THE SOCIAL PLAY PROJECT

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(excerpt from Hjorth & Richardson, 2014)

Through a series of workshops with young people focused on gameplay and creativity across digital and material contexts, we considered how participatory art can inform ethnographic methods and alternative modes of interpretation and knowledge transmission. These workshops were part of a performance at the Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP) in August 2015, and the temporary public site MPavillion (Melbourne, Australia, http://www.mpavilion.org/) in February 2016, in which primary school children were asked to make site-specific games that responded to their digital gameplay. The exercise not only asked participants to design, test and perform their own "location-based" games, but to consider and reflect on the relationship between digital and corporeal play. These play workshops drew from our broader ethnographic study of mobile gaming in everyday Australian life.

From fieldwork we first conducted a playful Minecraft-meets-Lego installation at the CCP gallery in which audiences could playfully transform the installation, photograph and share their performance on social media. Their social media photos then became part of the exhibition displayed on the gallery wall. From there we conducted workshops —initially inside the CCP gallery and then later at MPavilion—in which we invited young people (7-15 years) to collaborate in redesigning their favourite mobile game into an in situ corporeal game.

In the series of play workshops—conducted at the Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP) in August 2015 and MPavilion February 2016—we collaborated with school children to develop playful interventions in and around the two spaces. In the first series of workshops at the CCP gallery, we conducted ten workshops with school children.

In these workshops we familiarized participants with urban and physical games such as PacManhattan (in which people dressed as PacMan and the PacMan ghosts become "avatars" for players geo-located elsewhere, and are chased around New York), flash-mobbing (where a group of people assemble suddenly in a public place to perform a random act, typically organized through the internet, social media and/or mobile phones) and the Massively Multiplayer Thumbwrestling game (a thumb wrestling exercise for groups).

We also introduced them to the relatively emergent movement of the New Arcade, which seeks to recalibrate the relationship between digital and non-digital forms of player embodiment and emplacement, and recapture the feeling of co-located play in a social space that existed in the traditional arcade. Then participants worked in small groups to re-design, test and play a digital game they had adapted into a physical corporeal game. This process involved a lot of translation work. In each context—the gallery and the urban public space—the young people deployed different forms of play and performance to rethink their mobile and digital media practices.

Many of the children reflected that the play workshops had made them think differently about their videogame practices as well providing them a space to consider the power of play in defining a sense of place.

As twelve-year-old Sophie reflected, "*I had never thought about what Crossy Road might look like if it were physical. This workshop has definitely made me think differently about the videogames I play.*"

The workshops invited participants to challenge digital and non-digital binaries through spatial adaptation and to playfully recalibrate the relationship between digital and non-digital modes of engagement. The workshops also functioned as vehicles for an alternative mode of knowledge transmission to young people and their teachers. In these workshops, the children were defined as "experts" and "artists". They led many of the aspects of the play from discussion and design to testing the games. In the workshop process design was seen as a creative practice akin to ethnography— that is, it is concerned with reflexive, nuanced explorations into cultural practices. That is, through the deployment of both gallery space and urban public space as participatory performance space, the various settings not only operated as a means of gathering data but also transmitting it.

This transmission not only involved those actively participating in the workshops—members of the general public often became involved too by way of proximity. These workshops not only sought to investigate new methods for thinking about and enacting transmission through creative-play-as-performance in particular urban spaces, but also how digital and physical realms coalesced and influenced these performativities in different ways.

"…within contemporary practices across design, games, architecture and art, the playful has become a pivotal attitude in the expression of the contemporary."

Miguel Sicart (2014) in *Play Matters*

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PLAY

Play has multiple genealogies and is an integral part of sociality. Play is a source of culture (Huizinga 1971), a form of expression and representation (Sutton-Smith 1997). It is crucial to the human ability for adaptability and creativity (Brown, 2008), and as a way of creatively engaging with the world (Sicart 2011). The recent growth of online play together with the ubiquity of smartphones has brought digital games and play into homes, transport, work, and other everyday spaces—significantly changing the way we engage and play together (Richardson & Hjorth 2014; Pearce 2006). Developments in game design, location based technologies and diverse gaming platforms are impacting the kinds of games we play and design (Montola 2009). These developments are changing how and where play activities are entangled with quotidian routines. These complex and multi-sensorial textures of our daily lives also shift digital play to become increasingly ambient (Richardson & Hjorth 2014).

Play situations and events can also be seen as sites of performativity (Stein 2013; Witkowski 2012), where identities and conventions can be destabilised and established through processes of articulation and repetition (Hall 1992; Butler 1993). Drawing on all kinds of play from sports to folk games, Bernard De Koven (2013) describes how social play can be a way of collectively negotiating rules and conventions among a *play community*.

These communities are made up of spectators as well as players, where De Koven's ideal community values togetherness and community above any established rules of a given game. It is important that game rules can be modified or even discarded altogether. Essentially, the entire game can be changed to reflect the needs of the group that plays together.

Here individual player agency is prioritised while it is enmeshed in processes of collective negotiation (Wilson 2012). In order to reflect the needs of the play community, it is important that players are also designers—able to change the game together in relation to their own concerns. This toolkit provides suggestions to practitioners of ways in which to engage diverse groups through activities of design and play.

As described above, emerging play practices in the spaces of everyday activity suggest rich and diverse opportunities for enhanced articulation and reflection on players' social situations through activities of playing, design, and redesign. Mary Flanagan argues that the meanings emerging from games are related to the approaches and technologies involved in design decisions (Flanagan 2009).

As such, platforms, technologies, everyday situations and spaces involved in play and co-designed activity—including workshops as suggested in this toolkit—can be responsive, carefully considered and reflected on by the groups participating.

Play moments are made up of diverse human and non-human assemblages—interrelations between various actors or actants such as social, technological, institutional, or aesthetic (Taylor 2009). This relationality can be considered during processes of design and redesign of games (Naseem & Toft 2010). Play workshops in this toolkit are opportunities for different groups to reflect on how these are involved in their everyday practices and situations in playful and creative ways.

MOBILE PLAY

ENTANGLEMENTS BETWEEN THE DIGITAL AND THE CORPOREAL

(excerpt from Hjorth & Richardson, 2014)

As noted in the introduction, this project sought to think through some different ways in which ethnography and participatory performance art can foster alternative methods of conducting research, and producing and transmitting knowledge. Through a participatory art exhibition and a series of play intervention workshops in public spaces (one in a gallery, the other in a public park), this project sought to think through alternative modes of transmission that might, in turn, creatively disrupt participants' experiences and perceptions of their own playful practices.

Through the case study workshops in two different contexts, we have sought to think through some of the many possibilities that the intersection of art, play and ethnography can offer to knowledge transmission and dissemination.

The workshop process, as it unfolded, revealed and challenged participants' perceptions about public space, digital games, and playfulness. In effect, a complex layering of interfacial modes of research and reflexive participation was revealed, including: the use of the urban environment as both a 'living lab' for playful intervention, testing and research, and as a temporary material medium for gameplay; the translation of embodied memories and embedded habits specific to digital game interfaces into a physical space of co-located collaboration; the game as an experience that can be adapted across digital and material contexts (i.e. from screen to urban space); and more broadly performance and public play as an interface that enables us to experience our interaction with place and others differently, and to reflect critically on that experience.

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