From the cybercafé to the street: the right to play in the city

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Historically, the play of digital games in public was restricted to certain locations such as arcades and cybercafés. The proliferation of personal, mobile, and digitally networked devices, however, has contributed to the ubiquity of digital games in contemporary culture, making them available for play anywhere, any time. This paper uses two examples to examine this recent shift to consider how play and digital games can contribute to revitalising the urban experience. The first examines the experience of playing digital games in urban cybercafés; and the second discusses the recent popular location-based gaming app for the iPhone, Shadow Cities. By contrasting the types of play that unfold in the situated but highly contingent environments of the cybercafé and the ‘hybrid’ space Shadow Cities’ massively multiplayer world, this paper argues that the historical role of play as the foundation for a vibrant and progressive city life is increasingly at stake in the shift towards pervasive, software-mediated gaming applications.

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Introduction

“Chance encounters are what keep us going.”
— Haruki Murakami, Kafka on the shore (2002).

In recent years digital game play has increasingly shifted to personal, mobile, and digitally networked devices (de Souza e Silva and Hjorth, 2009; Drakopoulou, 2010; McCrea, 2011). This shift has had a significant impact on the visible public play of digital games. This paper explores what is at stake in this transformation for everyday urban experience. Due to the size and cost of early classic arcade games such as Space Invaders (Taito, 1978) and Centipede (Atari, 1981), the public play of digital games was historically restricted to certain locations. Subsequently, cybercafés took on the arcade’s traditional role, becoming the location for public play in the era of networked gaming (Apperley, 2010; Lin, 2009).

More recently, however, the proliferation of mobile platforms and location-aware devices has given rise to ‘location-based games’ that explicitly take digital play into the streets and public spaces of cities and urban regions, bringing about a further evolution in the nature of public gaming. This shift in public play, from the cybercafé to the street, implies a new potency for digital games and gaming cultures to contribute to a renewal of sociality in urban spaces. In his book The ludic city, Quentin Stevens (2007) argues that (non-digital) play is a fundamental element of civic and urban life. It allows individuals who are ‘biographically unknown to each other’ to interact with one another in ways that are highly contingent and shaped by the constantly changing environment and social milieu around them. He writes, ‘play events in public can encourage bystanders to join in, taking on a more active level of public engagement’ [1].

This focus on the positive contribution that play makes to civic life echoes accounts of play from the twentieth century, more than it does that of contemporary theorists. During the second half of the twentieth century Henri Lefebvre consistently argued that play and the festival would contribute to the renewal of urban spaces [2]. Similarly, during the 1950s and 60s, various avant-garde movements — in particular the Situationist International (S.I.) ‘led’ by Guy Debord...
— sought to revive play as the basis for a ‘revolution of everyday life’. The S.I., borrowing to a large extent from the work of Lefebvre, maintained that play was a crucial activity that allowed the public to reappropriate and re-imagine the city outside of contemporary models of urbanisation which mirrored the logics of capitalism and industrialism. Many twentieth century theorists, the S.I. in particular, were also drawn to play through Huizinga’s (1949) seminal work *Homo ludens*, which emphasised the role of play in the emergence of culture and cultural institutions.

Much of the contemporary scholarship on play and digital games makes useful inroads into rethinking how play might figure in civic life (e.g., Bogost, *et al.*, 2010; Kahne, *et al.*, 2009). Many scholars, though, also contend that rather than making everyday life more playful and social, the rise of digital games has instead conflated work and play; effectively turning game play into a form of digital labour. Media theorist McKenzie Wark adroitly summarises this position: ‘Play is no longer a counter to work. Play becomes work; work becomes play … The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life’ [3]. Even the harshest critics in this vein, however, do not entirely dismiss the potential for play to contribute to a reinvigoration of public life [4].

It is important to consider how digital play may contribute to civic life since, as Kahne, *et al.* (2009) note, digital games can provide models for democratic encounters and engagement. They provide ‘places where diverse groups of individuals with shared interests join together, where groups must negotiate norms, where novices are mentored by more experienced community members, where teamwork enables all to benefit from the different skills of group members, and where collective problem solving leads to collective intelligence’ [5]. In this paper, though, we want to analyse these debates by examining the consequences of a particular shift currently taking place in the digital games industry: the rise of easily accessible mobile games — available for easy download and distribution through smartphones and online services [6]. We approach this by contrasting the space of the cybercafé and the arcade — symbolic of the height of the videogame industry during the early 1980s (see Wolf, 2012) — with the current trends towards mobile, ubiquitous and ‘pervasive’ gameplay, embodied in particular by location-based games.

We are particularly interested in the effectiveness of digital play moving outside of the cybercafé for re-establishing the public spaces of the city as a potential ‘place of encounter’ [7]. The notion of the city as a place of encounter was central to what Lefebvre called ‘the right to the city’. At its core this notion argues that the city is a space for *inhabitation*, rather than a *habitat* to be managed by various bureaucratic techniques and class-based strategies that are guided and justified by quasi-sciences [8]. The right to the city reconfigures civics around a ‘renewed right to urban life’ for the working class inhabitants of the city [9].

Cybercafés and arcades, as well as the everyday locations carved out and appropriated by location-based games, can also be seen as environments from which this kind of unplanned, spontaneous social interaction can emerge. We examine what is at stake in the shift of public play to the streets through two examples: the first explores the experience of playing digital games in urban cybercafés in Caracas, Venezuela; and the second examines the recent popular location-based gaming app for the iPhone, *Shadow Cities* (Grey Area, 2011). While cybercafés contain digital play in a particular location, the playful activities and social interactions that occur in this situated space may reverberate beyond the time and locale in which they take place. *Shadow Cities* extends the social space of play into the streets and local neighbourhoods of the city. But in doing so, we argue, it makes the device on which it is played (in this case the iPhone) the key mediator between play and sociality, rather than the physical, embodied location in which the players are situated.

1. The cybercafé

The play of digital games in public has historically been limited to the semi–public space of the arcade and cybercafé, or through portable gaming consoles like the Nintendo Game Boy that involve ‘a type of spatial co-option, or […] carving out of private space from the broader public space’ [10]. Public play is also often associated with the introduction of digital gaming to popular culture; many people were first exposed to digital games through the proliferation of dedicated arcade games during the ‘golden age’ of digital gaming from the late ‘70s and early ‘80s [11].

The domestic market for digital games, game consoles and game–friendly computers — like the Commodore 64 — had eclipsed the importance of coin–operated games by the mid–1980s [12]. But the re-emergence of public play in the golden era continues to influence the still fledgling gaming industry. Typically, arcade games had been installed in public bars, pool halls and amusement arcades; areas which were public, but that often had culturally shaped limitations on access caused by localised understandings of age, class, gender, and race [13]. For example, writer Martin Amis [14] offers this account of the arcade scene:

Zonked glueys, swearing skinheads with childish faces full...
of ageless evil, Mohican punks sporting scalplocks in viva-pumps and a nappy-pin through the nose. Seven-foot black kids on roller-skates, coolly monitored by their more mystical and whacked-out older brothers... ...Ten-year-old trogs, knowing little vandals, foul-mouthed and furious and very easily frustrated... ...Queasy spivs... ...Bemused doddering hippies... ...blazered schoolboys... ...and — in New York — hip Madison Avenue ad-exec and MIT whizzkids...

He highlights that while inclusive in other respects, the subcultural scene that developed in arcades remained almost completely masculine.

Despite the domestic market overtaking it in importance, the arcade game market retained its visibility in popular culture. In particular, it was often used to deliver high-tech and publically visible game experiences that required specialized hardware beyond the capabilities of domestic consoles or computers [15], such as the marketing tie-in The Lost World: Jurassic Park (SEGA AM3, 1997).

During the 1990s, particularly following the introduction of the World Wide Web, the relative scarcity and slowness of domestic Internet connections created the opportunity for a new kind of business — the cybercafé or Internet café — that rented computers with Internet access to the public (see Cubitt, 1998; Wakeford, 2003). Digital gaming rapidly became a key activity at these locations, driven by the popularity of games which could be played on localised networks or across the Internet. Valve Corporation's corporate repackaging of the player-made mod Counter-Strike (2000) exemplifies this milieu: the game was not only played on computer networks, but content in the form of new 'maps' (game levels) were distributed on those networks among the community of players. However, cybercafés did not provide the only access to networked infrastructure. By the end of the 1990s it became relatively common for groups to set up a temporary space for networked gaming for short periods of time to create events known as LAN parties (Jansz and Martens, 2005; Swalwell, 2009).

The initial early development of public play in the arcades provided access to entertainment that was not available domestically. From the 1990s cybercafés also tended to increase the accessibility of digital games to the general public because the increasingly fast and sophisticated modes of play that high speed networks afforded meant that they could provide gaming experiences which were — at that time — not feasible in domestic contexts. During this period, cybercafés, particularly in the developed world (Powell, 2003), provided people with access to digital games that required highly responsive and sophisticated networking. This was especially the case with the most recent first-person shooter, real-time strategy — e.g., Age of Empires III (Ensemble Studios, 2005) — or massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) — e.g., World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). In the developing world the stakes for gaming were much higher; in Venezuela at least public cybercafés were often — and in many cases still remain — the only way that people could access any kind of gaming experience at all (Apperley, 2010).

The specificity of the cybercafé context can be elaborated through a discussion of Cybercafé Avila, a small (11–12 computers) cybercafé located in the Libertador district of Caracas, Venezuela. This research was conducted using participant observation of the café patrons, supported by semi-structured interviews with patrons and café employees. The fieldwork took place from March to July 2005 and involved daily observations during that period (for a full discussion see Apperley, 2010). In this paper we present one aspect of this research in order to illustrate the enduring sociability of public digital gaming. At Cybercafé Avila, while many patrons were interested in using their time to experience high-tech digital gaming, field observations consistently found that the sociality of the cybercafé mitigated this interest. This sociality led patrons to engage in networking or social play at the café often at the expense of experiencing the 'latter' digital game. From this research we wish to earmark three specific issues that highlight how cybercafés engender a sociality of public play that suggests how digital play may contribute to the social connections that Lefebvre (1996) and Stephens (2007) argue are renewed by play. Commentators like Putnam (2000) have situated digital gaming in the more anti-social sectors of computer use. This assumption largely overlooks the more niche cybercafé gaming, and also the largely networked context in which contemporary domestic gaming takes place. While it is clear that digital games in general offer players the opportunity to socialise indirectly with others, situated social play — like that found in cybercafés — provides an opportunity for social encounters.

First, continual developments in the market meant that the technological edge of the latest game had to be balanced against the considerable investment in time and money that had already been made by local customers in the current games of the hour. 'Classic' games would inevitably remain available in cybercafés due to their subcultural, rather than technological, relevance. At Cybercafé Avila these games were Counter-Strike and Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings (Ensemble Studios, 1999). Both were still occasionally played despite being over five years since release at the time that the fieldwork was conducted. Secondly, cybercafés, with their high speed Internet, are localised nodes that access the global network. Players are not limited to what is popular in the location of the cybercafé; their tastes regarding what game to play and how it should be played may just as easily be shaped by what is popular in other locations around the world.
third, the play of digital games was not the only activity taking place in the cybercafé. Playing networked digital games requires some organization in order to implement a joint session. What game is to be played and who might want to join had to be agreed upon. Often this involved inviting other patrons to join a new game that was being set up, or requesting to join an existing game. The people that were approached were often selected on the basis that they were also playing the game that the other patrons intended to play as a group. Even before the play proceeds a discussion of tactics was often necessary, which might include discussions of the common keyboard shortcuts in Counter–Strike, or Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (Rockstar North, 2002), or a discussion of the nuances of avatar design and weapon choice in Gunbound: World Champion (Softnyx, 2005). This was an opportunity to sound out the expertise of strangers, and to demonstrate knowledge about the game. But while it established hierarchies of expertise, these hierarchies facilitated a social role, making sure that people joining the group who were less familiar with the game had an overview of some of the key features of the game. It also gave people familiar with the game insight into the idiosyncratic approach that the particular group of players might take to the game.

The interplay of competition and cooperation that occurred during the play of networked digital games cues the sociality of the cybercafé environment. While networked play in Cybercafé Avila was highly competitive, players recognised that developing a competitive edge required an understanding of the variety of tactics that may be used against them. This meant that encountering and playing new opponents, both online and off–line was highly desirable for competitive players, as this meant that they would be exposed to new tactics and even ways of cheating. Furthermore, one of only the social benefits — however marginal — of being particularly good at a digital game in the cybercafé context was through the demonstration of prowess. This made it particularly important for skilled players to play with others, and to be generous in sharing their advice with other players who were less confident in their abilities. Consalvo (2007) uses the term ‘gaming capital’ to describe the various exchanges of knowledge and status that characterise online gaming communities (see also Malaby, 2006). Gaming capital also circulates in cybercafés, but in these cases contributes to face–to–face encounters and other forms of non–gaming social capital. Gaming capital should not be understood as a tool for mapping a microcosm of superficial, instrumental and calculated exchanges. Instead, the concept gestures towards the surprisingly generous cultures of cooperation and exchange that characterise competitive networked gaming.

Furthermore, even those patrons who were there to play digital games were not necessarily exclusively engaged in that activity. Casual games were a ubiquitous presence, and were played while patrons filled in time between other activities. At Cybercafé Avila the suite of games available in MSN Messenger (the precursor to Windows Live Messenger) were popular, and were used by patrons playing Gunbound: World Champion while they waited for other team members and the opposing team to take their turn. Internet–based chat was also a popular activity as well as general surfing. Patrons also used the café for off–line activities: eating and drinking were common activities, passers–by also came in to purchase food and drinks, use the printer, chat to friends and neighbours, and even seek shelter from the rain. These mixed activities created a steady stream of people moving in, out of and around the café, which contributed greatly to its role as a mediator of sociality. The diversity of online and off–line activities created some divisions among the patrons of the café — people were also there to do work–related tasks and study for university and high school. A general interest in new and distinctive activities therefore meant that many patrons were (more or less) subtly curious about other patrons’ activities. This curiosity is facilitated by the classic design of the cybercafé: computers are arranged in rows, separated by barriers that provide a modicum of privacy [16].

When a regular visitor of cybercafés enters any Internet café, a quick glance around the room will be enough for them to recognize the aesthetic of the videogames that they are familiar with among those that are being played. The unfamiliar, however, is no cause for concern. For the experienced eye a fleeting glance is often enough to decide if they are interested in making it familiar by playing the game. For this at–a–glance appraisal, game genre is a key determinant, or rather, how players evaluate that genre in relation to their affinities. For example, someone might enter the cybercafé and notice that a couple of people are playing an anime–inspired MMORPG that they have never seen before. However, a quick look at the launch icons on the desktop of the computer that they have been assigned reveals that the previously unknown game is MU Online. Interested parties can now launch the game or, if they want to find out more about the game first, they can turn to the World Wide Web or strike up a conversation with people already playing it.

The sociality of the cybercafé focuses on the relationships between people in a particular location. While the sociality that was engendered through public play in Cybercafé Avila was stimulated through the mutual experience of and affinity with digital gaming, the sociality was
embedded in, and experienced through the players’ proximity in and shared experience of play in the locality of the cybercafé. Any relationships that endured outside of the café had no direct relationship to software or networks, but were established through the shared experience of them. In this sense, digital play at cybercafés does not completely live up to the hopes that urban theorists like Lefebvre (1996) and Stevens (2007) had for play more generally. While it may rejuvenate social ties, this renewal is tied to particular locations. With this in mind, in the section that follows we examine the social experience of playing Shadow Cities on a mobile device in order to explore how mobile and location-based digital games may contribute to sociality and spontaneous encounters on urban streets. Such technologies ostensibly un tether the marked sociality of digital play from a peculiar location, thereby creating different conditions for sociality than those experienced in the more enclosed environment of the cybercafé.

2. The street

In 2001, Microsoft developed a viral marketing campaign known as The Beast to promote the release of Steven Spielberg’s science fiction film A.I.: Artificial Intelligence (2001). The Beast was one of the first alternate reality games (ARGs) that required players to unearth the narrative using ‘real world’ clues and information on the Internet. It began with a hidden phone number included in posters and trailers for the film. When curious fans dialled the number, they received a recorded voice message providing participants with just enough information to start uncovering a mystery that linked to the film’s narrative. Players had to find clues to solve the mystery by navigating Web sites for fictional characters and organisations as well as using various media including e-mail, telephone and fax [17].

The Beast is notable for being one of the earliest videogames to incorporate ‘real–world’ objects and texts as a key part of the game’s narrative. Following the widespread media attention that accompanied its release, a number of projects emerged that explored ways of further bringing digital gaming and play into everyday public spaces and locations — the streets, buildings and public squares of the city. These projects (which we refer to here under the rubric of ‘location–based games’) were fundamental in moving digital play from the situated, semi–public spaces of the arcade and cybercafé and into the streets and everyday locations of the city.

Following the novel success of The Beast, location–based gaming emerged at the frontline of artistic and commercial experimentation with location–aware technologies (Drakopoulou, 2010). Artists, game designers and amateurs explored the growing ubiquity of location–based technologies like mobile phones, laptops and GPS tracking devices, as well as purpose–built headsets and interfaces [18], to blend the players’ physical location and surroundings with the virtual game world. The most widely discussed games from this period include the U.K.–based group Blast Theory’s Can You See Me Now? (2001); academic and game designer Frank Lantz’s Big Urban Game (B.U.G.) (2002–3) and PacManhattan (2004); and the Tokyo–based social mobile game Mogi, Item Hunt (2003–7).

While arcades and cybercafés can be viewed as public (or ‘semi–public’) spaces, they nonetheless confine digital gameplay to the particularised rhythms and milieu of those environments, as we have outlined. Location–based games, in contrast, explicitly sought to move games away from the confines of the home and arcade and into the streets so that, as Frank Lantz [19] puts it, ‘the city becomes the game’s playground.’ Like online games played over an Internet connection, competition and cooperation are central features of interaction among players of location–based games. De Souza e Silva and Hjorth write that location–based games ‘are social experiences, and the coordination with other players becomes critical for the creating of the play activity’ [20].

What is different, though, is that this process occurs simultaneously in the virtual world of the game and the physical location in which it is enacted — which might be a single block or building, or a whole city. As a result, location–based games seek to revitalise and reactivate public life in the city by incorporating it into the city for playful interaction. According to Mimi Sheller, they ‘create a social world that encompasses the vicinity of the players, while the players’ spatial practice forms the conditions for progress within the game narrative. Thus they give new meanings to the players’ physical location, by lending it a mediated resonance as part of the game–play’ (Sheller, 2013).

A crucial characteristic of location–based gaming projects is that, while they took on many varied and diverse forms [21], they were commonly designed as ad hoc, temporary or transitory interventions into public space. As such, they were often built as much around the contingencies and unforeseen events that arise in public space as the pre–established rules and constraints of the game. In PacManhattan, for instance, players must coordinate together to chase each other through the streets of Manhattan in a real–world recreation of the classic arcade game PacMan (Namco, 1980) using the city’s streets as the game’s ‘board’. Similarly, games like Mogi, Item Hunt require players to scour the streets of Tokyo to collect items that ‘spawn’ in various parts of the city. They can use whatever transport means — walking, cars, public transport — are most suitable to the particular location and conditions (like weather, traffic) and that allow them to get there before their rivals. The ability of these games to adapt and evolve in response to the fluid
nature of ‘real’, physical space is a key test of how appealing and attractive they will be to players and potential participants. Frank Lantz, an early pioneer of location–based gaming, perfectly captures this sentiment:

If you want to make games like this you have to work hard to recruit an audience for them, you can’t just make up something awesome and then hope that people fall into it ... The real world is so much more noisy and distracting. So it just magnifies and multiplies all of the inherent difficulties of game design in a way that’s wonderfully stimulating. (Lantz, 2007)

As such, these games foster a sense of sociability and the potential for social encounters in ways that are quite different to public gaming in the situated space of the cybercafé. Their players must navigate the rather more unpredictable and chaotic social life of the city, as well as its material architecture and infrastructure. As such, the idea that ‘objects and encounters with other players are key narrative features that form an integral part of the game narrative’ [22] distinguishes location–based games from other forms of digital game play that might take place in public areas (such as an arcade or cybercafé). While interactions between players are possible in these environments, they do not dynamically influence the experience of the game to the same extent that location–based games seek to intertwine the physical and virtual environments of play.

Since the release of Apple’s 3G iPhone in 2008 and the growing uptake of smartphone technology, however, we have begun to see a growing commercialisation of location–based gaming software and applications. Broadly speaking, the popularity of location–based social networks and smartphones devices like the iPhone and Google’s Android platform have transformed the way people gather and interact in public spaces, in ways that become increasingly mediated through these technologies. Theorists such as Andersen and Pold (2011) for instance, have analysed the way ubiquitous computing technologies create ‘scripted’ or predetermined forms of public interaction, in which the user’s experience of urban space is configured and to a large extent determined by the devices they are using (see also Graham, 2005). We argue that this trend is echoed in digital play that takes place in public space through location–based social networking applications like Foursquare, where players are rewarded for visiting particular locations and provided with recommendations based on their past navigation history. Likewise, Google’s global augmented reality game Ingress, released in beta form in 2012 for Android, has been criticised for tracking its users’ movement and mining their data in order to allow Google to improve its own location–based services (Hodson, 2012) As Farman writes, ‘this commodification threatens to turn the user into another object within the network, finding value only in the accumulation of a user’s movements, locations and habits’ [23].

In this paper, we focus on one aspect of this argument: what the current shift towards ubiquitous location–aware and networked platforms like the iPhone and Android means for the types of playful interaction we have described thus far. The rapid growth of smartphones and networked devices with built–in location tracking technology promises to make public play more ubiquitous and pervasive since anyone with a smartphone and WiFi or 4G connection around the world can participate in them. At the same time, these same devices threaten to eliminate the very kinds of chance encounters and fluid social interactions that are fundamental to the rise of early digital games in the 1970s and early 1980s, and subsequently experimentations with location–based gaming in the early 2000s.

One of the examples that best highlights this tension is Shadow Cities, developed by Finnish game designers Grey Area and released for the iPhone in mid–2011. It was among the first mainstream, widely accessible mobile gaming apps specifically designed to use location–based technology as a major part of the gameplay and was hailed for bringing location–based gaming to the mainstream mobile gaming market (Schiesel, 2011). In the game, players begin by choosing between two factions or teams — the ‘Animators’ and ‘Architects’. The goal of Shadow Cities is to survey the game map from a fixed location and cast spells to build both their avatar’s experience and attributes and help their faction expand their influence. The game uses the iPhone’s built–in location tracking to find the player’s location, so whatever location they are playing it at will be represented on screen in a Google Maps–like map. So if players launch the app at home, their neighbourhood and surrounding streets appear on the game map; likewise if they’re at work, in a café or even walking down the street.

Shadow Cities also brings massively multiplayer elements to location–based play by allowing players to interact with one other’s avatar inside the game’s virtual universe. Anyone else who’s logged into the game will appear if they’re within the radius of another’s player’s game map. If they’re on the opposing team, players must attack them with a spell to defend their location. Players can also set up ‘dominators’ at specific locations that allow their team to take control of that ‘realm’ and temporarily become its owner, similar to the ‘mayoral’ system of social networking apps like Foursquare.

While the game was widely praised on its release, several commentators and players also pointed out several issues with its design that are pertinent for our argument about the role of interaction in public play [24]. The game allows players to interact with each other, but only in the virtual world represented on screen; there is no actual physical or ‘location–based’ play...
involved. Players can’t move their avatar from their fixed position within the game map; the player can only accomplish this by physically moving to another location — walking down the street for example. However, if they have registered friends on the same team that are currently online, they can also temporarily ‘warp’ their avatar to that area. So while they can’t move around the virtual map in the game itself, the ability to warp to friendly areas means that they can ‘virtually’ visit any city or location in the world and help their allies fight off enemies to maintain their team’s hold over that location.

In contrast, then, to early location–based gaming projects the social interaction in Shadow Cities is mediated by the software itself, rather than any face–to–face encounters and embodied interaction. The physical location where players play the game — at home, in a major city or in an isolated town — determines not what chance encounters might arise from playing the game, but how many virtual avatars they can battle against. If they live in a densely populated location, they’ll be able to interact with many other players and have large–scale battles. But if they live in an isolated location where there aren’t many other players, they will be lucky to encounter one or two other players in a session. It encourages, then, a ‘sedentary’ — rather than mobile and social — style of play; one that repurposes the concept of location–based gaming as program or code, without the central element of embodied interaction.

The opportunities for unanticipated encounters and spontaneous, unexpected interactions are thus removed by the logic of the game, in favour of one mediated by the interface of the game. As a result, the game reproduces neither the social milieu of the cybercafé, with its unspoken codes and conventions that go into producing a broader sense of gaming capital; nor the highly contingent and performative play celebrated by traditional location–based games. Instead, interactions between players take place entirely within the interface of the game software. They manipulate an abstract map of their neighbourhood that might as well be anywhere, while cooperating and competing with others in a fashion similar to online gaming, but without the additional layer of sociability afforded by playing in the ‘public’ space of the arcade or Internet café. In October 2013, the designer of the game, Grey Area, announced that Shadow Cities would no longer be supported on the App Store, highlighting both the precarity of location–based gaming apps existence as well as their entanglement within the commercial imperatives of the mobile gaming market [25]. In the next section, we interrogate what is at stake when the sociability and real world encounters that play facilitates are subordinated to this kind of consumer logic; and when the politics of ‘authentic’ public engagement are supplanted by the software and code as the space in which social interaction is mediated.

3. Public play and the right to the city

While location–based mobile games can offer opportunities for meaningful encounters between strangers, our analysis of Shadow Cities suggests that this form of digital play can also serve to segregate and isolate people playing in public because they require that individuals share common software. In this sense, location–based gaming, while shifting play to the city streets, still cordons off the sociability of play in a fashion not entirely dissimilar to the subcultural space of the cybercafé. However, this segregation is no longer demarcated spatially; it is enacted through software. This indicates the need to re–evaluate how the play of location–based games contribute to renewing and redefining the urban experience.

Our argument is that existing location–based games have difficulty producing meaningful encounters between players. But this is more of a challenge for the future than an insurmountable issue. With the Arab Spring and Occupy movement clearly in mind, Andy Merrifield [26] makes a sustained engagement with Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city that argues existing social media platforms have provided new vitality for the meaningful encounter. Social media facilitates the encounter through an ‘affinity’ which ‘becomes the cement that bonds, perhaps only for a moment, but a moment that lingers, a lasting encounter, of people across frontiers and barriers’ [27]. He points to social media as a potential grassroots organising force, one that can both strengthen, and be made stronger, by face–to–face contact [28]. Clearly, location–based games provide access to a momentary affinity that may spark a stronger bond, albeit one with a set of people that are defined by mutual access to compatible software and mobile devices. Location–based games may be further limited by their focus on creating a ‘rich’ play experience that draws players ‘into’ the game. In the cybercafé, the points of common interest between players emerge organically, and are simultaneous to the digital game play occurring. This segue from shared affinity to sociability is nurtured by the proximity that the players share in the café. While the same segue is not impossible with location–based gaming, they lack the everyday social cues that allow and encourage interaction outside of the immediate context of play, leaving all encounters between strangers to be mediated and defined by software.

However, the key issue that our discussion of Shadow Cities demonstrates is that location–based gaming apps and social networks like Foursquare and other location–based gamification applications constrain the aleatory possibilities of play. The social interaction in these games is mediated through abstract software interfaces rather than embodied — and indeed proximate — interaction. The sociality of location–based applications becomes a process of ‘sorting’ (Graham,
2005) in which access to play and to the encounter is determined not through conventional meeting places and self-organised interventions in public space, but through code. Rather than renewing urban space to the general public through play, the game software sorts the public into ‘players’ and ‘non-players’. This separation may produce sociality and rejuvenate the urban experience, but amongst a select group. The sociality of Shadow Cities is just as ‘enclosed’ to the general public as the cybercafé. As Farman suggests, what is at stake when embodied engagement is supplanted by the commodification of playful behaviour, is that the user merely becomes ‘another object within the network, finding value only in the accumulation of a user’s movements, locations and habits’ [29]. In this vein, we argue that an open, dynamic and constantly evolving social milieu remains a vital element for digital play to have a role in renewing the public spaces of the city.

Today, there are no lack of applications and platforms that facilitate playful interaction with others — from social networking and ‘gamification’ tools like Foursquare and FarmVille (Zynga, 2009) to location-based gaming apps like Shadow Cities. The contemporary dominance of mobile, networked devices and the pervasiveness of play in location-based software and applications would seemingly imply greater opportunities for these kinds of encounters. Instead, we argue that they often have the opposite effect. The actions of players of digital games have become circumscribed within the logic of increasingly closed and constraining logic of software such as that exemplified by Shadow Cities. These applications and devices make it easier to facilitate interaction with friends and other players of digital games. Ironically, though, they remove the element of chance and contingency that many theorists argue is fundamental to play in public and which is central to contemporary understandings of the ‘right to the city’. As such, we argue that the historical role of play as the foundation for a vibrant and progressive city life must be carefully considered in this shift towards increasingly pervasive, software-mediated gaming applications.

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Notes


16. Many cybercafés in Asia have private or semi–private cubicles and rooms available. However, this does not mean cafés in that region are not socialable. As Huhh (2008, p. 27) points out: ‘In the face of the high accessibility of broadband available in homes, many Korean players continue to prefer the social context of PC bangs, highlighting the importance of the space in providing context and meaning between online and off–line experiences of online gaming.’

17. See Bolish, 2012, for a more detailed account of the project.

18. Although perhaps at the higher end of the scale, the specialised equipment used in the '3D audio shooter' Demor, which was designed for blind people, highlights location–based games’ experimentation with purpose–built locative technology. See http://student-kmt.hku.nl/~q7/site/gameplay_.html.


21. For a more detailed ‘taxonomy’ of these games, see de Souza e Silva and Hjorth, 2009; Drakopoulou, 2010; and, Montola, et al., 2009.


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