

## GAMEPLAY: The game of opening up *la chance*.

---

### [Argument]

After having shown some plays which account for how the idea of the game of *la chance* emerged from my data, I will now move on to describe the characteristics of playing a game, as opposed to any other kind of practice.

My main point is that it is against the backdrop of difficult and uncertain circumstances, particularly the labor market situation in Mali, that university graduates are playing the game of *la chance*.

I now turn to (I) describing what I mean exactly by gameplay and, thus, the game of opening up *la chance*. I then (II) discuss the implications of looking through that lens and, ultimately, I (III) highlight what that lens allows us to understand about university graduates' knowledge and practices.

(I) Gameplay:

- (1) Through the lens of the game, we see that despite their knowledge of their circumstances graduates keep trying.
- (2) Through the lens of the game, we see graduates are striving towards different goals and succeed in doing so.
- (3) Through the lens of the game, we see that graduates play the game of *la chance*, not because they have no other choice, but because they want to.
- (4) Through the lens of the game, we see that university graduates do understand their situation and do not resign themselves to it.

(II) Implications:

- 1 The goal of the game is prelusory (Suits). This implies that the goal of the game is *la chance* rather than employment, for instance.
- 2 The constituent rules of the game allow for the activity of playing (Suits). This implies that it is only within the rules of the game of *la chance* that *la chance* is an accomplishable goal.
- 3 The players engage in the game voluntarily (Suits). That implies that graduates are not playing because they have no other option, but they play because they want to.

(III) We see:

(1) action, (2) disobedience (3) the actual puzzle and (4) a different kind of success,

## I Graduates are playing the game of *la chance*

### Overall argument:

The practice of opening up *la chance* is a game. In other words, graduates are playing the game of *la chance*. When graduates open up *la chance*/play the game of *la chance*, they “voluntarily attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (Suits 2014 (1925), 41).

### Definition and application to *la chance*.

Inspired and guided by Suits, I define the traits of a game and, in a second step, apply that definition as a lens to the practice of opening up *la chance*. As a result, I come up with a description of the game of *la chance*.

“(P)laying a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (ibid.)

According to Suits’ conceptual analysis, games consist of three consecutive traits: (1) games have a prelusory goal, meaning that the goal of the game can be achieved apart from the game, (2) games have constitutive rules within

which the goal can be achieved and these rules forbid the most efficient means to achieving the goal and (3) games require its players to have a lusory attitude, meaning the players have to be willing to accept the rules of the game.

This might sound a bit abstract, so here is an example which illustrates the three traits of playing games:

### **Prelusory goals and constitutive rules.**

#### **The Marathon.**

Running a marathon is a game (see Nguyen 2020). Its goal is to cross the finish line. It is prelusory in a sense that crossing a finish line does not matter outside of the game within which it is achieved. Anyone can cross a finish line, but the marathon is about crossing the finish line after running 42,19 kilometers. Running that distance before crossing the line is a marathon, a game, the voluntary attempt to overcome an unnecessary obstacle. The marathon would not exist if it was not for the unnecessary obstacle of 42,19 kilometers prior to the finish line. However, it is that distance, that obstacle, that rule that allows for the marathon to exist.

Running a marathon is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.

For the purpose of playing the game, i.e. running a marathon, not for the purpose of crossing the finish line.

In fact, if you do not run the 42,19 kilometers, you do not run a marathon. All you do is cross a finish line. And that can be a game, too, but one that is different from that of a marathon.

#### **The game of opening up *la chance*.**

Now, how does this relate to what we know about the relationship between graduates and *la chance*?

If we look at the practice of opening up *la chance* through the lens of game playing, this is what we see:

Opening up *la chance* is a game. Its goal is to have *la chance*. However, to have *la chance* does not matter outside of the game of *la chance*, because what matters outside of the game is employment, for instance. Outside of the game, it does not matter if the job is *la chance* or not. It is a job. The point

here is that every graduate can have a job, but the game of *la chance* is about having the job they want. Playing the game of *la chance*, graduates need to open up *la chance* prior to having *la chance*. To simply get the employment is not the same as getting the employment having opened up *la chance* before. It is that practice of opening up, the circumstances and obstacles graduates have to overcome that allows for the game of *la chance* to exist. Opening up *la chance*, i.e. playing the game of *la chance*, is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.

The purpose of playing the game of *la chance* is not to have a job, but to have the job, which is *la chance*. A graduate who does not open up *la chance* does not have *la chance*, even if they get a job. They get a job as a result of a job hunt, which can be a game, too. However, that is a different game, not the game of *la chance*.

### **Lusory attitude.**

“There is always something in the life of a player of a game more important than playing the game” (Suits 2014 (1925), 30). This also implies that if a game becomes more important than anything else in a player’s life, it ceases to be a game. Playing the game of *la chance* is not the most important activity in graduates’ lives and, therefore, getting the employment they want is not the most important activity. Graduates can always stop opening up *la chance*, i.e. stop playing the game of *la chance* (compare Suits, 29) and still have a job. The fact that they usually do not stop, but keep trying does not account for the fact that they have no choice, rather, it points towards the voluntary attitude with which they are approaching the game.

### **Playing the labor market.**

Playing the game of *la chance* is part of graduates’ everyday life. However, it is different from going to work every day (compare Suits, 41). Whereas going to work requires graduates to obey the rules of the labor market, the game of *la chance* allows them to escape these rules. At this point it is important to remember that the game of *la chance* is not primarily about getting employment, but about getting *la chance*. The game of opening up *la chance* is different from looking for employment because it is not restricted by the rules set by the labor market, but by the rules of the game of *la chance*.

And these rules are accepted by the players “for the sake of the activity they make possible” (Suits, 32). In other words, the rules of the game of *la chance* allow them to play a game that is not the labor market game. Here we see that graduates do not obey the rules of the labor market, but the rules of the game of *la chance*. In doing so, they play with the rules of the labor market. I will get to that implication later, but first things first:

The labor market is a necessary obstacle, at least when it comes to getting a job. However, when it comes to getting *la chance*, the labor market is an unnecessary obstacle which has to be overcome in order to get *la chance*, which again, can be a job. What might sound complicated here is actually quite simple: those who get the job they want right away did not play the game of *la chance*. They crossed the finish line, but they did not run the 42,19 kilometers.

“But they do have a job”, you might say now and that is true. Think about saying “but they did cross the finish line”, which is also true. Yet again, playing games is not about the goal, but about the activity prior to reaching the goal.

### **To sum up,**

I argue that graduates are playing the game of *la chance*. I am not saying that life is a game or that work is a game, instead, university graduates approach the labor market like an infinite game (see Carse 1986). And the elusiveness of *la chance*, being the goal of the game, is key in doing that. Since graduates are aware of the elusiveness of the goal, it allows them to focus on playing the game itself rather than on the goal. Neither does this imply that all they do is play games. It merely means that in situations in which they find themselves within limits not set by themselves (like the labor market or the marriage business) they provide themselves with the freedom to play.

Of course, the labor market is not intended for play. However, it is by means of attitude that graduates’ appropriate it (compare Sicart, 27). “Appropriation implies a shift in the way a particular technology or situation is interpreted. The most usual transformation is from functional or goal oriented to pleasurable or emotionally engaging” (ibid). In other words, graduates transform the rules of Mali’s labor market as they play the game of *la chance*. Playing the game of *la chance*, graduates transform their contexts; they do not simply act within it.

## II Implications of Gameplay

### Three Implications of Gameplay.

To say that graduates are playing the game of *la chance* has three other significant implications on our understanding of what graduates are doing:

- 1 **The goal of the game is prelusory (Suits). This implies that the goal of the game is *la chance* rather than employment, for instance.**

In the game of *la chance*, *la chance* is the goal of the game. In chapter four, we will see that *la chance* is elusive, which is the key to playing the game and enjoying it. Because the goal is elusive, the success of playing is not defined by winning, but by playing itself. Due to the nature of the goal employed by the game they play, graduates do not fail and neither do they feel like they are. Their goal is not to get an employment, but their goal is to explore, to be busy, to be doing things. It is about figuring stuff out as they go along. They do not have to do that because most of them do have jobs or a family who is taking care of them and they, too, are aware of the precarious labor market situation. So graduates are not judged by the job they do not have, but they are recognized by the game they play.

It is also the nature of the goal that distinguishes the game of *la chance* from playing the lottery, for instance. The lottery is about winning and the only way to be in a position to win something is to buy a ticket. The goal of the lottery is not playing, but winning. In playing in the lottery, the goal is not prelusory, but all about the money and therefore success is measured only by the amount of money won or lost. In contrast, the game of *la chance* is about playing towards a goal, which is prelusory and therefore success is measured by playing.

Playing the game of *la chance* is not primarily about fun and enjoying it, but much more about graduates doing something they do not have to do.

**2 The constituent rules of the game allow for the activity of playing (Suits). This implies that it is only within the rules of the game of *la chance* that *la chance* is an accomplishable goal.**

In other words, the combination of the goal of the game being *la chance*, and *la chance* being prelusory enables graduates to succeed. Let me use the Myth of Sisyphus (see Camus 1955) to explain what I mean by this: Sisyphus is punished by having to push a rock up a mountain. He is doomed to continue with this activity forever, never actually reaching the top of the mountain. His life is a punishment, a struggle. He is aware of the meaninglessness of his actions. At least, they are meaningless in relation to the goal of getting the rock on top of the mountain. He is aware of the fact that he will not reach the top. He knows. And in response to that knowledge he just lets go of the goal in favor of his action. In other words, he turns the pushing of the rock into his thing. Consequently, his purpose is no longer to reach the goal, rather his purpose is to push the rock. In relation to that purpose, or that goal, his actions are no longer meaningless, his actions are impactful, his life is no longer a struggle imposed by somebody else, but his own created by himself. We just have to imagine Sisyphus happy (Camus). Sisyphus redefined the mountain top. Success is no longer reaching the top, but pushing the rock and enjoying it.

Now, what about graduates? Are they Sisyphus? For the sake of analogy: graduates are punished by the political, economic and educational system, which forces them to push a rock and they know that it is highly unlikely for them to reach the top with the rock. Graduates, too, have let go of the concrete goal of getting a particular employment a long time ago. If your goal is not to become a professor, but to be happy, there are plenty of ways to attain it. If the goal is to become a professor, there is only one way. However, there are many ways to being happy, earning money or making an impact, for instance. Graduates understand that, so they keep pushing their rock, but they also look for other rocks. That is part of what I call the game of *la chance*.

Remember the physics graduate Madou, who in 2013 wanted to become a professor in physics, a big shot in telecommunications in 2014 and a farmer in 2015? I was amazed and puzzled by the fact that his goals changed both so quickly and significantly. I remember asking him if he was serious and, of course, he was. In 2021, he did work as a manager in telecommunications and selling home grown veggies and chicken. He knew of three different

ways to get to where he wanted to be, and to him, it was never about the concrete goal of a profession, but about the idea he thought would come with these professions, i.e. business and fame. So, it is not about the professional activity, but about the goal to which these activities are directed.

**3 The players engage in the game voluntarily (Suits). That implies that graduates are not playing because they have no other option, but they play because they want to.**

And that seems like an actual surprise, but only if the primary assumption – perhaps related to the precariousness of the labor market situation in Mali – is that they cannot engage in an employment activity of their own choice. For instance, why do people run a marathon? More than 45'000 people run the Berlin Marathon every year, only one person wins it. Except for a couple of participants, nobody runs to win it. The majority of the runners run for a purpose that is not winning in terms of crossing the finish line first. Winning is measured in relation to every runner. People won because they finished. Some won because they got a new personal best. Some won because they had to realize this was not their day, but they kept going anyway. Some won because they got to the starting line. Some won because they tried. There are so many ways to win.

So again, why do graduates play the game of *la chance*? Because why not? The only answer to “why?” is “why not!” And the more revealing question is: why is “why not?!” not a satisfying response? Why do we go to work every day? Because we have to and we need the money to make a living. Obligation is a satisfying response. Survival is one, too. However, there is a lot less agency in obligation and survival. For some people the answer to why they show up for work every day is: because they can. And because it makes them feel good about themselves. Graduates ask “why not go to work?” and go for it, not because they have to due to financial reasons (remember: some of them are not even getting paid for extended periods of time, if at all), but because they want to.

Other than questioning assumptions on an abstract level, graduates' behavior might lead to concrete changes, too. By playing the game of *la chance*, graduates do not obey the rules of the labor market ultimately targeted to getting an employment, but rather the rules of the game of *la chance* targeted to the continuation of playing. In doing so, they play with the rules of the labor market. Playing the game of *la chance*, graduates know they can-

not win against the background of the labor market. However, within the game of *la chance*, they do succeed and thereby appropriate the labor market.

### III What we see now

#### (1) We see action.

**Through the lens of the game, we see that graduates play the game of *la chance*, not because they have no other choice, but because they want to.**

Practices such as making do, getting along, muddling through, actively waiting (see for instance Honwana 2012) usually accounts for people doing things despite the circumstances. These perspectives on practice challenged and changed common assumptions about work (formal and informal work) and what it means to do things (waiting is doing, practices that usually escape our eyes). With reference to practice and what people are actually doing on an everyday basis, research now knows that people do things, how they do them, and argues for the significance of the process. Nevertheless, ongoing practices tend to be evaluated as liminal vis-a-vis measurable outcomes of success and failure in conducting these very practices and a lot less research is devoted to how people keep doing the things they do.

Waiting for a bus, waiting for someone, waiting for a job is thinking in relation to a future-oriented outcome (getting on the bus, meeting someone or getting a job), which is a kind of framing and, consequently, a kind of thinking that requires an evaluation of every situation. The goal has been achieved, the goal has not, or not yet been achieved. That kind of thinking values the process much less than the ultimate outcome. Waiting appears to describe the lack of researchers' ability to imagine process without progress much more than the actual practices they investigate. Now, in order to take the practice itself just as serious as the outcome, we need to take graduates' practices of *la chance* in Bamako just as seriously. I argue that the idea of game-playing allows us to do that.

Playing the game of *la chance* is not about making do despite the circumstances, but about acting because of and in response to what they have come to understand about their situation. Game-playing is intentional and therefore requires players not only to be able to do things and to actually do them, but also to be aware of the practices they are exercising. Ultimately,

game-playing is a practice which accounts for graduates' agency *par excellence* in the sense that it presumes agency rather than concludes it.

**(2) And we see disobedience.**

**Through the lens of the game of *la chance*, we see that university graduates do understand their situation and do not resign themselves to it.**

Graduates are not raising their voice out in the streets; they are not protesting. In fact, they do not seem to be doing anything, despite the fact that they understand. So why is that?

Precisely because they understand their situation, they are not out in the streets protesting, but out there playing the game of *la chance*.

In "Weapons of the Weak", rather than big movements, James Scott (1985) focuses on everyday forms of resistance and non-cooperation of peasants in rural contexts against oppression. He shows seemingly invisible forms of resistance, arguing that the agency of the weak is subtle, mute and involves individual acts (Scott 1985,137) for two main reasons: one, because the weak cannot afford it to be otherwise, because in a situation of powerlessness survival is on the line; and two, just as "fish do not talk about water", people do not talk about their everyday, routine actions because they take them for granted.

So, just because resistance failed at winning by overthrowing the system (Scott, 289), this does not mean that it lost in general. There are other ways to resist without directly confronting elite norms: "in ridicule, in truculence, in irony, in petty acts of noncompliance, in root dragging, in dissimulation, in resistant mutuality, in the disbelief in elite homilies, in the steady, grinding efforts to hold one's own against overwhelming odds – a spirit and practice that prevents the worst and promises something better" (Scott, 350).

Playing games is another way of resisting: "Play becomes political action when the interplay between the context and the appropriation leads to an activity that critically engages with the situation without ceasing to be play. ... Because it is play, it can thrive in situations of oppression; because it is play,

it can allow personal and collective expression, giving voices and actions when no one can be heard” (Sicart, 80f.).

### (3) We see the actual puzzle.

**Through the lens of the game of *la chance*, we see that despite their knowledge of their circumstances graduates keep trying.**

The description of professional practices as play is by no means new. Richard Rottenburg (2001), for instance, examines development work with Africa as a game in which the participating parties agree on the reduction of complexity for the benefit of measurability and ultimately, for the purpose (or the goal) of improving the conditions in developing countries. There is an agreement about the necessity of improvement in one of the two partner countries. Rottenburg argues that the primary assumption is that translation is possible, i.e. the translation of an idea from one context to another and, therefore, countries can change from undeveloped to developed. He describes a game, which is about winning or losing because it is evaluated in accordance with the measured efficiency and success of the project at stake.

The puzzle Rottenburg is confronted with is this: How come the practice of development work is kept alive even though it keeps failing? Approaching the puzzle, he examines the game, its framework (or rules) and practices (means by which the parties follow the rules) and based on an analysis thereof distinguishes between a code of practice and a code of reflection. He argues that these codes are kept separate, and have to be kept separate in order for the game of development work with Africa to be played. Put differently, playing the game, players do not question the game.

The actual puzzle is not how graduates deal with uncertainty and how they find their ways into the future. The puzzling question is: why even try?

In other words, if the labor market situation is so precarious and graduates understand that even prior to starting their studies, why do they even try? Why do they keep going? Most of them do not seem to be frustrated, they do not take their criticism to the streets, they just keep going. They keep signing up for the *concours*, they keep trying to extend their arms. How come they keep going when the reality of the situation stays the same and gets even worse?

Hirikazu Miyazaki (2006) asks a similar question in “The Method of Hope”, which focuses on Fiji’s Suvavou people, who have, for generations,

been seeking the promised government compensation for the loss of their ancestral land almost 150 years ago: how do they keep up hope when reality continues to prove them wrong? (Miyazaki 2006, 3) The Suvavou people keep up hope by practicing “the method of hope”, which is a practice Miyazaki discovered when examining ritual practices and their process rather than their effects. This method allows people to keep prospective momentum; an idea of the present in a state of the “not-yet” future (Bloch in Miyazaki 2006), rather than a not at all. It is this prospective momentum that allows them to keep going. The situation in Mali is similar, yet, radically different: Graduates do not work towards an anticipated future; they know about the state of the present and they engage in game-playing. The game is not about gaining prospective momentum, game playing is about momentum for the prospect of *la chance*, which is elusive.

Graduates keep going through the practice of opening up *la chance*, which I refer to as “the game of *la chance*”. In doing so, they do succeed individually. And their individual success is a product of a practice they exercise as a collective: they are “opening up *la chance*”, as they would call it; they are “playing the game of *la chance*”. The game of *la chance* is not about winning, so they are not trying to win, but they are playing the game. Graduates are not looking for any employment, but they look for *la chance*, which is the employment they want. They are not looking for work, but they look for *la chance* of getting paid for their labor.

#### (4) And we see a different kind of success.

**Through the lens of the game, we see graduates are striving towards different goals and succeed in doing so.**

University graduates are not playing the game of employment, but the game of *la chance*, in which the goal is a different one. In the game of *la chance*, the goal is opening up *la chance*. What matters within the game of opening up *la chance* is playing it.

Think about Amadou’s phone cabin for a second. Think about this business not being about the money, but about doing the business itself. It is about getting up in the morning, opening the doors of the business, putting the bench in front of the door and sitting on it, ready to sell units to passers-by. It makes so much more sense to think about it like that, simply because there is not enough money to be gained by running a phone cabin.

Graduates practice game-playing in real life, which does not distract from the seriousness of life, rather from the seriousness of assumed goals. Graduates are aware that the imposed goals are not achievable for most of them; they are playing for a different goal. Graduates know they most likely will not get a stable employment that corresponds to their qualification and they act according to that knowledge.

If we approach university graduates as engaging in game-playing, we see them not as victims doomed to failure, but as people achieving goals that matter to them and they have defined for themselves.

The game of *la chance* is about *la chance*, which is elusive. And because graduates know about the elusiveness of the goal of the game they are playing, the game of *la chance* is not so much about winning, but much more about playing. The future is elusive, too, and so is everything we place in the future, i.e. our imaginations, our dreams, our goals.

Playing the game of *la chance* allows for a perspective on the present which is less influenced by normative ways of imagining the future and outcome-oriented evaluations of present practices. Success or failure are no longer a criterion for the evaluation of present actions once we stop putting so much emphasis on the outcomes, but rather on the process of actions.

