Title

Engaging civic conversation in playable cities

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Abstract

Urban play has changed our relationship with the city. Playable Cities Now have the opportunity to make the city itself a platform for play through radical interventions into the democratic use of data, and the creation of social frameworks that connect people, place, technology and code.

Playable cities can lead to civic conversations that are democratic and inclusive – and that connect people in that conversation across different layers of the city, reimagining what it was, what it is now, and what it could be. Melbourne is already a playful city, what would happen if it became playable? The Playable City Melbourne conversation talks to its multi-layered identity – as a creative city, technological city, a diverse and multicultural city, a liveable city that is growing fast. It looks at what playable cities are now in response to our particular social, cultural and environmental context.

How does this connect to broader discussion on the impact and engagement of the cultural value of games and play? What are the opportunities for artist gamemakers situating play in public space? What topics are relevant now in civic conversations?

Playable City Melbourne proposes a framework for a critical reimagination of the city that seeks to address three themes: expanding our ways of being in urban environments; First Peoples connection to place, and more than human infrastructure. These themes will be explored through their expression in urban play, impact and engagement on the lived experience of cities.

Biography

Dr Troy Innocent is an artist, academic, designer, coder and educator. His public art practice combines street art, game development, augmented reality, and urban design. As a recent Melbourne Knowledge Fellow, Innocent developed the framework for Playable City Melbourne, a three-year project in which Melbourne is transformed into a playable city through an inventive blend of live art, game design and public art. Innocent

is Senior Research Fellow at RMIT University, where he continues his research into 'urban codemaking', a design process for situating play in cities, he has developed urban games in Melbourne, Bristol, Barcelona, Istanbul, Ogaki, Sydney and Hong Kong.

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Urban play has changed our relationship with the city. Playable cities originally emerged as a critical response to the rise of smart cities centred on technology-driven urban planning policies of surveillance and control. In contrast, the playable city explores creative technologies to establish social frameworks that connect people, place, technology and code. A key methodology adopted by the playable city for engagement is conversation – between industry, community and creatives working in public space.

How does this connect to broader discussion on the impact and engagement of the cultural value of games and play? What are the opportunities for artist gamemakers situating play in public space? What topics are relevant now in civic conversations?

Building on field research into the international playable city movement and practice-based research working with critical urban play, this positional paper outlines the foundation of an enquiry into the role of playable cities now after its inception at three events in October 2019 during Melbourne International Games Week.

Playable Cities

Since the emergence of ubiquitous computing, the role of creative technologies in reshaping and reimagining our urban environments has been explored by research labs, artist collectives, urban hackers and game designers. Early work in exploring the transformative role of pervasive games (Montola et al, 2009) in public spaces and its critical capacity (Flanagan 2009) expanded on locative media explorations of real places and the social interactions that emerged through this play between media and space. As location-based technologies started to become more industrialised through the establishment of the Internet of Things (IoT) and the ubiquity of smart phones, smart cities became the dominant paradigm for research and development in this field. Typically corporate led and technologically driven, the smart city privileges efficiency, productivity, surveillance and control. Building on the early experimental work in the first decade of the millennium, playable cities emerged as a counterpoint

to smart cities in 2012, with the term playable city originating at the Watershed Pervasive Media Studio in Bristol, UK a creative lab that subsequently supported the development of several playable city projects through an annual award. Other terms also emerged, such as the ludic city (Stevens 2007), playful city, playful citizen (Glas et al. 2018) and so on.

Playable cities usually appropriate smart cities technologies and situate them within participatory cultures that are active, local, creative and democratic thereby changing their meaning by bringing into play new sets of relations. Rather than a focus on optimisation and efficiency, they put people and place in the centre with a focus on the lived experience of cities – a view from the street, rather than a view from above. Smart cities start with a detached birds-eye view of the city from above mapped by systems of relations between infrastructure and data, whereas a playable city will begin at ground level from a particular place and context. Playable cities may still work with data but adopt a different approach, bringing a broader range of voices into the conversation: artists, designers, placemakers, local government, communities, urban planners, gamemakers and more.

Civic conversations are one of the strengths of playable cities, especially when these are inclusive and speak to the languages of a wide range of disciplines as this can lead to citizen participation (Leorke, 2018). This methodology recognises that urban environments are complex and messy, and that they are occupied, shaped and created by people even when governed by systems and codes. Playful takeover of these systems presents a way into complex problems through bottom-up people driven approaches rather than top-down technological methods, although there is a danger of instrumentalising play and forcing it into an agenda. While play may reveal new solutions and perspectives, these need to be explored freely without constraints and the need for free play – play for the sake of play – should hold equal value.

Playing well will result in citizen engagement by creating memorable, rich experiences that encourage imagination and curiosity – an opening up of critical conversation and multiplicity of possibility rather than a finite problem-solving activity. The larger benefits of urban play such as potential increases in public health and societal wellbeing arise from this open approach. Progressive smart cities have adopted – some would say co-opted – much of the playable city methodology (Innocent, 2019) to recognise the ways in which it humanises technologies and offers more democratic approaches to citizen data and infrastructure.

This paper will articulate and explore the language of urban play and the formation of communities that engage with public spaces as living laboratories for creative technologies and playful citizens. These definitions and methodology for engagement are then applied to Melbourne via the establishment of Playable City Melbourne in response to the unique challenges and opportunities presented by Melbourne's diverse communities and urban environments.

Urban Play

While playable cities typically involve some form of engagement with infrastructure, local government or technology, urban play is a more open and inclusive framework that explores the potential of play in urban environments. In this framework, play speaks to a reimagined, reconfigured and renegotiated world (Innocent, 2014) by modelling and providing insight into 'systems thinking', presenting strategies to adapt or 'hack' a wold of changing conditions, and a philosophical perspective that frames the world as mutable, flexible and changeable. In this way, urban play is first and foremost an attitude or way of being in the world rather than a set of actions or behaviours although these may arise as means to express internal emotional states and ways of being.

Urban play differs significantly from games or gaming, activities that are often competitive and goal-based, although this relationship is not binary – there is a spectrum of activity that moves from free play through to competitive games. This way of being has similarities to the 'lusory attitude' (Suits, 1978) described by Suits where rules favour less efficient means of engagement that the player voluntarily participates in as they are more engaged in the process than any end goal or outcome. Similarly, De Koven's 'well-played game' (De Koven, 1978) talks to the process of being in play and the particular qualities of that way of being also in contrast with winning or achieving a goal. While these definitions do not speak directly to urban play, they do identify significant points of difference between play and games and bring into focus the particular qualities of play desirable in urban environments. Urban play will be explored within this definition through a series of examples, with the additional complication – or opportunity – of public space.

Figure 1: Playable City Tokyo: Sophie Sampson and Thomas Metcalfe 2018

Free analog play is an open-ended and inclusive strategy that often draws upon players existing play literacies to resituate or reinvent familiar games in a new context. The player immediately knows how to play but is free to adapt their behaviour to the context, place, situation, and others who may also be in the space – either as observers or additional players, strangers or friends. In this example, the game of hopscotch is placed in an atypical setting and presented using a modified visual language.

Figure 2: Shadowing: Matthew Rosier and Jonathan Chomko 2014

Play with technology often reframes that technology in a playful or poetic way, appropriating it into a play moment. In this scenario, familiar elements of the urban environment such as street lamps, signage, trees or pavements are already known to the player but their role or behaviour is changed thereby changing their relationship to the player. *Shadowing* explores this approach by taking a street lamp and modifying it to capture and play back the shadows of people – or their pets – as they walk underneath it, leading to emergent behaviour such as dancing, making shapes and other performative actions.
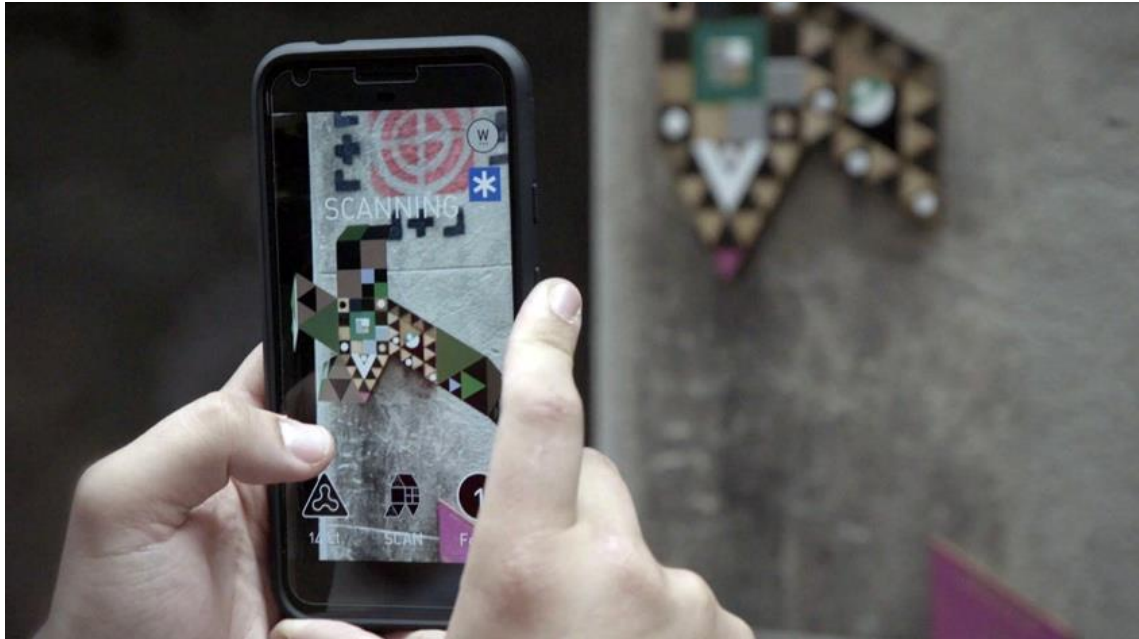
Figure 3: Wayfinder Live - urban code being scanned: Troy Innocent 2015

Urban play often tries to bring people into the present moment, taking them away from the screen of their smartphone. However, mobile play has also been appropriated for urban play often via location-based games that work with augmented reality to playfully reinvent place. The site of small screen of the ubiquitous smartphone may be reclaimed through imaginative connections between physical aspects of urban environments with virtual objects on screen. In *Wayfinder Live*, for example, art objects blended with the existing street lead players to locations and encounters with digital animation and sound that speaks to the lived experience of the city.

Figure 4: Accelerando - playable art tram: Troy Innocent 2018

Play with infrastructure is another strategy for appropriation that shifts the meaning of everyday elements of the city, allowing them to be experienced a new way. Making urban infrastructure playable can take something functional and everyday and turn it into something poetic. *Accelerando* is a playable art tram that transforms a Melbourne tram into a musical score playable via augmented reality. The speed and motion of the tram generates music as the tram passes through the camera of a mobile phone as it accelerates, comes to stop, slows down – playing with both rhythm and simple melodies.

Figure 5: en route: One Step at a Time Like This 2009

Particularly working with audio, play with location can situate a player within an alternate reality or different layers of the city become what is immediately tangible or visible. The emotional landscape of the city, imagined or actual lives of those that live within it, and the projections of the player into place may be activated by taking existing locations and framing them in new ways. *en route* is a live art event that leads people through private and public experiences working with spoken voice and music to create a form of choreographed wayfaring through a diverse range of urban environments.

Figure 6: Star Light, Star Bright: Hellion Trace 2017

Play with strangers can also be choreographed by framing the spectacle of urban play and making it accessible – and fun. Again, the appropriation of familiar frames such as dance or tag can be augmented with technology or framed in an unfamiliar context to engage players. *Star Light, Star Bright* choreographs players movement through space using networked, touch activated lights that correspond to constellations of stars in the night sky to bring together strangers in public space.

Figure 7: Urban Codemakers: Troy Innocent 2010

Exploring connections between urban play and public art suggests an approach that speaks to the temporal and situated nature of play. Public art that is also embedded and situated, distributed and responsive, temporal and relational allows play with the city as a material. Working with and in relation to the materials of urban environments and speaking to its multiple layers places urban play in conversation with the materiality of the city. *Urban Codemakers*, an alternate reality game about rezoning the city through play, was situated across performance, urban signage, social media, urban planning policy and hundreds of physical tags that marked places in the city as part of the fiction of the game.

Urban Play Communities

In order to explore this diversity of practice and the ways in which it may lead to ways of being that result in systems thinking, hacks and adaptation, and a playful philosophical perspective on the world, there is a need to find the right context and methodology for civic conversation. An outcome of this engagement could be a sense of reconnection to place, which brings lasting impact to the players relationship with the world after the urban play moment is over – it is a deep, civic conversation, both verbal and nonverbal. Given this ambition and the need to work across multiple

layers of the city, there is a clear need for an interdisciplinary community made up of designers, game developers, scientists, writers, architects, artists, producers, performers, musicians, players, and bureaucrats.

> 'This rhetoric of play understands play as a human mode of being in the world, a particular phenomenological stance toward the world. In this sense, this rhetoric of play is exclusively human and discards animal play. The play mode of being in the world is appropriative, expressive, personal, and autotelic. Play is appropriative in the sense that it wants to take over the world in order to manipulate it. This manipulation is expressive, that is, conducive to the creation of new things, actions, or behaviors.' (Sicart, 2016)

Through the shared experience and attitude of play as a way of being in the world, an urban play community may have shared values and vision even if the value systems and cultural frames that they bring to the community are different. Sharing an urban play moment is a collective and individual experience that may connect people with place, but also with one another through an ongoing process of conversation. This is similar to the experience in building play communities developed by the New Games Movement – communities that would take on a life of their own.

> 'We are beginning to create a play community - not a forever community with a fixed code, but a temporary community with a code we make up as we go along, a community that we can continue creating anywhere, any time we want to create it with us.' (De Koven, 1976)

Both Sicart and De Koven describe ways of being that are mental attitudes, ways of framing or imagining the world, and that operate as a set of social relations – a language for the conversation that creates connection within a play community.

This attitude or approach may be applied to the playable city to create a robust, inventive and healthy urban play community that represents the rules of engagement outlined earlier – systems thinking, adaptation and hacks, playful philosophical perspective. This approach to the playable city may be compared to a similar engagement with the city last century in which the Situationist International deployed play as a strategy to disrupt the utility and function of the modern city. There are parallels to our contemporary context in which the smart city is seen as a technological reboot of the modern city, again privileging productivity, efficiency,

utility and function and urban play communities – including the best of the playable cities movement – subverting and disrupting this space to bring a different set of social and cultural values into the foreground using the urban play strategies outlined earlier.

Playable City Melbourne

If we accept this optimistic view of the potential of urban play communities then we can move forward into a speculative design approach and consider the engagement of urban play with the city of Melbourne. Already a playful city, what would happen if it became playable? The Playable City Melbourne conversation talks to its multi-layered identity – as a creative city, technological city, a diverse and multicultural city, a liveable city that is growing fast. It looks at what playable cities are now in response to our particular social, cultural and environmental context.

Playable City Melbourne proposes a framework for a critical reimagination of the city that seeks to address three themes: expanding our ways of being in urban environments; First Peoples connection to place, and more than human infrastructure. These themes may be explored through their expression in urban play, impact and engagement on the lived experience of cities.

The project was introduced at Melbourne International Games Week in October 2019 through three events:

- *Playable City Melbourne:* public symposium at The Capitol attended by a range of disciplines representing the urban play community
- *Urban Play Symposium:* industry event bringing together four different city councils with industry and creative practitioners
- *64 Ways of Being:* PAX Rising booth situating a large-scale public art commission within an independent game development environment

These panel discussions started with provocations on urban play, bringing into the conversation a range of perspectives and methodologies starting with First Peoples ways of connecting, knowing and being in relation to place. By recognising play as a creative force capable of reshaping and renegotiating our collective, lived experience of cities we can explore their creative and linguistic diversity. For example, this may lead to a playable city that starts with the social, local and historical situating urban play moments that respond to collective stories of place.

A significant challenge for designers is bringing adults into urban play. Our cities are largely functional, operational, transactional. Children play outdoors but adults usually play indoors – or in the 'privacy' of their own phone. The challenge for artists and designers is how to extend invitations for adults to play in public space. To encourage citizens to pass over the threshold to become players who are curious, and want to explore, to experience other ways of being.

Playable cities can open up civic conversations about community and place. Urban play as a strategy for co-creation allows citizens and designers to re-imagine their city using participatory design and collaboration as key methodologies. While local governments and urban planners have experimented with creative technologies in this space, perhaps the best place to start is to learn from First Peoples ways of sharing and connecting with place – a way of knowing the world that is already situated and relational.

One of the opportunities for urban play is reframing infrastructure through strategies of appropriation. Infrastructure is designed to be operational and functional, what if it could also become playable? Poetic, more-than-human infrastructure, thinking of what life in the city might be like for a street light, a tree, a crow, a building, a tram, an eel… discussion on urban play may be extended to explore how can we play with all the layers of the city and see the world from a broader perspective.

These themes are being explored by Playable City Melbourne within a city that is home to many thriving play communities engaging with independent, experimental and creative game development. Making a playable city means bringing them together with urban designers, live artists, computer scientists, ethnographic researchers, academics, public artists, architects, landscape architects, musicians and sound artists. The focus of this urban play community is to work together to playtest, workshop, design, develop and realise opportunities for play in the city ranging from experiments and prototypes through to large-scale collaboration and research.

As a starting point for a conversation – and an urban play community – the symposium translated the playable cities methodology into the particular, local context of Melbourne. Through ongoing collaboration and development this urban play community presents an opportunity to evolve the playable city into a strategy that builds on systems thinking, hacks and adaptation, and play as a philosophical

perspective or way of being in the world. The challenge for this conversation will be acknowledging, balancing and negotiating multiple agendas in the contested space of the city to hold focus on the reimagination, renegotiation and reconnection with our urban environments.

Acknowledgements

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