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WASTEBALL: PLAY, COLLABORATION, AND EXPERIMENTAL HERITAGE IN THE MAPPA LAB

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Abstract: Wasteball is an experimental game created within the MAPPA Lab at the University of Pisa. Played daily after the laboratory's communal lunch, it involves all members (professors, postdoctoral researchers, PhD candidates, students, and interns) regardless of role, background, or gender. With simple rules and an informal setting, the game nonetheless fulfils a profoundly pedagogical role. Wasteball was conceived as a form of academic team-building: a ritual of play that transforms the laboratory into a collaborative and inclusive environment. By suspending hierarchies, it fosters inclusion, trust, and a shared sense of belonging, thereby shaping the social conditions under which scientific knowledge is produced. At the same time, Wasteball can be read as a piece of archaeogaming and experimental heritage, in which play becomes a medium for reflexive data-making and for rethinking the ethics of cooperation in research. This paper situates Wasteball within the theoretical frameworks of archaeogaming, game-based pedagogy, and the anthropology of institutions, arguing that play can serve as a method for cultivating cooperative and situated epistemic communities and sustaining collective care in academia.

Keywords: game, experimental heritage, collaboration, academia, care, team-building.

1. Introduction

In recent years, archaeology, like much of academia, has become increasingly shaped by the metrics and expectations of neoliberal productivity. The value of research is often assessed through quantifiable outputs: publications, projects, citations, and deliverables. Within such a framework, collaboration tends to be instrumentalised, reduced to a means for producing measurable results. The MAPPA Lab at the University of Pisa

has chosen to respond differently. Rather than accepting competition as the implicit rule of academic life, the laboratory fosters cooperation as a core research principle. This ethos manifests not only in its scientific practices but also in its social and institutional rituals, including an unconventional daily game known as Wasteball. Played after the lab's communal lunch, Wasteball is a simple yet significant activity. Who eats together, plays together: professors, postdoctoral researchers, PhD candidates, interns, and visitors alike. There are no teams based on seniority, no hierarchies of expertise, and no gender distinctions. The game's simplicity, centred on throwing a ball made of recycled materials, conceals a complex pedagogical structure. It functions as a levelling space, an experiment in inclusion and shared agency that redefines what academic team-building can mean. In this sense, Wasteball is not a distraction from research but a way of performing research itself: through play, the lab embodies the same cooperative principles that govern its scientific work. This cooperative ethos also shapes MAPPA's authorship model, which emphasises equity and transparency by listing all contributors alphabetically and explicitly recognising diverse roles, from conceptual input to data care and project coordination. This model resists the hierarchisation of labour typical of contemporary academia, emphasising instead the distributed and interdependent nature of archaeological knowledge production.

The following paper situates Wasteball within the theoretical frameworks of archaeogaming, experimental heritage, and the anthropology of academic institutions. It argues that play, when enacted as a reflexive practice, can challenge neoliberal conceptions of productivity and value. Through this embodied and participatory practice, the MAPPA Lab articulates an alternative ethics of research, grounded in cooperation, care, and shared responsibility, that reimagines both the conditions and the politics of knowledge-making in archaeology.

The relationship between play and knowledge production has long been ambivalent. In academic settings, play is often tolerated as leisure, a brief suspension of work, a "break" from productivity. Nevertheless, as scholars in game studies and heritage theory have shown, play can also function as a form of inquiry, a means of testing ideas, relationships, and ethical frameworks (Caillois, 2001; Huizinga, 2002; Malaby, 2007; Sicart, 2014). Play thus becomes a practice of situated reflection, where experimentation and care intersect.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 More than a game

Within archaeology, the concept of archaeogaming has emerged as an exploration of how games both represent and perform archaeological thought. While much of the literature has focused on digital environments and historical simulations, archaeogaming also provides a language for examining how play shapes our understanding of the past, data, and ourselves as knowledge creators (Champion, 2015; Reinhard, 2018). In this broader context, Wasteball can be seen as a form of experimental heritage (Petersson et al., 2020): a creative intervention through which a community explores

its own cultural practices by doing rather than by representing. In this sense, the game produces not a replica of heritage, but heritage itself in the act of playing. Instead of reconstructing the past, Wasteball reconstructs the present of academic life. It transforms the daily, often invisible routines of laboratory work (eating together, sharing space, negotiating collaboration) into a performative experiment in institutional heritage. This performativity is not metaphorical. Through Wasteball, MAPPA Lab performs its own values: equality, openness, and the refusal of competitive hierarchies. The game's rules, materials, and setting reinforce this ethos of care, asking people to come together in plurality, communication, trust and respect. The ball itself is made of recycled waste, a literal assemblage of the laboratory's remnants. The act of playing thus becomes a gesture of revaluing waste and labour, an affirmation of what we chose to consider meaningful. Care needs matter, and such gestures convert the everyday into a reflective medium, enacting care as a form of knowledge production.

2.2 Reclaiming time

Wasteball resonates with the idea of reflexive data-making: knowledge production understood not as accumulation but as situated practice, shaped by care and relational ethics. The game materialises a critique of instrumental rationality: the notion that every action within academia must produce a measurable outcome. This critique aligns with an expanding body of scholarship on the neoliberal university. Authors such as Mountz et al. (2015) and Ryan-Flood and Gill (2010) have described how metrics, rankings, and productivity pressures fragment academic communities, leading to isolation and competition instead of solidarity. Within this framework, care and cooperation are often pushed to the margins, acknowledged rhetorically but rarely embedded structurally. Against this background, Wasteball becomes a modest but tangible form of resistance: a "slow scholarship" that reclaims time for laughter, play, and collective maintenance. Such moments of institutional subversion recall what Sara Ahmed (2017) calls the "feminist snap": the wilful acts that eventually interrupt the smooth continuity of normative structures, making visible and recognisable the flaws in how they organise experience and expectation. By insisting that everyone who eats together must also play together, Wasteball performs such a snap within the academic institution: a collective deviation that refuses the hierarchies separating senior and junior scholars, intellectual and technical labour, production and maintenance. In Ahmed's (2010) terms, this act of shared play reclaims happiness as a form of dissent, joy not as compliance with institutional norms, but as their reconfiguration through care, laughter, and mutual recognition. The game's inclusivity is not merely social but epistemic: it redistributes who gets to participate in the making of knowledge. This redistribution is mirrored in the MAPPA Lab's authorship practices. Publications are signed alphabetically, and acknowledgements list every contributor, including those responsible for funding, logistics, and data care. Such gestures may appear minor, but they constitute a form of institutional archaeology, a reconfiguration of what heritage means within the academy. In recognising all roles as equally necessary to research, the lab extends the ethics of Wasteball into the politics of authorship. Both practices articulate an understanding of heritage as process rather than possession, as something we do together rather than something we own.

2.3 Thinking with things

By reading Wasteball through the lens of archaeogaming, we can thus move beyond the surface of play as entertainment or pedagogy. The game enacts what Renfrew (2004) might call an archaeology of ourselves: a reflexive examination of the social assemblages that underlie our scientific work. It embodies an experimental heritage of academia, a practice through which a research community rehearses and redefines its own modes of being together. From this perspective, Wasteball is both playful and serious. It challenges the separation between leisure and labour, suggesting that play itself can be a form of thinking, a methodology for care, and a way of producing knowledge that is affective, embodied, and communal. The game's low-tech materiality, its recycled ball, improvised field, and minimal rules, contrast with the high-tech infrastructures that usually dominate digital archaeology. However, this simplicity does not signal a lack of sophistication; rather, it reveals the cognitive and relational depth of what Malafouris (2013) has described in Material Engagement Theory (MET). In this sense, Wasteball exemplifies enactive cognition. The act of throwing, missing, or scoring is not merely symbolic; it is constitutive of thought. Each gesture, each rebound, each negotiation of distance or angle becomes a micro-event of collective reasoning. The bins, the ball, and even the uneven surfaces of the laboratory act as cognitive partners, offering affordances that guide movement, cooperation, and anticipation. The field itself operates as what Malafouris would call a cognitive ecology: a dynamic system in which human and non-human elements co-produce understanding and sustain attention. Through play, the laboratory quite literally thinks with things. The material components of the game mediate relations, record histories, and redistribute agency among the players. The result is not the simulation of collaboration but its material performance, a tangible enactment of how knowledge, care, and creativity are generated through shared engagement with the world. From a MET perspective, Wasteball becomes an experiment in distributed cognition, a small but vivid demonstration of how the human mind extends into the social and material fabric of its own making. Yet, it shares with them a commitment to data as relational: the idea that value emerges not from the data itself but from the network of human and non-human relations that sustain it (Drucker, 2011; Huggett, 2022). In this light, Wasteball offers an experimental response to the post-digital condition of archaeology. As technologies become increasingly opaque and automated, critical reflection often risks abstraction. Wasteball brings critique back to the body: it makes collaboration tangible, visible, and rhythmic. It reminds us that research infrastructures are not only technical but also emotional and ethical. The laughter, coordination, and shared movement that constitute the game are not peripheral to knowledge-making: they are its preconditions. Ultimately, Wasteball exemplifies how play can function as a method of institutional repair (Jackson, 2014). It restores the connective tissue of academic life: trust, mutual recognition, and the joy of collective endeavour. In doing so, it contributes to a broader reimagining of heritage, not as a static record of the past, but as a living practice of community maintenance. Through its modest but persistent ritual, the MAPPA Lab reclaims the right to be unproductive together, to dwell in the generative space between work and play, and to treat collaboration itself as a form of cultural heritage.

3. The game

3.1 Let there be Wasteball

Prior to the formalisation of the rules and structured configuration of Wasteball, repeated attempts were undertaken by a researcher at the MAPPA Lab to throw the paper wrapper of a sandwich consumed during a laboratory lunch break into a waste-paper basket. This initially individual practice, observed and occasionally commented upon by colleagues, led to the organisation of the first match on 5 May 2023. On that occasion, the rules were codified, the league was formally established, and the institutional roles of president, notary and treasurer were appointed. The Wasteball field is located at the very heart of the MAPPA Lab itself. Between desks, shelves, and computers stand two recycling bins (fig. 1), one for paper and one for plastic, placed side by side. They are the last surviving bins of their original type, preserved through strategic watchfulness and improvised barricades when all the others in the department were replaced with a new model in 2024. These bins define the entire spatial and symbolic architecture of the game. They are at once goals, boundaries, and ethical markers of the laboratory's ecological commitment. The rules are simple but precise: each player has three shots per match, gaining points for the paper bin and losing for the plastic one. Scoring is far from easy: the paper bin's slot is narrower and less forgiving, and rebounds in the plastic bin can be treacherous. Two throwing lines mark the field. The first line is for twenty-point scores; the second line is for thirty-point (fig. 2), more distant and riskier: scoring plastic from this position means

fig. 1. The two recycling bins, which are at the centre of the game.

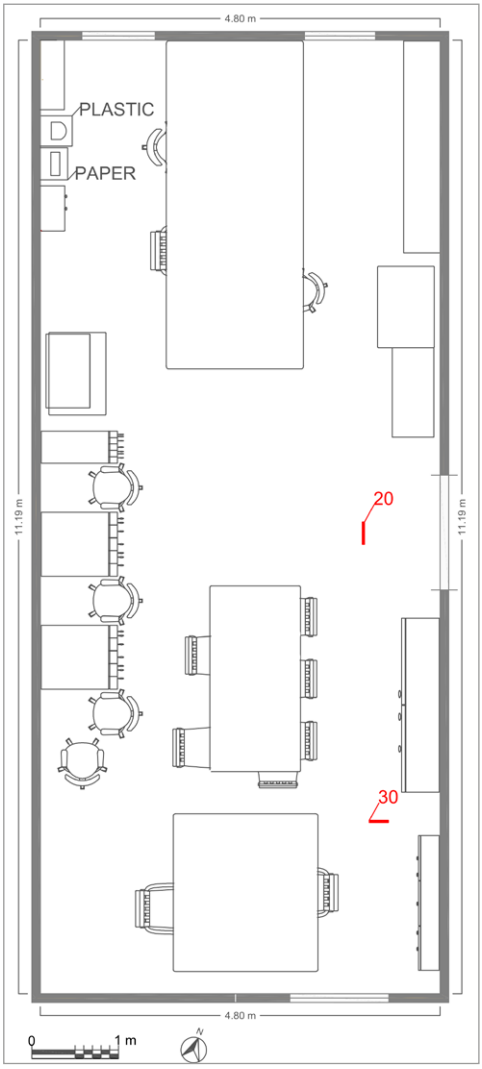

fig. 2. Ground plan at a scale of 1:45 of the playing field showing shooting positions and baskets. The distance from the 20-point line to the paper target is 5.53 m, and to the plastic target 5.81 m; the distance from the 30-point line to the paper target is 8.43 m, and to the plastic target 8.77 m.

losing thirty points instead of twenty. A player's first participation is for free, as is their birthday match. Every other game costs fifty cents, a symbolic stake in the collective economy of play. Scoring plastic instead of paper doubles the fee to one euro. Weekly prizes are modest but meaningful: the player with more "papers" than "plastics" earns €2.50; the one with the highest number of successful paper shots across the week wins €5. Respectively, the price of an industrial and an artisanal beer.

3.2 The winner takes it all, but everybody wins

The year is divided into two seasons (September to December, and January to June), each comprising a *regular season* followed by *playoffs*. At the end of the regular season, the top four players compete in semi-finals (first versus fourth, second versus third), followed by the *finals*. Prizes reflect the dual spirit of Wasteball: practical and

fig. 3. The Wasteball Trophy is made from recycled materials covered in aluminium foil, and depicts the throwing gestures denominated as the "Sala style", named after its inventor.

symbolic. The regular-season winner receives a useful prize, such as an ergonomic mouse, a new keyboard or a new laboratory tool. The winner of the finals receives the *Wasteball Trophy*: a statuette of a player made from recycled materials and covered in aluminium foil (fig. 3). The funds collected from players' contributions are not kept privately; they are reinvested in the community itself, funding the laboratory's Christmas dinner and the *Repubblica di MAPPA* celebration on 2 June, coinciding with the Italian national holiday. The Wasteball economy is therefore circular in every sense: it transforms money into conviviality, competition into solidarity, and waste into value. A written regulation codifies the rules, ensuring fairness and continuity. A "notary" acts as an arbiter in controversial cases or when proposing amendments. However, despite this institutional scaffolding, Wasteball is guided by an ethos of *fair play*: competition exists only as play, never as rivalry. The pleasure of participation outweighs the desire to win, and laughter remains the dominant form of expression on the field. The game also encourages creativity. *Trick shots*, unorthodox throws performed with closed eyes, under the legs, backwards, or while sitting on the floor, are allowed and celebrated. Their outcomes count double, whether in success or failure. This rule adds a layer of performative improvisation that aligns the game with artistic and experimental heritage practices: risk and imagination become integral to its mechanics.

3.3 We won't be bricks, together we play

Owing to its social and relational significance, competitiveness among the members of the group dissolves: what matters is not performance itself, but participation in a collective gesture. Wasteball suspends the logic of competition and skill acquisition. Players do not train, either within the laboratory or elsewhere: each throw is an individual and extemporaneous action, unique and unrepeatable. This lack of training is not a limitation but a defining feature of the game's ethos: a sort of shared improvisation that binds participants together and continually reaffirms the community of play. The spontaneity of each throw also sparks immediate group reactions, cheering, surprise, and even disappointment, with the ultimate result of reinforcing cohesion and a sense of belonging.

Wasteball enables a form of embodied and public self-determination. Over time, players develop recognisable throwing styles, including the iconic theatrical pose that has become the game's logo (fig. 4), which are not fixed but continuously reworkable. Within this context, the act of throwing becomes a mode of bodily self-presentation within the laboratory space, expressed through posture, gesture, and timing in front of peers and senior researchers alike (fig. 5), independent of academic status or technical competence, and made possible by a non-judgmental environment that suspends norms of efficiency and productivity, recognising individual difference as part of the game's collective fabric.

In ethnographic terms, Wasteball transforms the laboratory into a microcosm of collaborative life. It reveals and reshapes interpersonal dynamics: professors cheer for PhD candidates; interns advise senior researchers on throwing techniques; laughter replaces hierarchy. Over time, the game has produced its own mythology: legendary matches, heroic failures, ritual jokes. These narratives contribute to a collective memory that coexists with the lab's scientific output, forming an informal yet significant heritage. The identity of Wasteball has also materialised in visual and tangible forms: a distinctive logo, a webpage on the official MAPPA Lab website (https://www.mappalab.eu/en/wasteball-en/), T-shirts gifted to all participants, and stickers that members carry to conferences and academic gatherings (fig. 6). These artefacts circulate beyond the laboratory, spreading awareness of the game, arousing curiosity among colleagues, and turning Wasteball into a shared emblem of collaboration and playful scholarship.

Recognising these dimensions, all the data related to Wasteball has been archived in the MOD (MAPPA Open Data) repository, including a detailed plan of the *Wasteball* field and the 3D models of the Wasteball balls, enabling other laboratories to reproduce the setup and adapt the practice, the historical rankings and statistical data from each season, and the official written regulations and metadata describing the scoring system, materials. The open release of these materials extends the game's collaborative ethos beyond the laboratory's walls. It invites other academic groups to replicate, reinterpret, or expand the game to foster their own forms of team cohesion and institutional reflexivity. By doing so, Wasteball becomes both an object of heritage and a tool for heritage-making: a practice that others can inherit, modify, and re-enact. In this open, reproducible form, Wasteball materialises a principle that defines the MAPPA Lab's broader research philosophy, i.e. that knowledge, like play,

fig. 4. The iconic shooting pose that went on to become the official logo of the association.

fig. 5. Some moments from a Wasteball match. Every player has their own shooting style.

gains value through sharing. The game's documentation, rules, and data constitute a form of "meta-research": a dataset that preserves not an artefact, but a way of being together in research. Through Wasteball, the laboratory performs a subtle but powerful critique of academic individualism, proposing instead a model of scholarship grounded in conviviality, fairness, and care.

4. Conclusions

Wasteball condenses in a single practice many of the tensions and aspirations of contemporary academic life. It is, superficially, a game: modest, improvised, even ironic in its materiality. Nevertheless, beneath that simplicity lies a complex social technology: one that redistributes agency, recalibrates hierarchy, and, in Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) terms, cultivates a speculative, more-than-human ethics of care, here translated into the everyday infrastructures of academic life. By obliging everyone who eats together to play together, Wasteball transforms the act of play into a micro-political intervention. It reclaims collective time from the fragmentation imposed by neoliberal productivity, reasserting slowness, humour, and shared vulnerability as legitimate components of knowledge-making. The game's pedagogy is neither instructional nor outcome-driven. It teaches by doing, by failing, by laughing. It turns the laboratory into a field of embodied learning where collaboration is not a managerial value but a lived experience. The inclusion of trick shots, penalties, and symbolic prizes encourages experimentation, risk-taking, and self-irony, virtues often

fig. 6. The MWA (MAPPA Wasteball Association) stickers.

discouraged in an academic system obsessed with success metrics. Through these mechanisms, Wasteball articulates a counter-narrative to the logic of efficiency: here, failure is generative, chance is welcomed, and care is infrastructural.

In connecting play with data, through the open archive, Wasteball bridges material and digital heritage. The decision to publish its records in the MOD repository reframes the game as a reflexive dataset: a body of information that documents not an archaeological site, but a living community and its ethics of cooperation. In this way, Wasteball participates in experimental heritage: heritage-making that operates in the present, using creativity and iteration to sustain cultural continuity. The data of Wasteball do not preserve the past; they preserve a practice of togetherness.

Crucially, Wasteball exposes how infrastructures of collaboration can themselves become heritage. It is not only the material residue of the game that matters, but the very social and emotional architecture that enables it. The laughter that fills the laboratory after lunch is as much an archive as the 3D model: a fleeting, affective record of how knowledge communities endure. In this sense, Wasteball may be read as a model for institutional repair: a response to the alienation of academic labour through acts of collective self-archaeology.

If neoliberal academia tends to value individuals through metrics of productivity, Wasteball values collectives through acts of care. It invites us to reconsider what counts as "productive" within the university, and to imagine other forms of value that emerge from solidarity, play, and maintenance. It suggests that heritage is not only what we study, but how we inhabit our institutions. The MAPPA Lab's open authorship policies, shared meals, and games are part of the same experimental apparatus, one that treats collaboration itself as a research method and an ethical stance. By framing Wasteball as a form of "archaeology as play", we can move beyond traditional, institutional roles and engage in a ritual that centres play on its own terms, quite literally transforming the workspace into a democratic playground. It's through a playful stance like this, which looks like "just a game", that we take concrete actions to blur hierarchies and nurture care practices (Politopoulos et al., 2023).

Wasteball is more than a game: it is an epistemic performance, a collective gesture of resistance, and a celebration of care as method. By framing play as a legitimate mode of knowledge-making, it contributes to a redefinition of both archaeology and academia, from disciplines of extraction to practices of attention. Looking ahead, the Wasteball model suggests broad potential for replication in other academic and research environments. Its minimal material requirements, flexible rules, and scalable format make it adaptable to diverse laboratory cultures, disciplines, and institutional contexts. The open archiving of its data already constitutes an invitation to other communities to experiment with similar forms of structured conviviality. Future developments might include cross-institutional Wasteball tournaments, comparative ethnographies of how Wasteball is reinterpreted across different laboratory ecologies, or the articulation of open protocols for cultivating slow, collective practices in research environments. More broadly, Wasteball stands as evidence that soft resistance to the "publish-or-perish" culture need not be purely discursive: it can be embodied, daily, and joyful. The modest game played after lunch in a Pisan archaeology laboratory offers, perhaps unexpectedly, a practical and transferable model for reimagining academic community, one throw at a time.

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