCouragers program, which focuses on health and wellbeing. Thus, employees associate the playful activities with ‘walking the talk’ in connection to the company mission of enhancing quality of life as well as increasing business performance. When exploring specific examples of how play unfolds in Nestlé, it is evident that several playful activities are offered as a part of the NCouragers program. Most of them are connected to sports or competitions, where the company tries to gamify healthy behavior as a means to motivate participation. Playful activities with the sole purpose of socializing seem to be less legitimate and are therefore planned outside of working hours. Play happens primarily in a planned manner as break activities, which means that spontaneous play happens less frequently, and that play does not happen as an integrated part of work. The playful activities are 100% voluntary, and the overall perception is that the initiatives are not yet used enough, however, participation is growing. Employees vary a lot in terms of how much they participate, which seems to be influenced by age/ stage in life as well as professional function.

Having developed an understanding of how play unfolds in Nestlé, this sets the scene for the next part of the analysis, which explores what effects from play that employees experience in Nestlé.

#### **4.2.6 Effects of Play**

The following paragraphs answer the third research objective about identifying and exploring specific examples of effects that play has on work tasks, employees and the organization in general. This is answered by using the data collected in Nestlé.

##### **4.2.6.1 Organizational and Work Task Effects**

In Nestlé we find evidence that the playful activities have started to become legitimate by articulating that it is okay to take breaks (Interview N2: 6). The playful activities make the employees get away from the computer, think about something else and clear their minds before they return to the task (Interview N2: 10; Interview N3: 4). Thus, after having participated in an activity, it feels more manageable to perform the work tasks (Interview N3: 14). Furthermore, an employee mentions how

the playful break potentially makes you come up with more creative solutions (Interview N2: 8). In this stream of thought, she does, however, come with the critique, that it is difficult to quantify creativity and that it is, therefore, just a feeling (ibid.)

The data further shows that the employees believe that the activities increase their energy level. An example of how the energy rises is for instance the new initiative Pleaz, which has the purpose of bringing up the energy during meetings (Interview N3: 6). When they use the Pleaz activities in meetings, they believe it can provide a break from the meeting and in addition it can loosen up the mood and atmosphere (Interview N2: 8). An employee explains how the employees get *“the two brain hemispheres to work together. By throwing balls to each other it provides laughs which effects the energy in the room”* (ibid.). The laughs and smiles that the activities cause are also mentioned by another employee, who argues that when they take breaks to do elastic band training, it is *“always with a big smile”* (Interview N3: 11). She further explains how the elastic band training contains elements that have the purpose of releasing endorphins and make the employees laugh (ibid.:6).

On the more negative side, the employees describe how other branches of Nestlé, who do not have these initiatives, say things like *“perhaps you should focus more on your numbers instead of taking breaks, or focus more on your work instead”* (Interview N2: 15). Hence, employees outside the Nordics do not see these activities as a positive thing, which can affect the view on Nestlé Nordic and their cooperation with the rest of the organization. Furthermore, employees may decide not to participate in the activities, if they feel judged by the other branches of the company.

Nestlé has experienced people getting stressed and therefore going on sick leave (Interview N1: 4). According to the interviews, the reason for this is the expectations and pressure of high performance (ibid.: 4). It cannot be concluded whether the activities could have a positive effect on this, but since a new culture focusing on the health of the employees has started to arise (Interview N3: 4), it could indicate that Nestlé can experience a positive development in that direction in the future. The different cultures are investigated further in section 4.3.

#### **4.2.6.2 Individual and Group Effects**

The data also shows evidence of effects from playful activities on the employees. It is described how the activities have shown to get the inner child to appear in even the top management because an

instinctive feeling of being a child again occurs (Interview N3: 11). Besides from the energy, the inner child and the positive atmosphere that the playful activities provide, the employees describe how the activities prevent lifestyle diseases (Interview N1: 6). An employee explains: *“I know that one of my colleagues has lost 20 kilos and has really started to work out and in addition have pointed focus to mindfulness”* (Interview N2: 7). This shows that the activities in Nestlé have activated some employees to change their habits or as an employee says: *“it has at least inspired someone that would not normally get it done”* (ibid.).

This participation and activation of employees has mostly happened during the periods of competition (Interview N3: 7). In these periods, more people have participated, and this has affected that the employees have increased their level of activity afterwards (ibid.). This highlights that the motivation for participation is driven by the want to win the challenge (ibid.). The Nordic Lead describes how the feedback from the employees from these competitions are statements like *“this is awesome”* (ibid.: 10). Thus, these competitions have resulted in increased commitment from the employees, where they have shown to a larger extent, that they want to invest their time and resources to participate (ibid.: 7).

Additionally, the data shows evidence of the activities providing cross-functional interaction in Nestlé (Interview N2: 4). Further, the breakdown of the groupings makes the employees get to know each other on a deeper level (ibid.). One employee mentions how it is the relationships in Nestlé that is the strongest part of the organization, and in addition how getting to know each other has developed into having work relations that become private friends who you can go on holidays with (ibid.).

In addition, one employee emphasizes how playful break activities bring energy into the teamwork. She states that *“when you laugh together and you can goof around together, then it has the effect of a more open dialogue with each other”* (Interview N2: 4). In this regard, the activities affect that the employees create more trust in one another, which both affects the work tasks and the individual perception of their wellbeing (ibid.: 9). She explains how not being very good at all activities shows that no one is perfect, which again provides more openness between colleagues (ibid.: 10). The openness and enhanced teamwork also develop during the more competitive activities (Interview N3: 15). Here, the employees show a great cohesion with each other (Interview N3: 15). The employees have to compete in teams, and the effect is that the employees become more social, support each other

and in addition have the possibility to win a social prize (Interview N3: 15). This kind of team competition is one of the signs of how Nestlé tries to improve the social health as well.

Another effect in Nestlé is that not all employees find the initiatives useful (Interview N1: 5). One employee states how he believes that at some point there were too many activities and how it all just became overwhelming (Interview N1: 9). This is backed up by another employee, who argues that some employees may think *“why should we spend our time on this, it is just another HR initiative”* (Interview N2: 15). She explains how some employees find it annoying that all these new activities arise (Interview N2: 15). This indicates that the organization does not have the support from all employees for these activities, which affects that the activities for this group of employees perhaps become a source of irritation.

Another negative effect stated is that *“you are getting bombarded with stuff that you should do”* (Interview N1: 6). Another employee argues that the activities can sometimes be seen as transgressive (Interview N3: 6), and that it seems very silly to participate (Interview N1: 5). One of the people, who started the NCouragers, argues that *“you cannot hit them all”* (Interview N2: 7), meaning that there cannot be activities that will be in everyone’s interest. This problem is also addressed because many of the participants are not the ones who need the physical activities the most (ibid.: 6). This could indicate that the effects of the activities are only applicable for a certain group of employees, which will have the effect of not being able to change the mindset of the entire organization.

In addition to the interviews, we received an internal evaluation report, which shows that 176 out of 417 employees in Nestlé did not think, did not know or answered neither/nor to whether the NCouragers program were of value to them. This demonstrates that there are a lot of employees in Nestlé who do not see the effects of the activities. Moreover, the report shows that 252 out of 415 answered that they were very motivated to live a healthier life through the NCouragers program (ibid.). This indicates that there is a foundation for Nestlé to get more employees to experience the effects and therefore get the value as an organization.

#### **4.2.6.3 Change in the Effects of Play**

The employees in Nestlé describe how there has been a change in the perceptions of the playful activities in the organization. Earlier, activities were perceived as laughable, whereas now people are

more serious about the purpose of the activities and “*there has therefore been a change where it has become more normal to be active in the workplace*” (Interview N3: 10). This ongoing change also shows in how the key ambassadors of the NCouragers are trying to spread the vision in Nestlé. One of the main problems is to get the management to participate and thereby signal that it is okay to participate in the activities (ibid.: 11). According to one of the interviewees, the managers have an even more rigid culture and they do not perceive a working day to include these activities (ibid.: 12). The fact that it is difficult to get the managers to support the activities makes the effects of the program less visible and could potentially result in Nestlé not getting the full value of the activities. In addition, the managers hereby contribute to the more performance-based mindset, and thereby they reduce the chance that the new focus on mental, physical and social health will become a success.

#### **4.2.7 Summary of Effects**

Overall, the effects of the playful activities in Nestlé are that people get away from their computers and obtain new energy that can positively affect work tasks, and even change their approach to problem solving. It is clear that not all employees find the activities useful or attractive, and in addition, that employees outside the Nordic countries believe it is a waste of time. Many of the employees in Nestlé want to participate but are not doing it at the moment. The analysis indicates that it is because people are judged on their individual performance and therefore will not spend time on it.

One of the effects that the playful activities have on the employees is that it creates a positive atmosphere and energy. In addition, people lose weight, and the competitive elements are the foundation of a commitment that enhance the teamwork and potentially makes people more creative. The analysis also shows that a change of perceptions is happening. This affects that the Lead of NCouragers still needs to spend a lot of time trying to convince the managers that they have to be pioneers and signal that they wish for the employees to participate. If this does not happen, it is possible that the employees will keep thinking that it is silly, and that Nestlé will not experience the full effects of the activities.

## 4.3 Organizational Culture

In the two previous chapters, the effects of play in both Nestlé and Pentia were investigated. The second part of the research question addresses to what extent the effects vary in different organizational settings, which requires a comparison. Before comparing Pentia and Nestlé, an analysis of their cultures is conducted. The understanding of the cultures provides a basis from which we can compare the effects that were discovered in the two separate analyses and help to investigate why differences occur. In order to understand the cultures of Pentia and Nestlé, we apply Schein's culture framework (1984).

### 4.3.1 Schein's Culture Framework

According to Schein, culture is *“the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems”* (Schein, 1984: 3). In order to understand the culture of an organization, it should be analyzed at different levels starting with the artefacts, which are *“the constructed environment of the organization”* (ibid.). In order to analyze the reason for people's behavior, the second level is to look for the values (ibid.). The values are what the employees say and ideally would like to be the reason for their behavior. The third level is to cover the underlying reasons for the behavior, the underlying assumptions, which are typically unconscious (ibid.). The following sections analyze the artefacts and values that the employees in Pentia and Nestlé disclose. In terms of the underlying assumptions, this thesis tries to cover some of the areas, but since it would require a data collection with the specific purpose of revealing the basic assumptions (ibid.: 13), it is currently not possible to fully analyze these. Schein's framework is, however, still helpful in order to understand the culture, because the values used for problem solving will gradually transform into underlying assumptions (ibid.: 4).

### 4.3.2 Culture in Pentia

#### 4.3.2.1 Artefacts

Pentia is located on Islands Brygge in an old building that was previously used to build zeppelins in (Appendix 13). It is a very open office with three floors, where the middle part is open all the way up (ibid.). The office layout consists of small clusters of desks on all floors. By most desks people have

toys or posters and the lamps are see-through with toys inside (Appendix 13). The ground floor consists of meeting rooms, a canteen, pool table, billiard table, an arcade/gaming room, a candy bar and areas with couches and soft chairs to relax in (ibid.). There are playful elements everywhere you look, such as LEGO figures in the meeting rooms and Star Wars paintings on the wall (ibid.). The lunch area consists of one long table and has a refrigerator with all kinds of sodas (ibid.). Down from the ceiling there are model aircrafts and a zeppelin. The meeting rooms on the first and second floor are smaller and have different themes, such as a normal living room, a room with a leather couch and a globe bar, and a scrum room without chairs (with the purpose of short meetings) where it is possible to write directly on the walls (ibid.). The meeting rooms have names such as ‘Create’ and ‘Innovate’ (ibid.). The employees are dressed very casually in everyday clothes, such as jeans and a sweatshirt, and there seems to be no specific dress code (ibid.).

#### 4.3.2.2 Values

According to the CEO, Pentia really believes in their values: Fun, Respect and Responsibility (Interview P2: 2). The CTO argues that the basis of their values is to create a workplace where they are happy to be (Interview P1: 4). A part of this includes removing a lot of the unknown factors of being a consultant, such as how much you have to work, by having a flexible 37-hour work week (ibid.: 5). They describe the culture as a workplace with an informal tone, a flat hierarchy and where there is a lot of trust (ibid.; Interview P8: 2; Interview P7: 4). This means that the employees have a lot of co-determination (Interview P8: 2), and freedom with responsibility (Interview P1: 2). The management believes that when they give their employees freedom and co-determination, they get it back from them, which can be seen on the financial results and employee engagement (ibid.: 8.). The co-determination is also expressed as “*democracy tyranny*”, which means that all employees have a say in most decisions. However, when the democracy decides something, it is expected that the employees support the decision afterwards (Interview P8: 2). As the CTO says; “*it is all about involving the employees*” (Interview P1: 10). Even though they have co-determination, they have the principle that “*the shit floats up*” (Interview P2: 1), meaning that the employees need to take responsibility, but it is the CEO’s responsibility to handle critical problems (ibid.).

Pentia is a workplace where there is room to make mistakes without being punished, which makes space for people to play not to escape from work but to support the work (Interview P1: 6). In addition, Pentia is described as a workplace with a community focus instead of focusing on individual careers

(Interview P1: 4). This means that they do have performance goals and ambitions, but it is not a performance driven culture. The employees are evaluated on common KPIs instead of individual results (Interview P3: 4-5). Pentia describes this as working with a different bottom line about employee satisfaction (Interview P2: 3). Furthermore, the culture in Pentia is explained as inclusive, where everyone can be who they are (Interview P3: 3), as very human, transparent and democratic (Interview P5: 2), and as a nice, caring and fun place to work (Interview P6: 3; Interview P8: 4). The employees describe that they have strong social relationships, that Pentia is a very playful workplace with space for fun and laughter. However, they also describe Pentia as a serious workplace.

#### 4.3.2.3 Basic Assumptions

One of the best ways to analyze the basic assumptions is to look at how new employees are socialized into the organization (Schein, 1984: 13). In order for new employees to adopt the same assumptions as the rest of the organization, all new employees in Pentia are assigned a mentor, whose role is to teach the professional competences but also to teach how to be socially involved (Interview P7: 2). Further, new employees are advised to participate in the playful activities during the workday (ibid.). According to Pentia's onboarding survey, Pentia scores 4.71 out of 5 on how well the employees think they have understood the work culture and company values (Appendix 17: 29). Pentia introduces new employees to the culture and values and hire new employees from personality and value criteria that match the culture and values of Pentia (ibid.: 17). They do this because they want to hire employees who can support and enrich the Pentia spirit (ibid.). Many employees mention the Pentia Spirit as something that is present in the organization, and when they have to explain it, it is something where they *"take care of each other and are genuinely interested in one another and that all are feeling well"* (Interview P6: 5), and that *"it is the people before anything else"* (Interview P8: 2). This aligns with the values and culture that the management describes as being the foundation of Pentia, and in addition it aligns with the purpose that the founders built the organization on.

The management believes that the values of Pentia are internalized by all employees, and that problem solving is guided by the values (Interview P1: 2). This is supported by the CEO's statement that it is easy to be the CEO in Pentia, because all choices he makes are guided by the values (Interview P2: 3). Hence, it seems that the values and culture of Pentia are very solid. According to Schein (1984: 7), the strength of a culture is somehow related to the stability and shared experiences of a group. The

stability of the management, low employee turnover and all the activities, therefore, seem as arguments for why the culture is strong in Pentia.

#### **4.3.2.4 Summary of Pentia's Culture**

In summary, the culture of Pentia is very internalized by the employees. The analysis of the artefacts shows that there are playful activities and artefacts everywhere. The organization has a strong community-focus and rewards team efforts. The articulated values, that there are room for mistakes and room for playing and fun, seem to correspond with the identified basic assumptions, which are still affected by the founders' idea of a close community with space for fun, while earning money. That these values have become basic assumptions can be seen by the way that even new employees internalize and follow them.

### **4.3.3 Culture in Nestlé**

#### **4.3.3.1 Artefacts**

Nestlé is located in Amager in a shared office building, in which they have four floors (Appendix 14). In order to enter Nestlé, you need to register at the entrance, and as a visitor you need to be picked up in the reception because all floors have gates that can only be opened with an employee key card (ibid.).

At first sight, it is not very obvious what kind of organization Nestlé is, but when you look closer there are many different Nestlé products (Nespresso, Nesquik etc.) around the office (Appendix 14). The office is somewhat open with small clusters of desks in different rooms. The floors are very long with small meeting rooms in the middle, dividing the desk areas from the small kitchens (ibid.). At all floors there are small areas with elastic bands and balance boards with instructions on how to use them and other flyers about different NCouragers initiatives (ibid.). The furniture is colorful and comes in many different shapes (ibid.). The meeting rooms on the side are very bright with panoramic views. In most meeting rooms there are screens and small labels that say: "*Remember an active break – Visit Pleaz.work*" (ibid.), to remind the employees that they have the option to do a Pleaz activity, plus instructions on how to do so.

The employees are dressed casual or business casual, such as dark jeans, a nice shirt and leather boots (Appendix 14). The employees seem to interact mostly with the colleagues in their own teams and

there is not much “traffic” on the stairs (Appendix 14). On their Instagram profile they share many collegial activities such as dinners, ‘bring your pet to work’ and in addition many videos of how training (mental and physical) can be a part of a workday (Nestlé Nordic, c).

#### 4.3.3.2 Values

According to the employees of Nestlé, the mantra of the Nordic CEO is: *“Health, Family, Nestlé – in that order”* (Interview N2: 11). This means that they believe that in order to perform well, the employees need to have control over their own health, prioritize their family and then they can focus on Nestlé (Interview N2: 11; Interview N1: 3). This mantra is mentioned by all the interviewed employees.

The culture in Nestlé is described as open, and a place where people are good at sparring with each other, giving feedback, listening and coaching (Interview N2: 3). In addition, the tone is relaxed and informal (Interview N1: 7), and Nestlé is a place where the bonds between the employees are very strong (Interview N2: 2). Several employees describe how they feel that Nestlé is a flexible workplace and that they have freedom with responsibility (Interview N2: 2; Interview N1: 4). Another symbol of the culture is that there is an openness regarding new initiatives and that there is *“not a very long way to the top of Nestlé”* (Interview N1: 12). The employees feel they can address the top management with new ideas and that there will be taken action on the ideas (Interview N2: 3). They explain how the management is casual and that they interact with the employees by for instance *“talking about everyday stuff by the coffee machine”* (Interview N1: 13).

The above described culture that has a human health focus is still relatively new, since the CEO introduced it only four years ago (Interview N3: 3-4). Therefore, the data also shows that the employees describe the culture with an alternative focus. They describe it as a high-performance culture, where all employees have to make goals and have to improve and provide results (Interview N1: 2-3). It is described how there is a lot of pressure, which can sometimes be too much, and that the goals they have to achieve are very tough (ibid.: 3). It is described how this part of the culture can be a source of stress (ibid.).

This two-sided culture is articulated by one of the employees as: *“On the one side we have this high performing culture, and on the other side we have a CEO, who says that first it’s you, then your*

*family and then Nestlé*” (Interview N1: 3). The same employee also states that Nestlé is a very complex organization, since it consists of four countries with five categories and that they work very silo-based, where the culture in the different parts of Nestlé can vary (ibid.: 4).

#### **4.3.3.3 Basic assumptions**

We do not have sufficient evidence from Nestlé to conclude whether the human health or the high-performance culture, or both of them, are a part of the basic assumptions, but there are signs that the values point in both directions and even that there are different cultures in different subgroups of Nestlé. However, according to Schein, there can be cultural subgroups but still be a common corporate culture (Schein, 1984: 7).

The values described could indicate that Nestlé currently experience a change in the culture that started with the CEO’s new focus. According to the employee leading the NCouragers program: *“it has affected the entire organization for the last four years because there is starting to become more space for new initiatives, which puts the health first”* (Interview N3: 4). She experiences the change because more money has been allocated for the program, and, in addition, because the management has said: *“now we have to change the culture even more, so that it becomes even better to be an employee at Nestlé”* (ibid.). Moreover, this change is expressed in how they have built a culture today where *“it is okay to spend an hour during the week to attend elastic band training or mindfulness sessions or even go down to have breakfast”* (ibid.).

The change from only being focused on performance to have a focus on health is therefore present in Nestlé. Whether the health part is as integrated as the performance part in the employees’ mindset is difficult to decide, and therefore difficult to conclude whether it is fully a part of the basic assumptions and culture of Nestlé. From the interviews it seems that all the employees are aware of the focus, but not all of them are using it for problem solving. As one of the employees expresses, it is about how you change your habits and decide to invest the time to involve yourself in the activities (Interview N1: 12). This could indicate that they are making progress, which also shows in how they display it both on social media and in how they try to convince the managers to become ambassadors of the change in order to try to activate more employees (Interview N3: 12).

#### 4.3.3.4 Summary of Nestlé's Culture

In summary, the artefacts found in Nestlé are not very playful, but there are signs of how they try to convince the employees to take active breaks. The articulated values in Nestlé seem to be the mantra: first your health, then your family and then Nestlé. The focus on the social, mental and physical health of employees has entered during the last four years. This is also why these values perhaps have not become basic assumptions yet. The findings suggest that Nestlé is currently trying to change their culture from a high-performance culture to a culture where the health of the employees is more important. It is therefore ambiguous what the basic assumptions are now, because it seems to be individual whether the employees have adopted the new values or not.

### 4.4 Comparative Analysis

As described in section 3.5.2, we have chosen to conduct two individual case studies with the aim of doing comparisons and a cross-case analysis in order to investigate whether the organizational context influences how play affects employees' working lives. Therefore, this section compares the findings from the two case studies. The comparison is done by presenting similarities and differences between the two cases, followed by an analysis of why these similarities and differences may occur with the cultural analysis as a starting point and common frame.

#### 4.4.1 Similarities

Even though Pentia and Nestlé are two very different organizations and even though play unfolds in different ways in their individual settings, some effects of play seem to be similar across the two cases. Firstly, employees from both organizations report that play makes them smile and laugh and have fun together with their colleagues, clearly supporting the theories suggesting that organizational play involves positive affect (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 90; Statler et al., 2011: 238).

Secondly, diversionary play (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 92) or in-between-play (Thorsted, 2013: 46) occurs in both organizations, meaning that play is used as a way of getting a mental break from work tasks and a physical break from computer screens, which helps employees to restore energy and focus better when returning to their work tasks. This finding is not too surprising, as it has been argued in the literature that mental breaks are especially important for employees in knowledge intensive roles (Hunter et al., 2010: 97), and that diversionary play has the ability to facilitate cognitive

restoration (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 103). Thus, this should also apply to our cases, as all interviewees in the study are knowledge workers.

Thirdly, both organizations report positive social effects, such as the creation and improvement of cross-functional interpersonal relationships, a more open and informal dialogue as well as getting to know coworkers more in-depth, resulting in better collaboration. These findings are in line with the previously discussed literature on how organizational play contributes to a friendlier atmosphere (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 175) and its ability to break down functional barriers (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 108). Fourthly, employees from both organizations hypothesize about organizational play positively affecting creativity, however, none of them are able to provide concrete examples of if this actually happens.

Fifthly, competition seems to be an important element in both cases. In the Nestlé case it is especially prevalent, as competitions get more employees to participate. For instance, there are examples of activities where the number of participants more than doubles, when an activity is included in a competition (Interview N2: 4). It is less explicit in the Pentia case, however, almost all activities include an element of competition, such as table football and billiard. It is also mentioned how even the carnival has become competitive in terms of winning the award for the most original costume (Interview P8: 8).

Pentia and Nestlé not only share similarities in positive effects, but experience some of the same negative effects as well. These include that some employees find certain play activities to be transgressive and uncomfortable or simply a waste of time. Time is a factor in both cases in terms of people who do not participate in play activities, as play has lower priority if you have a tight deadline or have a family you want to get home to. In general, both organizations experience that employees vary in their degree of participation, and in both cases the professional function, age, individual life stage and personal interests are mentioned as some of the most common reasons for this variation.

Although the purpose of this study has never been to test existing theory, we do acknowledge that the majority of similarities in effects from the above findings are in line with existing literature. This can naturally be the explanation why it is possible to find these similar effects of play in two seemingly different organizational settings.

#### 4.4.2 Differences

Just as Pentia and Nestlé share many similarities in terms of effects from organizational play, they also vary on several dimensions. One of the positive effects that is mentioned in the Pentia case is how their playful organizational environment creates an informal frame that results in good client- and employee retention together with easier talent attraction. Contrastingly, it is explicitly mentioned in the Nestlé case how the NCouragers, and thereby the playful activities, is not an employer branding strategy. It can, however, be argued that the initiatives may still have an effect on job applicants, as pictures and videos of these initiatives are shared on social media (Interview N3: 16; Nestlé Nordic, c). Therefore, it cannot be ruled out, that play has an impact on talent attraction in Nestlé, even if it is not intended.

As earlier mentioned, employees from both cases experience increased energy levels from play. However, only Pentia employees explicitly comment on increased productivity as an outcome of play. Instead, when focusing on increased energy levels, Nestlé employees argue from a biological point of view in terms of how the brain and body are activated and influenced by play. This underlines that the premise of introducing play into the organizational setting has been completely different in the two organizations.

Another positive effect mentioned in the Pentia case is how play breaks down hierarchical boundaries and allows employees to “take off their masks” or not wear their “work personalities” and become a truer version of themselves in the work setting. This is not explicitly mentioned in the Nestlé case. Here, the closest thing to such an effect is the comment that play brings out the inner child in the employees. However, there are also indications that some Nestlé employees may not want to “take off their work personalities”. One employee mentions how he would rather do some of the NCouragers activities in private (Interview N1: 10), pointing towards a wish to separate his private and working life. The opposite holds true for another employee, who argues how the relationships with colleagues extend into her private life (Interview N2: 4). Therefore, there is a chance that this difference is connected to individual preferences rather than organizational differences.

Comparing Pentia and Nestlé in Table 5, it is clear that play exists in many forms in both organizations, however, what also catches the eye is how Pentia has more check marks in the “threshold experience”-column. Hence, it can be argued that Pentia employees are more likely to

experience a threshold between convention and illusion, allowing them to experiment with realities, roles and identities during play to a higher extent than Nestlé's employees are. Furthermore, Pentia ticks off more columns in general and has several play activities that include all five elements of play at the same time. Recalled from the definition by Mainemelis and Ronson (2006: 91) in chapter two, not all five elements have to be identified in order for an activity to be regarded as play, however, an activity is considered more play-like the more elements it includes. Therefore, it cannot be argued that the activities at Nestlé are not play-like, but at the same time it can be argued, that the activities in Pentia are play-like to a higher degree. When comparing the two cases on these five elements, it is important to emphasize how the allocation of checkmarks in Table 5 are an expression of our subjective interpretation as researchers. The interviewees have not been asked explicit questions about these five elements, nor have they been asked to categorize play activities in any sense.

5 elements of play	A threshold experience	Boundaries in time and space	Uncertainty-freedom-constraint	A loose and flexible association between means and ends	Positive affect
Examples of play in Pentia					
Carnival	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Table football		✓	✓	✓	✓
Game days	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
1 hour of "free play" every Friday		✓	✓	✓	✓
Board game club	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Running Club		✓			✓
Yoga Club		✓			✓
Nerf gun war	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Snowball fight	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bathing/swimming		✓		✓	✓
Pool/billiards		✓	✓	✓	✓
e-sport team (Counterstrike)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Card (game) club		✓	✓	✓	✓
Table tennis		✓	✓	✓	✓
Festoon competition (Christmas decorations)		✓	✓	✓	✓
Monthly social events		✓			✓
Friday bars		✓			✓
"Prisoners on the fort"	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

5 elements of play	A threshold experience	Boundaries in time and space	Uncertainty-freedom-constraint	A loose and flexible association between means and ends	Positive affect
Examples of play in Nestlé Nordic					
Forever Healthy Competition		✓	✓		✓
DHL run		✓			✓
Friday bar		✓			✓
Table football tournament		✓	✓	✓	✓
Elastic band training	✓	✓			✓
Mindfulness session		✓			✓
Whole grain day		✓			✓
Meeting room activities (Pleaz)		✓	✓	✓	✓
Golf Club		✓		✓	✓
Wine Club		✓		✓	✓
Art Club		✓		✓	✓
Tribe (innovation project - 30% of your time is "free play")		✓	✓	✓	✓
Balance boards or bikes by the desks		✓			✓
Poker night	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Padel sports		✓	✓	✓	✓
Easter Egg Hunting		✓	✓	✓	✓
Christmas Calendar		✓	✓	✓	✓
Bike competition - "Who arrives at Vevey first"		✓	✓		✓

**Table 5: Comparison of Activities, Pentia (left) & Nestlé (right).**

In line with the above, it is argued in the case analyses that Nestlé has only entered the in-between-play level of organizational play, whereas Pentia has reached the everyday play level. This means that play is only used as break activities in Nestlé, whereas it is a substantially embedded part of the

culture in Pentia. This also helps to explain why the challenge in Nestlé seems to be to get the playing started, while the challenge in Pentia sometimes is to know when to stop.

In connection to the differences in challenges and organizational play levels, it can be discussed which organization is able to get the most out of play or experience the most comprehensive effects from play. In the case analysis, it is suggested that Nestlé not yet experiences the full effects of play, whereas it is indicated that Pentia gets more out of it, because the Pentia employees embrace play in the workplace to a much higher extent. However, it is also suggested in the case analysis that play is at risk of becoming a sedative in Pentia, because the frequency and accessibility makes it less extraordinary and less of a deviation from the “normal”. If play becomes normal, employees may become so used to it, that the effects of it will decrease over time, which can be argued to be reinforced by the low employee turnover. On the contrary, play is more of a deviation from the normal in Nestlé, which can have the potential to create more prominent effects. It does, however, require that play is embraced to a higher extent in Nestlé, including that it unfolds as more than break activities and that it is taken in by a bigger proportion of the employees. According to Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) *“high job complexity environments increase the likelihood of play as engagement”* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 109), whereas low job complexity environments, characterized by routine and monotonous tasks, may primarily encourage diversionary play. If this is the case, then it should be possible for Nestlé to experience play as more than break activities in the future, as all of the interviewees seem to have high-complexity jobs. (For a summarized overview of similarities and differences of effects, see Table 6).

Company		
Effect	Pentia	Nestlé Nordic
Positive effect on client relations/ retention	✓	
Easier recruiting / lower employee turnover	✓	
Increased employee engagement / satisfaction	✓	✓
Mental break /Renewed energy / new perspective on work tasks	✓	✓
Increased productivity	✓	
Possibly more creative problem solving	✓	✓
Better collaboration between coworkers	✓	✓
Deeper interpersonal relations	✓	✓
Positive affect (smiles, fun, laughter)	✓	✓
Informal atmosphere / loosen up the mood	✓	✓
Take off masks / be a more authentic self	✓	
Increased employee loyalty	✓	
Breaking down hierarchy	✓	
Creation/improvement of cross-functional interpersonal relations	✓	✓
Legitimation of breaks	✓	✓
Brings out the inner child in employees	✓	✓
Physical effects (prevents lifestyle diseases / changes bad habits / losing weight)		✓
Increased employee commitment		✓
Amount of activities perceived as too much/ overwhelming		✓
Criticism from global branches / possibly affect collaboration between branches		✓
Play being perceived as a waste of time	✓	✓
Play being perceived as transgressive	✓	✓
Feeling awkward / guilty / fearing reactions from others	✓	
Play becomes a sedative	✓	
Job applicants for the wrong reasons	✓	
Noise and disturbance	✓	
Sends the wrong signal to clients / some clients do not appreciate play	✓	

**Table 6: Comparison of Effects, Pentia & Nestlé**

#### 4.4.3 Reasons for Differences

Judging from the individual case analyses, it can be argued that different types of play have different effects on organizations and individuals. As is evident, almost all playful activities in Nestlé are carefully planned, whereas many forms of play emerge spontaneously in Pentia, which may be part of the explanation why Pentia and Nestlé experience different effects of play. On the one hand, the lack of spontaneous play in Nestlé may be the reason why they do not experience the same negative effects as Pentia, such as background disturbances, since most of Nestlé's playful activities are

planned and therefore take place in rooms or areas designated for play. In that way, play does not disturb the non-participants. On the other hand, the lack of spontaneous play in Nestlé may be a manifestation that play has only entered the first organizational play level, in-between-play, whereas play in Pentia has reached the higher level of everyday play, showing that play is a supporting and natural part of their culture.

An explanation to why spontaneous play happens more frequently in Pentia than in Nestlé could be tied to the cultural artifacts. As mentioned in the cultural analysis, there are playful artifacts everywhere you look in Pentia's office, which may induce more spontaneous play to happen, whereas Nestlé's office only displays playful artifacts in certain areas and otherwise has a more corporate look and feel. This is supported by West (2015: 11), who argues that playful contextual cues can work as encouragers of organizational play.

Another reason for more spontaneous play at Pentia could be tied to the concept of psychological safety. According to Anderson (1994: 81) psychological safety is one of the two essential ingredients for play to be possible. From the empirical data and from the cultural analyses, it seems that both organizations are characterized by flat hierarchies, freedom with responsibility, informal tones of language and openness to new ideas, which could all be building blocks of psychological safety. However, it can be argued that Pentia has more psychological safety when it comes to play. The foundation for this is that play and fun is a part of the "Pentia Spirit" and core values and thereby perceived as legitimate behavior in general, even though the lines can sometimes be blurry in terms of how much time you are allowed to spend on playful activities. Furthermore, Pentia's reward system is group-based, meaning that you are only perceived as a success if your entire team is successful, which may lower the individual's fear of making mistakes. Conversely, play may not be as legitimately perceived in Nestlé, even though employees are granted one hour a week to participate in playful activities, and the Nordic CEO participates in promotion videos and flyers about the NCouragers program. While it is prioritized from the top management, there still seems to exist other social rules or norms in the organization, for instance that the acceptability of playful activities depends on the attitudes of the employees' immediate managers. Further, as is evident from the cultural analysis of Nestlé, two cultural narratives in the form of 'human health' versus 'high performance' are competing for dominance to become the underlying basic assumptions, which can also impact the level of perceived legitimacy of play. Here, employees who subscribe to the new

human health focus of the culture may perceive play as more legitimate and valuable compared to the employees subscribing to the high-performance focus. In terms of psychological safety, however, it can be argued that the relation between play and psychological safety can move in both directions. On the one hand, feeling psychologically safe may encourage employees to play more. On the other hand, playing together may create or reinforce a psychologically safe environment.

Regardless of which organization has the most psychological safety or the widest acceptance of play at the time of this study, it is possible that it may change over time. Nestlé already experiences a change in their culture moving towards more acceptance and motivation in connection to the NCouragers, and they are aware that a shift in attitudes, habits and culture takes a long time (Interview N3: 8). Nestlé is a more complex organization with more employees, geographical locations etc. compared to Pentia. In this regard, it can be argued that dispersing play initiatives may take longer in a more complex and possibly more bureaucratic or standardized organization. This is also exemplified in the statement from the Nestlé employee, arguing that the NCouragers initiative is viewed positively in the Nordics, whereas it is viewed with skepticism from some of the global branches. Furthermore, Pentia's culture of fun stems all the way back from the establishment of the company, whereas it is a relatively new initiative at Nestlé.

An explanation why play may emerge more naturally in Pentia could also have something to do with mental energy. As mentioned in the Pentia case, the CTO suggests that mental energy is important for the intrinsic motivation to play. This could explain why play is more challenging to start in Nestlé, since some employees state how the high-performance culture in Nestlé can be stressful, indicating that they may not always have the mental energy for play. This is supported by West (2015: 11), who argues that a stressful work environment is a discourager of organizational play.

The differences could also have something to do with Pentia and Nestlé representing two very different industries, which are respectively IT/consultancy and foods and beverages. One of the employees at Pentia even mentions this:

*“especially in IT-businesses it requires to put the human first, it is kind of like this way Google and all the other big IT companies also work, that it should not feel like a workplace you just*

*have to get away from, but it should feel like an integral part of one's daily life.*" (Interview N8: 10).

He further argues how both Google and Facebook have this mentality and that they are both successful companies, suggesting that having the playful activities seem to work (Interview N8: 10). Therefore, employees perceive the IT industry as more known for play and informality, which is also supported by the literature (Plester, 2009: 596). Thus, there may be another culture around play in the IT industry in general, whereas Nestlé may not get as much inspiration for play from other food companies.

It is important to emphasize that a potential reason why play unfolds differently in the two cases is that it has been introduced into the organizations with different purposes. Therefore, it could be interesting to investigate whether Pentia and Nestlé would experience the same effects from play, if they implemented an identical activity, e.g., would Nestlé experience the same effects from a carnival at the office as what has been the case at Pentia? And would Pentia experience the same effects from a health competition as what has been the case at Nestlé? Thus, the type of play activity as well as how and why it is introduced or has emerged in the organization may influence which effects arise from play. That being said, the above analysis indicates that organizational culture has an influence on how play unfolds and on the resulting effects, e.g., through spontaneity, social norms and psychological safety. Hence, there can be multiple explanations for why variation occurs in the effects experienced by Pentia and Nestlé.

Lastly, when analyzing the differences in effects from play in the different contexts of Pentia and Nestlé, it should be mentioned that there can be effects of play that employees do not articulate or pay attention to. This means that some of the effects that are only mentioned in one of the cases may still be present in the other case as well, even if it does not appear from the empirical data. It also means that other effects than those disclosed in this study may exist. Therefore, there may be a difference between effects of play and perceived effects of play, explaining why employees only talk about certain effects. Furthermore, these insights can be the basis for a methodical discussion on whether interviewing is the most appropriate method to investigate the effects of play, which will be discussed further in chapter five.

#### 4.4.4 Summary of Comparative Analysis

In summary, Pentia and Nestlé experience several of the same effects from organizational play, even though their organizational contexts are different. The common effects include positive affect, cognitive restoration, positive social effects such as cross-functional interpersonal relationships, an informal dialogue, closer relationships and better collaboration. Furthermore, both organizations experience negative effects such as employees feeling uncomfortable or that playful activities are either transgressive or a waste of time. Both organizations also experience a varying degree of participation from different employee groups, mostly explained by age/stage in life and professional function/interest.

Pentia and Nestlé show differences in how play unfolds in the workplace as well as in experienced effects of organizational play. In terms of how play unfolds, Pentia's activities seem to be generally more play-like than the ones in Nestlé. Further, play manifests itself as both in-between-play and everyday play in Pentia, whereas it almost only occurs as in-between-play in Nestlé. This finding highlights that the organizations have different challenges regarding either getting play started (Nestlé) or knowing when to stop (Pentia).

In terms of effects, Pentia is the only case reporting that play has external effects in terms of relations to customers together with talent attraction. Moreover, Pentia experiences that play has the ability to break down hierarchical boundaries and let people be a truer version of themselves in the work setting. Nestlé, on the other hand, reports more physical effects, such as how the body and brain are affected, emphasizing their different premise of implementing organizational play. Thus, the premise in Pentia is 'fun', whereas the premise in Nestlé is 'health'. The analysis suggests that Nestlé not yet experiences the full effects of play, and that Pentia currently experiences the most comprehensive effects of play. However, it can be discussed whether effects can decrease or increase over time, and whether the degree to which play deviates from the "normal" in the organization will intensify the effects.

The analysis suggests several reasons for the different findings in Pentia and Nestlé. Some can be attributed to the difference in the level of planned versus spontaneous playful activities, which seems to be influenced by the presence of playful artifacts as well as by industry and complexity of the organization. Further, the level of psychological safety in the organization has an impact. Currently,

the level of psychological safety appears highest in Pentia, but it shows signs of undergoing change in Nestlé. Lastly, the analysis points to how there may be differences in effects and perceived effects, which can mean that more effects than the ones disclosed in the interviews are happening in the two organizations. Therefore, taking all of the above into account, the analysis suggests that organizational context does, to some extent, influence effects of organizational play.

## 5. Discussion

The following discussion is divided into two parts. The first part is a discussion on our empirical findings, whereas the second part of the discussion addresses what we have learned about studying play as a phenomenon, including the methodological challenges encountered along the way.

### 5.1 Discussion on Empirical Findings

#### 5.1.1 Separating Short-term and Long-term Effects of Organizational Play

The findings from this thesis show that organizational play can have many effects, including effects on individual employees, social effects, and effects on work tasks and the organization in general. Our analysis, however, fails to address whether these effects happen immediately or occur in the long term, as the interview questions mostly focus on obtaining concrete examples of effects of play experienced by the employees (Appendix 1). This limitation of focus also applies to other studies on organizational play as pointed out by Petelczyc et al. (2018: 179). This consideration is, however, important, as: *“it is possible that play may be both beneficial and detrimental, depending on whether the consequences are short or long term.”* (ibid.). Thus, whether an effect can be regarded as positive or not may depend on the time aspect, which is also briefly addressed in the Pentia analysis, where it is argued that the playful opportunities are initially perceived as a great employee benefit but are at risk of becoming sedatives over time.

Some of the most prevalent effects in our two case studies are examples of positive affect in the form of joy and laughter as well as the reduced feelings of stress, provided by the break that play can facilitate. This could indicate that many of the employees emphasize the short-term benefits when talking about effects of play in the organization. This is supported by previous literature, where it is argued that positive affect, reduced stress and feeling accepted and valued by others are all immediate outcomes of play (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015: 640-41).

Additionally, employees from both Pentia and Nestlé emphasize how play helps to build more informal relations and helps to get to know coworkers more in-depth, which strengthens collaboration. This finding corresponds with existing literature arguing that some of the long-term effects of play are positive impacts on psychological and physical health as well as relational outcomes contributing to feelings of intimacy, trust, security and reduction in conflicts with others (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015: 641). It is important to acknowledge that Van Vleet and Feeney (2015)

investigate the outcomes of play in the context of close relationships, such as marriage, and thus not in the context of organizational play. However, as some of the effects from their article are similar to the ones found in this thesis, it could be argued that some effects of play may occur independent of the setting. Further, Petelczyc et al. (2018: 180) who do focus on play in the workplace setting, also suggest that the development of relational skills underlies the long-term effects of play.

As mentioned in the comparative analysis, both at Pentia and Nestlé employees hypothesize about play enhancing creativity, even though none of them are able to provide concrete examples. This could have something to do with creativity being a more long-term effect, which makes it difficult for employees to point to an exact moment or experience of play influencing creativity. This assumption is in line with the study by Van Vleet and Feeney (2015: 41), where they argue that long term effects include improving the ability to think flexibly or in an unconventional manner. This sounds a lot like the cognitive processes relevant to creativity described in the literature review, suggesting that the development or improvement of creative-thinking skills can be a long-term outcome of play. Contrastingly, Petelczyc et al. (2018: 179) argue that creativity is a short-term effect of play, because it is influenced by the experience of positive affect, which is momentary. Thus, it is not yet clear whether play facilitates creativity in the short- or long term, which could be valuable for future research to address further.

One of the surprising and not least interesting findings from this thesis is that learning is not mentioned by any of the interviewees in Pentia or Nestlé as an effect of play, even though play is suggested to enhance learning in much of the literature (Thorsted, 2013; Lee et al., 2019; Starbuck & Webster, 1991; Kinder et al., 2019; Kolb & Kolb, 2010). It could be assumed that this, again, has something to do with the time aspect. If learning happens gradually, it may be difficult for employees to associate this with specific playful activities or events. Moreover, as has been pointed out throughout this thesis, not all employees perceive playful activities in the workplace as play, which is another reason why they may not associate play with learning. When something occurs in the long-term and not immediately during or after a playful activity, it is also likely that it will be more difficult to argue that other factors do not impact the outcome as well. Petelczyc et al. (2018: 179) lend support to this assumption, as they argue that learning and mastery of new skills are long-term effects of play. As with creativity, it could be interesting for future research to address this domain of effect with a focus on the time horizon.

When distinguishing between short- and long-term effects, it can also be argued that it makes it harder to compare the two cases, as play has been a part of Pentia's DNA all the way back from its establishment in 1998, whereas play is a relatively new initiative at Nestlé. It is, however, relative where the boundaries between the short- and long term are drawn, and we argue that the five years that Nestlé has had the NCouragers is a sufficient time frame to be able to talk about the more long-term effects, even if play is not yet as far-reaching in their organization as it is in Pentia.

### 5.1.2 Individual Differences

The findings from the individual case studies as well as from the comparative analysis suggest that it is highly individual whether one finds play in the workplace attractive or not. Thus, variations in the attitudes and motivations toward organizational play vary not only across organizational contexts but also between individual employees within the same organizational context. This could lend support to the stream of research studying play as a trait, which suggests that people differ on the personality trait playfulness, meaning that some people have a stable tendency to be more playful than others (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 170). As mentioned earlier, play is studied as an activity and as an organizational feature in this thesis, which is why it fails to address differences in employees' personalities.

That people's attitudes towards organizational play vary does, however, not necessarily mean that differences in personality traits are the only explaining factors. Our case studies and comparative analysis suggest a relation between play and generational differences or differences in life stages. For example, a Nestlé employee argues for his disinterest in playful activities with his age, and others point out parenting and family life as a discourager in terms of time. Generational differences have also been discussed in the literature. Petelczyc et al., (2018: 178) suggest that Millennials judge coworkers who play in the workplace less harshly than people from older age groups. Likewise, Lamm and Meeks (2009) have tested how generational differences between Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Millennials moderate the relationship between workplace fun and individual workplace consequences. They find that: *"Millennials would show stronger positive associations between workplace fun and individual outcomes than Generation Xers (...) for job satisfaction, task performance, as well as OCB [Organizational Citizenship Behavior]"* (Lamm & Meeks, 2009: 627). Further, West (2015: 49) argues that the youngest generation of employees is more willing to

participate in playful activities and that Baby Boomers often perceive workplace fun as counter-productive in line with the industrial work values, whereas the Millennial generation often perceive it as important in terms of building trust and social connections in the organization. However, our analysis indicates that age differences seem more connected to parenting, family life and individual life stage rather than if you are a Millennial or Baby Boomer.

Moreover, Fluegge-Woolf (2014: 696) mentions how workplace fun is important to younger employees and how this makes them apply for jobs in organizations that offer these opportunities. This finding corresponds with our data from Pentia, where playful activities are part of an employer branding and talent attraction strategy and where some of the young employees mention that they applied to Pentia because of the playful culture (Interview P7: 4; Interview P8: 10; Interview P4: 16). It is, however, still ambiguous whether age plays a definite role in explaining the difference between the individual perceptions of organizational play. From a trait perspective, when developing the Adult Playfulness Scale, a definite relationship between adults' playfulness and age has not been found (Glynn & Webster, 1992: 83).

Lastly, it could also be argued that the variation does not have anything to do with personality traits or demographics but rather that the employees' attitudes are socially influenced through sensemaking. Here, a social factor influencing sensemaking could be the local norms concerning work and play in the organization, which is exemplified in both the Pentia and Nestlé cases, e.g. in terms of perceived legitimacy of play. Additionally, the processual nature of sensemaking suggests that the perceptions and interpretations of play are not static and therefore may change over time. This is, for example, seen in the Nestlé case, where it is stated that people's attitudes towards the NCouragers have changed substantially over time. It could, however, also be that attitudes and perceptions are affected by a combination of personality traits and social influences, which is supported in some of the literature, suggesting that: *"one's preferences for fun in the workplace may have to do with a person's work history, peer influences, personality characteristics and also socialization experiences."* (Fluegge-Woolf, 2014: 696). Consequently, there may be many different explanations for the differences in employees' attitudes towards organizational play.

### 5.1.3 Myths of Play and Mental Models

One of the more surprising findings from the case studies of this thesis is how deeply rooted the myths of play, and in particular the dichotomy between play and work, still are in the mental models of employees. On the one hand, this should not be surprising, as it is mentioned in multiple articles in the academic literature how this dichotomy is still present in many organizations (Hunter et al., 2010: 96; Dandridge, 1986: 159; Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 85; Statler et al, 2009: 89). On the other hand, it was already suggested by researchers in the 1970s and 1980s that this dichotomy should be diminished (Dandridge, 1986; Burke, 1971; March, 1976) with the aim of allowing experimentation to “*explore the possibilities of alternative rules*” (March, 1976: 127) and to “*better integrate the experience of work into life satisfaction*” (Dandridge, 1986: 159). Moreover, society and the labor market have changed significantly since the industrial age, among other things because of the rapid innovation in information technology (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 87), which could lead you to expect that more would have changed in the field of organizational play by 2020. Furthermore, as our cases are chosen with the aim of investigating organizations that already show manifestations of an active choice of allowing playful behavior in the workplace, we assumed that these mental models influenced by industrialist work values would be less prevalent in Nestlé and in particular in Pentia, which is a more extreme case.

Of course, Nestlé and Pentia both show signs of the boundaries between play and work being more permeable than what was the case during the industrial age. This is evident from all of the examples of positive effects experienced by employees as well as the attention from top management on this subject. In both cases, employees are met with trust and are allowed to take out time to engage in playful break activities. Pentia also displays examples of play being more integrated with work tasks, such as the example with the Harry Potter impersonation during a client meeting. Thus, at a first glance it seems that these two cases are not affected by the myths about play and that they are, in fact, embracing play at work. However, when investigating play in these workplaces more in-depth, we find that even at Pentia, where play is a substantially embedded part of the culture, employees still mention feeling guilty while playing, fearing what coworkers may think if they are away from their desks. Further, it is mentioned how some employees perceive the biannual game days as a waste of time, which they would rather spend on developing new professional skills or becoming familiar with new technologies. Additionally, at Nestlé social activities are easier to schedule outside of working hours, because it is challenging to find arguments legitimate enough for them to be placed during the

workday. Moreover, Nestlé employees feel a pressure to perform and achieve individual goals and deadlines, which makes some of them think that time for play should not be prioritized over serious work tasks.

Both cases show examples of the first myth, that play is for children only (Bove-Nielsen, 2003: 85), is still living on as well. Several employees have a hard time defining play and explaining what play means to them, because they associate it with childish behavior, which is why many of them either do not perceive themselves as playing or choose to use a different vocabulary. Therefore, it can be argued that even in companies, where playful activities are explicitly allowed by the top management, employees are still, to some extent, influenced by these historic work values and myths about play, which suggests that they are embedded in or internalized by employees.

#### **5.1.4 The Paradox of Intentionality**

As should be evident from the empirical findings of this thesis as well as from previous academic research, play offers many opportunities for positive effects on employees and organizations. Positive affect is mentioned by almost all interviewees in Pentia and Nestlé as an immediate effect of engaging in play. This is no surprise, as it is included in almost all definitions of play (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 167), even when researchers have not yet reached consensus on a full definition. However, this is only a small part of the opportunities inherent in organizational play: *“in addition to providing enjoyment, play can serve the purpose of adding significant value to organizational life”* (Statler et al., 2009: 88). Examples of organizational value include that play can be the source of creativity (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 81) and learning (Thorsted, 2013: 157; Lee et al, 2019: 4; Kolb and Kolb, 2010: 47) together with positively affecting interpersonal relations (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 175; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 105; Lee et al., 2019: 3; Huizinga, 1949: 12). As mentioned earlier, this is also why organizational play has received increasing attention during the last decades.

It is, however, challenging to purposely implement play in organizations with the aim of achieving the above-mentioned benefits. One of the reasons is that *“implementing corporate-imposed fun risks backfiring and evoking employee cynicism”* (West, 2015: 49). Our empirical data does not show any signs of backfired initiatives or definite cynicism, however, it does suggest that employees prefer the kind of playful activities that they engage in spontaneously for fun, rather than the playful activities orchestrated by the organization. This highlights one of the biggest challenges and paradoxes

connected to play, which is its autotelic nature. When play is planned or instrumentalized to achieve certain extrinsic goals of the organization, it is difficult not to compromise its autotelic nature and difficult to avoid it becoming less enjoyable and playful (West, 2015: 49-50). Some researchers even argue that not only is it difficult, it is impossible to implement play with the purpose of achieving specific goals (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2012: 82). Thus, it seems that play offers a plethora of positive outcomes for companies, however, they can only happen if these outcomes are not the explicit goal.

This may be a discouraging conclusion to organizational leaders, since it may be challenging to get the idea of play approved by the organization without knowing exactly what the purpose and effects of it will be. This can be one of the plausible reasons why play is not more widespread in the business world today, because it is not an *“efficient means to satisfy a fixed goal in a reliable way.”* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 90). Therefore, when wanting to encourage, for instance, creativity or learning, leaders will turn to other proven and more reliable tools or methods instead of play. Some researchers do, however, caution that the *“distinction between autotelic and goal-oriented behaviors should not be drawn too sharply”* (West, 2015: 51) and that the difference between play and work in terms of instrumentality should be viewed as a matter of degree, since even completely frivolous play can turn out to have useful results (ibid.).

The discussion has so far primarily focused on whether the organization can implement play in order to achieve instrumental goals. It has, however, not addressed whether individual employees can have instrumental goals themselves when they engage in play in the workplace. When asking employees in Pentia and Nestlé about why they choose to participate, the two organizations present diverse answers. Almost all employees at Pentia mention coziness and fun and being together with coworkers in an informal setting (Interview P8: :4; Interview P7: 2-3; Interview P6: 11), whereas the two participating interviewees from Nestlé have a more strategic argument for engaging, because one of them is leading the initiative now, and the other one was in charge earlier (Interview N3: 10-11; Interview N2: 7). Therefore, there is signal value in participation for them as well as an opportunity for feedback. This indicates that Pentia employees mostly engage in play just for the joy of it, whereas Nestlé employees may have more strategic motivations. It should be noted that this may not apply to all participating employees at Nestlé, as we have only talked to employees, who either lead or has led the initiative, and an employee who does not participate at all.

Further, our findings indicate that having a sincere relationship with coworkers is important to many of the interviewees, which makes it less likely that employees would deliberately engage in play in an unauthentic way in order to achieve personal strategic goals. This finding contradicts some of the existing literature, suggesting that developing informal relationships with coworkers may not only happen for social reasons but also to serve the instrumental goal of e.g., creating positive impressions and gaining career sponsorship from engaging in play with one's manager (Petelczyc et al. 2018: 184). If this is the case, then it could be argued that employees in Pentia and Nestlé not only engage in play in order to feel good socially, but also to position themselves better in the organization. This could be an argument that interviewing is not the best method to explore intentions and motivations behind play, since employees may not be likely to disclose this sort of strategic information with us.

## **5.2 Discussion on Methodological Challenges**

### **5.2.1 The Selection of Cases**

The purpose of the thesis is to explore how play affects employees' working lives and further whether there are differences to be found in different organizational settings. In order to compare different organizational settings, we chose two cases with very different business areas, size and approaches to play. The choice of the two cases should benefit the analytic conclusions and make the conclusions more powerful (Yin, 2009: 61). Even though the choice of Nestlé and Pentia made it possible to discover patterns across the organizational settings and distinguish individual effects as well, there are some considerations concerning whether the two organizations were the right match for the purpose of this study.

From the description and analysis of Pentia, it should be clear that they engage in play in an extreme way in regard to adopting playful features or elements into their workspace and routines. According to Flyvbjerg (2006) these *"atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied"* (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 229). Accordingly, Pentia seems to be a good case to help us gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of organizational play. On the other hand, since Pentia is so extreme, the findings cannot be generalized to other organizations, and it will, therefore, not provide an understanding of how employees in organizations less extreme can be affected by playing.

Choosing Nestlé as a case organization seems less obvious than Pentia, but since they are an entirely different organization, both in terms of size, having a focus on health and in addition operating in different business areas, it works well in trying to cover different organizational settings. The limitations of choosing Nestlé as a case include that they do not believe they play, and that they have a focus on health instead of fun or play. Consequently, there is a chance that because this study's research philosophy is interpretivism, the findings from Nestlé become more directed towards playing because our subjectivity affects the data. Therefore, there is a possibility that we have added the playing part to the equation, and that the findings do not relate to play but instead to activities that improve mental, social and psychical health. However, a reason why Nestlé is still a suitable choice of case is that the interviewees noticed playful characteristics about the activities, and, in addition, that all of the activities consist of two or more elements included in the chosen definition of play. Nestlé can, therefore, work as the more "regular" case, and the differences between Pentia and Nestlé become a valuable insight.

### **5.2.2 Interviewees**

Having considered the pros and cons of choosing Nestlé and Pentia, there is another limitation in regard to comparing the organizations, which is the different number of interviewees. Here, it can be questioned whether three interviews in Nestlé are enough to capture all the possible nuances of play in the organization. In Pentia the interviewees were chosen by the HR manager but in accordance with our wish to talk to employees from different departments, with different responsibilities and different seniority. Since we conducted eight interviews with wide variance in the answers, they can be argued to capture more nuances of the phenomenon of play than the ones in Nestlé.

In Nestlé, we were only allowed to talk to three employees, who were all chosen by the head of the NCouragers program. Two out of three of the interviewees either runs the NCouragers now or did in the past. This affects that they are very convinced of the positive effects of the activities. With only one interviewee, who is not in charge of the program, she chose someone, who does not use any of the activities. This ensures a wide variety, but it also affects that there are no interviewees, who are in between the extremes, who perhaps uses the activities once in a while. The advantage of the conducted interviews is that even though we only conducted three interviews, we still achieved a wide variety of either super enthusiastic employees or non-users. The extreme cases of employees can also justify having less interviews in one organization compared to the other. The number of

interviewees can still affect the findings of the analysis and can perhaps provide a more nuanced analysis of Pentia compared to Nestlé. However, since the findings from both cases are relevant in the field, we still believe that they contribute to developing knowledge about how different organizational contexts influence the effects of play.

There will always be the consideration that when the organizations control whom they would like to state their opinion, they have the option to try to make the statements more positive or in a specific direction. However, as several employees also highlighted the negative aspects of playing in the organizations, we do not regard this as a problem in this thesis.

### 5.2.3 Data Collection Method

The initial plan was to combine interviews and observations as the main data collection methods. The purpose was for the observations to complement the interviews and thereby cover the behavior and unspoken words of the employees. As earlier mentioned, these observations ended up playing a different role, since we were not able to conduct sufficient observations to use as a separate data collection method. Instead, the observations made in Pentia have been used partly as a data quality check, in order to verify if the data from the interviews matches the observations. In connection to this, we have made the assumption that because observations verify the interview data in Pentia, it would have been the case in Nestlé as well. We therefore assume a high data quality from our interviews. The rationale of using more than one primary data collection method and the most important advantage is: *“the development of converging lines of inquiry, a process of triangulation and corroboration”* (Yin, 2009: 115-116). A more elaborate use of observation as a source of data collection would, therefore, have given the analysis an extra dimension and supported that the conclusions were depending on more than one source of evidence.

One of the methodological findings from the thesis is that the initial idea of investigating how play affects creativity was not possible, due to the fact that the employees did not know how to relate and correspond to the subject. Thus, they did not have the adequate language to explain or relate to the subject. Even though we changed our focus and made the subject more relatable for the employees, there are still evidence pointing towards that play as a concept in an organizational setting is difficult for the employees to relate to. Because the interpretivist research philosophy views the reality as *“socially constructed through culture and language”* (Saunders et al., 2016: 136), the limited

language about play in an organizational setting limits the value of interviews as the primary source of data. The limited language may, therefore, prevent the data from showing all nuances of the effects that play has on the employees' working lives. In this regard, observations could have been a valuable data source, because with the opportunity to conduct prolonged observations, we might have disclosed some of the "hidden" behaviors without it being necessary for the employees to articulate and be aware of the effects themselves.

Another potential method that could have provided insights on the hidden language, could have been to make an experimental design with the purpose to *"test the impact of a treatment (or an intervention) on an outcome, controlling for all other factors that might influence that outcome"* (Creswell, 2014: 201). These experiments could perhaps highlight which effects are effects of play and which effects that are explained by other organizational factors. The knowledge gained from such experiments could also remedy the challenges linked to the missing language, because the experiments would have created a situation, which could be interpreted. Using an experiment would, however, clash with our interpretivist research philosophy. Experiments are, therefore, not seen as the best way to investigate our research problem. Instead, this thesis combines several sources of evidence from the qualitative methods including interviews, observations and documents. According to Yin, the use of several qualitative methods *"far exceeds that in other research methods such as experiments, surveys or histories"* (Yin, 2009: 115).

#### **5.2.4 Quality Criteria**

The change in the research topic and problem definition, as described earlier, affects how we fulfil the quality criteria of the study. Two of the criteria that we committed to fulfil was transparency and dependability, which both ensure that all changes in the research are recorded in order to disclose the emergence of the findings (Saunders et al. 2016: 206). Throughout the study we have explained the changes, but it is still important to emphasize that the findings of our analysis are affected by the interview guide, which was created for the originally planned research question about play and creativity. A consideration is, therefore, whether the use of an interview guide created specifically for the current research question would have made it possible to disclose more insightful information. Here, it is again important to emphasize that the analysis is conducted primarily from an inductive approach, which impacts that we have interpreted the patterns discovered from the data. The

conclusions from this study will, therefore, naturally change if the questions, the interviewees or the researchers changed.

The reflectiveness of how we have affected the research is another quality criterium that we committed to fulfil. As mentioned, our choice of research philosophy means that we affect and co-create the knowledge in the study. A limitation of this thesis is, therefore, also that we cannot generalize statistically and expect the findings in this study to be applicable to all other organizations. In addition, the study cannot be fully replicated by other researchers. Even though replication is not fully possible, we have recorded all the steps and reflections about possible improvements in order for others to use our study as an inspiration.

Moreover, we committed to fulfill the quality criterion of credibility. Credibility ensures that *"representations of the research participants' socially constructed realities actually match what the participants intended"* (Saunders et al, 2016: 206). In this regard, a limitation of this thesis is that because we could not complete all observations, we do not have much additional knowledge to support or contradict the answers provided by interviewees. Here, observations could have nuanced our interpretations of the collected data. In addition, we have not sent the analysis to the interviewees, allowing them to proofread and comment on the interpretations and statements that we have cited them for. Thus, we cannot be sure that the representation and interpretations actually match what the participants intended with their answers. However, most of the areas we have focused on, are based on patterns discovered in the data, meaning that there is more than one employee, who focuses on the particular effect, which increases the credibility.

Another criterion, that we committed to fulfil, was relevance, meaning that the study provides interesting knowledge to the area of research (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010: 49). Our thesis draws many similar conclusions as previous studies as well as it contributes with multiple new insights to the research area of play. One of the contributions is that it explores how play unfolds in and effects two different organizations and, therefore, investigates whether these effects solely happen in specific contexts. Our study is valuable and relevant because it contributes with empirical data, where the phenomenon of play is studied in two authentic organizational settings and not just as a theoretical phenomenon. Our contributions are elaborated in section 5.3.

The last two criteria that we committed to fulfil are coherence and consistency, which include that there should be a clear coherence between the different parts of the study, and that the concepts, theories and methods are applied in a consistent way (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010 37-38). In order to ensure coherence, all parts of the study have been conducted with the research question and research objectives in mind. In addition, the research philosophy and research approach have guided the analysis and how the findings are interpreted. A limitation regarding coherence is that the initial plan of the thesis is not one hundred percent coherent with the rest of the choices, and as mentioned, that has affected the interview guide. Here, the change of problem definition can be seen as a way of making sure that the rest of the study is coherent, and it allowed us to make the study relevant. The consistency of the study has been ensured by explicitly describing how we perceive the concept of play and how methods are applied.

### **5.3 Contributions to the Field of Organizational Play**

According to Petelczyc et al. (2018): *“the lack of attention given to play at work is particularly problematic today because changes in the technology and culture and generational shifts in values and interest among potential employees have altered the landscape of 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations”* (Petelczyc et al., 2018: 163). In combination with the problem that much of the research in this area has been heavily affected by research conducted of play outside of an organizational context (ibid.: 164), we wanted to contribute with an empirical study of play in an organizational setting. The existing literature has failed to adequately investigate how play is integrated into a work environment, and, in addition, what specific positive or negative effects that it has (ibid.: 163). Our study, therefore, contributes with empirical data on the effects of play in the workplace and in addition how different organizational contexts can moderate the effects.

Our thesis both confirms some already existing effects of play and discovers some effects and underlying reasons that, as to our knowledge, is not present in the existing literature. The already known effects supported by our findings include renewed energy, better interpersonal relationships and increased employee loyalty and productivity. In addition, this thesis contributes with new focus areas, such as how individual differences can influence the effects of play, whether the time horizon plays a role and that the old myths from the industrial age still affect the employees' mental models. All these are somewhat new perspectives or nuances of the field. Since the existing literature has predominantly focused on positive outcomes (Petelczyc et al, 2018: 162), our thesis also contributes

to the area of research because our findings suggest that effects can also be negative. Examples of negative effects are employees feeling guilty, uncomfortable or being a disturbance to employees and clients.

Furthermore, through a comparative analysis, our thesis contributes with new insights on contextual factors. Our findings show that it is not only the cultural differences that can be a possible explanatory factor, even though they are suggested to have an impact on how play affects organizations. Other possible explanatory factors include types of play, if it is spontaneous or planned and whether it contains a competitive element. A key finding is also that organizations do not have a common language of how to talk about play. This has a great impact on what aspects of play in the workplace that can be studied through interviews. Thus, our thesis contributes with methodological knowledge about how interviews may not be the most beneficial method to study play.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the effects and potential of introducing play in a workplace setting and investigate to what extent these effects vary in different organizational contexts. In addition, the aim was to contribute with empirical findings to a research field currently dominated by theory. Therefore, we conducted two individual case studies, investigating the nature and effects of organizational play in two playful companies, Pentia and Nestlé Nordic, and subsequently compared the findings.

Before conducting the case studies, we wanted to get an overview of the existing literature in the field. Here, we learned how the history of play in organizations started to have a significant impact after the end of the industrial age and how its relevance and popularity has only increased since then. We discovered that there was little consensus in the academic literature and that the academic phenomenon of play had many different definitions, of which many included elements from Huizinga's (1949) terminology of play. As this definition emerged in an industrial context, we, however, chose to adopt a more current definition developed specifically for adult play in an organizational context. Hence, we chose to theoretically define play as *“a behavioral orientation consisting of five interdependent and circularly interrelated elements: a threshold experience; boundaries in time and space; uncertainty-freedom-constraint; a loose and flexible association between means and ends; and positive affect.”* (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 84).

Likewise, the empirical findings of the thesis suggested that play is a multifaceted concept that is challenging for employees to define and relate to. In Pentia, play and fun meant two different things, and, in addition, each employee had an individual approach to whether play/fun was integrated in the work or if it was solely the break activities and social interactions. In Nestlé, they had difficulties defining play at all, because they did not perceive themselves as playing. Both in Pentia and Nestlé, the purpose of the playful activities could be seen as a way of “walking the talk” in regard to organizational values. The findings in Pentia further showed an external purpose of attracting and retaining employees.

Common positive effects of organizational play across the cases were found to be positive affect, cognitive restoration and positive effects on interpersonal relations, including better collaboration, whereas common negative effects were found to be people feeling uncomfortable and guilty, and play

being perceived as transgressive or a waste of time. Both organizations experienced a varying degree of participation from different employee groups, which was mainly attributed to their individual age/stage in life and their professional functions/interests.

Pentia and Nestlé also experienced differences, which seemed to be that play permeated all parts of the organization in Pentia, both as planned and spontaneous play, whereas in Nestlé most playful activities were planned activities with a competitive element. This was also supported by the cultures of the two organizations, since Pentia had fun as a value and basic assumption, whereas Nestlé focused on health. The cultural differences, where Pentia was more team-focused and Nestlé was focused on individual performance, also explained why Pentia experienced effects such as being able to break down hierarchies, where Nestlé reported more individual psychical effects. The differences in culture and level of integration of play also helped to explain why Nestlé did not get the full effects of play, and that Pentia experienced more comprehensive effects of play. Apart from culture, other explanations for the differences in effects were attributed to industries, the complexity of the organization as well as the level of psychological safety. Thus, the effects of organizational play did, to some extent, vary with organizational contexts. They could, however, also be attributed to individual differences, such as, personality traits, generational differences, sensemaking and how employees were affected by the social norms. In terms of explaining effects and missing effects, it was also discussed whether the time horizon impacts the effects, with some effects being more long-term.

Another key finding of the thesis was how the dichotomy between play and work still seemed to be integrated in the employees' mental models. This was both applicable for Pentia and Nestlé, which indicates that it is present in even the most playful organizations. Additionally, we discussed whether play could be implemented with a certain strategic purpose. Here, the data suggested that the employees in general preferred spontaneous play over planned activities, and that purposeful play, therefore, did not cause the same positive reactions.

In order to understand the phenomenon of organizational play more in-depth, more exploratory studies are needed in the future. However, as the language of organizational play is still very limited, we recommend future researchers to critically consider whether interviews is the most suitable method to sufficiently explore the potential and effects of organizational play.

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