

# Locating Play and Politics: Real World Games & Activism

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores locative media projects involving play and games, and their potential to act as a tool for empowerment, community building, and cultural change. Locative media, as a genre of projects and as a set of tools and technologies, often offers playful scenarios or actual games with which to explore spaces, particularly the space of the city. What contemporary media artists attempt—to create novel experiences in the space of the urban environment—involves mapping, psychogeography, and the city using new technology for play. In many of these projects, the themes of mobility and play are touted as liberatory. The history of these types of creative projects which engage the city, and the insight they offer to recent work, will be highlighted in this paper in an attempt to flesh out the social and political possibilities of taking play to the streets.

## Keywords

Locative media, mobile games, urban games, site specific art, psychogeography, location, Situationists.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*The study of everyday life would be a completely absurd undertaking, unable even to grasp anything of its object, if this study was not explicitly for the purpose of transforming everyday life (Debord 1961 (1981), 68).*

The potential for play to act as a tool for empowerment, community building, collaboration, and cultural change has been cited as a significant motivating factor in many recent location-based media projects, on an international scale. According to Intel researchers who organised a recent ubiquitous computing workshop and among the organisers of the Intersociety for Electronic Arts festival in 2006:

the contemporary city is weighted down. We can no longer technologically or socially be constrained by something planned and canned, like another confectionary spectacle. We dream of something more, something that can respond to our dreams. Something that will transform with us... (Paulos et al par. 1)

Locative media, as a genre of projects and as a set of tools and technologies involving computing, mobile technologies, physicality, and location, is called upon to speak to those dreams. Locative media offers playful scenarios, interactive events, or actual games with rules and win states to explore ideas of participation and space, particularly the space of the city. In the recent surge of locative media projects, artists are

repurposing GIS/GPS, communications, and mapping technologies to create (primarily, urban) experiences labelled as diversely as “Urban Games,” “Locative Art/Games,” “Massive Games,” “Flashmob Art,” “Ubiquitous Games,” “Hybrid Games,” “Alternate Reality Games,” and “Pervasive Games” because they combine physical and technological play (Benford 2003, McGonigal 2003, 2005). Locative games offer an ambiguous game experience; in most, the players experience the game as at least a part of ordinary life as they often occur in recognizable places and situations. In many of these projects, the themes of mobility and play are touted as liberatory, as opportunities for players to interact on scales and in environments where play has never before been experienced. Here, play emerges as fabricated or designed phenomena in actual locations. Commercial games, which already utilise locative media technology or a pervasive style of play, include *the beast* (Lee & Stewart 2001), *la fuga* (Negone 2005), *I Love Bees* (42 entertainment 2004), *Mogi* (Newt Games, 2003), *ConQuest* (Lantz & Slavin 2004) and *Crossroads* (Lantz & Slavin 2006). Such games can have fixed play lengths or offer a scenario for play until a winner/winning team emerges.

Following on the work of de Certeau and the mid-Twentieth Century Situationist projects (Debord 1955), or the new games movement of the early 1970s which attempted to bring physicality into gaming (Fluegelman 1976), there have been a number of arts groups (such as Blast Theory, Glowlab, and others) as well as individual artists who have taken on games, mapping, and the city using new technology for creative purposes. In major cities such as New York, London, Sydney, Amsterdam, Minneapolis, and Tokyo, urban games and locative media have steadily increased in popularity. New York alone has hosted *Noderunner* (2002), a race game to particular location-nodes, which utilised the urban wifi grid in the street play (Gitman & Gomez de Llarena 2005). The *PacManhattan* project (Lantz 2004) was led by Frank Lantz and a team of NYU students to enact a locative performance of the *PacMan* game in Washington Square Park and its environs. *Asphalt Games* (Chang & Goodman 2005), used street corners as territory for players to capture. Outside of New York, the Design Institute of the University of Minnesota commissioned *Big Urban Game* (2003) as a part of its Twin Cities Design Celebration, in which participants moved large-scale game pieces around the city in coordination with online voting on city maps (Design Institute 2003) (Note 1). Outside the US, Megan Hayward’s *traces* (2005) explored Sydney locations and the relationships of these locations to people, place, and narrative; Australian based *Snap Shot City* (2006) is an ongoing international locative photography game. Blast Theory’s *Can You See Me Now* (2001), *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003), and *I Like Frank* (2004) enacted tag-like play patterns to merge offline and online play.

Internationally, there have been a significant number of

location based media events held in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century media arts arena, and these share a much touted history with other city-based research initiatives (Paulos et al 2005). The 2006 ISEA conference theme “Interactive City,” held in San Jose, California in parallel with the ZeroOne “Global Festival of Art on the Edge,” for instance, focused on interactive systems and games based in urban terrains for “passers-by participants” (which might end up incredibly large, potentially becoming social “smart mobs” (Rheingold 2002)). The “Come out and Play” event, held in New York City in October 2006, also exemplified a direction where game design, art, and the use of technology and the city merged. These demonstrate that the interest in urban play using locative media is increasingly popular.

The history of these types of creative projects in the city, and the insight theories about art and urban geography offer to interpreting recent projects, will be highlighted in this paper in an attempt to flesh out the political implications and possibilities intrinsic in taking play to the streets. There have been several recent papers focused on the critique of locative media because of its closeness to industry or its reliance on Cartesian maps and thinking (Tuters & Varnelis 2006) or social control—for example, to network theorists such as Andreas Broeckmann, locative media projects might be the “avant-garde of the ‘society of control’” (2004, 7). The goal of this essay is to investigate the role of city space in such work. In respect to historical movements, the highly influential work of the Situationists is particularly relevant. A few questions to consider throughout the course of this essay include: Why would the creation of location-based environments for play, a seemingly innocent endeavour, be thought to hold problematic assumptions about space and the city? Why are urban locative media games emerging at this particular point in history? In what ways are the works emerging as political artefacts, and who is left out of the game? If technology is used, can it reflect the contested nature of lived reality, of space and place? I will argue in this essay that current social and technological landscape presents certain peculiar characteristics, and challenges, to locative media work, and these will be discussed with contemporary art and media examples.

## 2. PLAY AS A LOCAL PHENOMENON

To better understand the political promise of liberatory play, one might first reflect on analyses of play as a form of culture; according to a wide range of historians and psychologists, play has long served as a tool for both cultural transmission, and as a form for empowerment and cultural change (Blumenberg 1985, Bruckner 2000, Carse 1986, Csikszentmihalyi 1975, Sutton-Smith 1997). This definition, however, casts a wide net: indeed, there are conflicting descriptions of the idea, including terminology involving choice, need, practice, and the like. To consider the idea of liberatory possibilities inherent here, play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith notes that play is fun, voluntary, intrinsically motivated, incorporates free choices/free will, offers escape, and is fundamentally exciting (1997, 174). Further, he argues that any definition of play must apply to both adults and children, and that play is never innocent, linking play with taboo and survival issues (1997). Sutton-Smith holds out a wide net for what play constitutes: gambling, children’s play,

festival, sport, and creative activities/nonsensical activities (Note 2).

In this essay, the aim is to address both playful scenarios created by media and arts practitioners, as well as specific games, which could be said to be bound by more rules and prescribed outcomes (Salen & Zimmerman 2003). With the breadth of thinking about play, we should now move to an example of a locative work that has been described by its maker as a communicative game. Steve Symons’ *Aura* (2004) is an interactive sound installation based on GPS, augmenting a particular participant’s experience of a real space with three-dimensional sound environments. To engage with the work, participants wear PDA backpacks and walk around an outdoor space whose coordinates have been pre-programmed with sound clips, specifically, musical sounds and beats. As participants move to various positions, a particular sound mix is created based on location and direction of movement, providing “full spatial listening that blurs the real world and artistic intervention. Sound takes on a physical quality in *Aura*, thereby encouraging the creation of ‘sculptures of the mind’” (Symons 2004, par. 3). The sounds stay fixed in terms of location, but the participants move from sound node to sound node. Therefore, space can be “mapped” by participants in terms of the sound they hear in a particular location.



Figure 1: Image of *Aura* in use at *Futuresonic 2004*

Symons’s project has been staged throughout various public squares in Europe and North America (Breitsameter 2005). Noting that interaction between participants becomes “a communicative game based on aesthetic cooperation,” (Symons 2004, par. 3), the intention is for participants to somehow communicate and engage with each other to enhance or alter their own sonic experience of the space. In *Aura*, sounds are not only assigned to spatial coordinates, but also to each interactor. Each participant, and his or her movement in relationship to other participants, creates sounds shared by several in the vicinity. When in proximity to each other, participants listen to the “collision” of sound as it is processed in real time, becoming, in effect, a sonic encounter. In this way, Symons compares to the work to a multi-user computer game, in which such sonic collisions can create a cooperative sonic game.

As much as the project creatively engages with participants as they encounter space, and each other, in the field of listening,

the use of various latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates is not assigned particular meaning in the work; that is, the emphasis is on a music-like soundtrack mixed live and based on the relative positions of participants—not the space within which one is engaging. On the one hand, this means that a public space such as a square is an entirely appropriate site to experience the work, for these are indeed sites for encounter and congregation. The work can be shifted to just about any location and stay relatively the same in terms of audio location, proximity, etc. But on the other hand, this conversely infers that the work (like games to be discussed later in this essay) is “location free” even though it has tended to take place in urban locations of historic and social relevance. Thus, the issue of locality, of the embedded meaning of space, is an aspect of this type of work that calls for further development, even though Symons notes that *Aura* “is site specific work” (Breitsameter 2005, par. 5).

Here it is useful to reflect on location and its relationship to play. Play, as the anthropologist Johan Huizinga argues, takes place in a “magic circle,” a sanctioned time and space for play; it is not an activity which stays purely in the realm of the physical, for it is as much a *mental* construct, one in which participants might experience ideals (like other human values: beauty, goodness, justice, fairness, for example). In any event, whether crossing taboo boundaries or tumbling in field sport, play possesses that “well-defined quality of action which is different from ‘ordinary life’” (Huizinga 1970, 4). Play is possible only when players, *decide* it is possible. This involves permission, an agreement, between players, and also between spectators or passers-by.

On the first page of *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga asserts that play, whether it is among dogs, lions, or between people, always has *meaning*—it is more than a mere physiological or psychological phenomenon, but a process of *signification*. Regardless of the specific definitions of play offered earlier in this essay, one commonality figures into most scholarly interpretations of both games and play, and that is, the *significance* of signification. As a process of signification, play traverses ordinary life and allows players to take on issues from that life from a position of insulation. From games to humour, from role playing to the arts, from word play and poetry to gambling to festival, these activities are only *play* in context; what is play in one location, in one language, in one public space, may or may not be recognised as play in an entirely different context. With only a few exceptions, one can conclude that the phenomenon of play is *local*: that is, while the phenomenon of play is universal, the experience of play is intrinsically tied to location and culture (Note 3).

Therefore, when examining locative media projects, one must interrogate the role of the *site*. Spaces have histories, social relationships, associated languages, customs, flora, and fauna. The importance of the site in terms of one or more cultural aspects is a frequent consideration in site-specific work. It is useful to ground the issue of locality and mobile artworks within earlier practices, such as that of urban engagement through the figure of the ‘*flâneur*,’ that detached pedestrian, the stroller/observer among city streets. Much recent cultural studies scholarship has focused on *flânerie*, from its historical origins in early 19th-century Paris, to its promotion by thinkers such as Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, and a

host of critics throughout the last century (Serlin 2006). Eighteenth century *flâneurs* walked, both to see and to be seen, committing to an urban engagement for social and aesthetic reasons. In the Twentieth Century, *flânerie* slowly but surely transformed into the far more psychically-grounded experiments of psychogeography, a discipline or method built largely on the writings and practices of a loosely associated group of writers, anarchists and artists who formed the Situationist International, primarily working in and around Paris in the mid Twentieth Century.

The Situationist International, through their manifestos, publications, and other writing, detailed specific strategies to help to achieve their critical purpose: to examine the psychological ramifications of the urban landscape. “We now have to undertake an organised collective work aimed at a unitary use of all the means of revolutionizing everyday life” (Debord 1957, par. 37). This revolution would occur through the creation of temporary *situations* that would offer a brief moment of transcendence from boredom, thought to be a counter-revolutionary state by Situationists and part of their sloganeering in the 1960s.

Two of the most influential theorists to emerge from the Situationist activities were Guy-Ernest Debord (1931-1994) (also known as the founder of the Letterist movement, and famed for his later ideas on spectacle), and Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991), a Marxist critic and philosopher closely involved in the group’s early activities. Both Debord and Lefebvre articulated the potential for *flânerie* to be redrafted for political ends. Using what they referred to as the *dérive*, the drift, Situationists practiced an active type of *flâneurship* whereby the formerly aristocratic walker was transformed into a conscious, political actor. Debord wrote in 1957, “Our central idea is that of the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformations into a superior passional quality. We must develop a methodical intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the comportments which it gives rise to and which radically transform it” (Debord 1957, 704). Even though, as theorists, they were bound by their own time, place, class, language, and ethnicity, and could be validly criticised for not attempting to more deeply question the drift as an activity with class, gender, and ethnic implications, these limitations only partially detracted from the SI’s attempt toward radical social and political change. Theirs was a movement founded in Marxist ideology, serving to critique a growing bourgeois commodity-driven culture in which spaces and objects were appropriated in a consumptive cultural and economic machine. Inspiration was sought elsewhere, on the street, in the situation – an experiential, rather than commodified, form of art. Situations and experience were elevated with playful, intuitive methods. The participant became the artist, constructing the art experience using urban walking as a reflective, and critical, tool. On the surface, locative projects like Symons’ *Aura* seem to be a type of sonic *dérive* created to both offer a heightened sense of space and forge social instances of cooperation and community. If it is indeed a site-specific work, the issue of locality, of the embedded meaning of space, is an aspect, of the work that appears far less relevant to the intention of the piece than the facilitation of social interaction.

One of the significant intentions behind psychogeography, as Debord described it, was to be *mindful* of space in its open-ended, deliberately vague research schema designed to encourage people to explore their environment—usually the streets of the city. Psychogeography provided a means for participants to open themselves up to play and chance in context. It was a method of studying the world, combining compelling, off-the-wall proposals with “the long-term aim of transforming ‘the whole of life into an exciting game’—the play principle before the work principle (Wollen 2001, par. 9).

With aims in line with, though perhaps not as far-reaching as this particular claim, the UK arts group Blast Theory’s work is among the best known collection of locative gaming in the world. Blast Theory makes interactive performances, installations, video and urban-based mixed reality projects. Based in Manchester, the group combines research and development with games, narrative, and new technologies. The group’s project *Can You See Me Now?* (2001) is a locative media game which has been performed in Sheffield, Rotterdam, Oldenburg, Köln, Brighton, and Tokyo in which players around the world can play the members of the Blast Theory group online in a “virtual” city while the Blast Theory runners, mapped via satellite, appear on the map of the city. The runners carry with them handheld computers showing the position of online players; runners can communicate with each other via walkie-talkie type interaction (which online users can eavesdrop on via streaming audio on the web). The game allows for up to 20 players at any given time, and explores the ubiquity of handheld communications technology in the city. Noting, “some research has suggested that there is a higher usage of mobile phones among the homeless than among the general population,” the group explores the mobile device as a common denominator for urban experience; here technology is thought to be normative (Blast Theory 2001, par. 4). According to Richards, Blast Theory’s work is important because their projects are able to:

extend user and audience affect outside the game - rather than delimiting our consciousness to the stereotypical and virtual, the game play pushes us to understand aspects of communities, our social responsibility and ourselves. This is partially achieved by the very visceral game play - in CYSMN? the players and game play self-generate affects of pursuers and pursued...It was encouraging to see Blast Theory awarded the Prix Ars Electronica Golden Nica, which has in the past lauded some commercial, apolitical projects (2003, par. 9).

Here, with the acquiescence of the participants, the space of the city is utilised for play; the landmarks and streets become mere spaces on an existing game board, without meaning or history in their own right. For theorists of the city such as Lefebvre, the appropriation of the city means that space has been abstracted; the divorce between place and environment is delineated in Lefebvre’s ideas on social space, and its production. For Lefebvre, it is in the everyday, and through the body, that people experience urban space. Thus one’s personal preferences, identity, language, and social group or status have a significant affect on their experience of the city. Site in many locative play projects is decontextualised, abstracted—for one reason, because Lefebvre, among others, notes that abstraction of space is a capitalist strategy of power. As Lefebvre notes in *The Production of Space* (1991), spaces that are defined in the abstract, that is, those that aspects of space that are able to be

installed anywhere, be configured and reconfigured, become a manifestation of a way of thinking produced entirely by capitalism. Capitalist spaces, to Lefebvre, are systems of property relations, surveillance, and consumption. Certainly most of the urban games discussed here rely on an abstracted, loose relationship to the location in which they are played, thereby commodifying the urban landscape. In this sense, urban critic Dennis Judd might be close to the heart of the matter when he argues that major urban centres have become spectacles of tourism and entertainment, and these spectacles no longer serve residents, but have become tourist destinations in their own right. Cities attract a new form of tourist, a “post-tourist”; “unlike ordinary tourists, post-tourists do not wish to gaze upon officially sanctioned tourist sites,” argues Judd (2002, 34) and one can imagine that locative media may stand in as yet another emerging industry which forms middle class capitalist entertainment for the Twenty-first Century.

The Situationists engaged in a particular historic and culturally located view of economy and power in mid-Twentieth Century France; their view was formed based on particular assumptions about statehood and human rights; theirs was also a class-specific view, in that, through the autonomy of the individual, the highest priority is that of individuality and unrestricted movement—thus, the walker and the *flâneur* were thereby, in theory, the citizens possessing utmost empowerment due to the celebration of freedom that walking intrinsically entails. There are concerns that must be raised, however, with the SI’s ideology in terms of its white, educated, and almost indulgent middle class specificity—after all, who really has had the ability to claim unrestricted movement, to have time to follow one’s curiosity—who is able to wander and drift? Indeed, the question can be applied to locative games. Who has time to engage in “alternate playgrounds,” those urban spaces in which designers should “create new sandboxes in the metapolis” and promote playful encounters (Paulo et al 2005, par. 14)? Artists and designers certainly have answered the call to create such works at numerous events, but answers may need to better address real world disparities.

### 3. PLAY ACTIONS AND SPACES

The key issue to examine with locative media and pervasive games is that many of these new, mediated experiences refer to and appropriate space while divorcing it from its meaning, history, and significance. In September of 2006, Eyebeam in New York City hosted the “Come Out & Play,” a festival dedicated to street games. The festival offered three days of talks, parties, and events which all focused on “new types of games and play” (CO&P 2006, 1).





**Figure 2: Nokia's Times Square display screen during the event. Posted by \_snapp.**

While some games did not refer to specific spaces at all (here I am thinking of Frank Lantz's *Identity Game*, which could have played in a large house, conference, or school instead of the urban street) some games specifically took on themes of the street in their engagement.

In the locative media game *Cruel 2 B Kind*, initial teams of two players each act as assassins who stalk other teams and "kill" them with acts of kindness. Because players cannot easily identify who is a player/actor and who is a bystander, players could, for example, complement the shoes of a complete stranger, or this complement could "kill" a target. As assassination targets are successfully "picked off" from the game board of the city, those now "dead" players join their killer's team and continue to play with larger and larger groups. The teams grow until the climax, featuring a showdown of two mobs that descend upon each other for a "spectacular, climactic kill" (McGonigal & Bogost 2006, par 5). "Will innocents be caught in the cross-fire? Oh, yes. But when your secret weapon is a random act of kindness, it's only cruel to be kind to other players..." (McGonigal & Bogost 2006, par 3).

While *Cruel 2 B Kind* (*C2BK*) was not publicised as a drift but rather a team-based mobile game, the involvement with "random acts of kindness" and the engagement of an unwitting participation of other users seeps over into a type of appropriation motivated by personal gain (Note 4). In a time when the gap between the most affluent Americans and others in the US is wider than it has been since the end of World War II, in a time when the financial gap between rich and poor in Manhattan is surpassed only by a group of 70 households near a former leper colony in Hawaii, it seems as though the transformation of the city into a gameboard is bound to be destined for the enjoyment of the privileged (Holmes 1996, 1). Many more examples can be analysed for their appropriation of space for play (Note5).

Large scale games and mob-like games like *C2BK* offer a new type of human-centric, technologically mediated spectacle. Perhaps it is the contemporary conditions of labour, or the role of mobile technology and media, which contribute to a

resurgence in Situationist thinking in relation to urban games (Chang & Goodman 2005, Tuters & Varnelis 2006, ISEA 2006). Barnard theorises, "people have become divorced from authentic experience, are passive spectators of their own lives and no longer communicate or participate in the society of the spectacle. The dominant form of spectacular commodity production and consumption ensures that people do not engage in self-directed or autonomous activity, but answer the needs of the spectacle" (Barnard 2005, 107). Thus, the question of empowerment must be noted in contemporary locative media examples.

If the trend is for many locative media projects to borrow heavily from both the language of, and philosophy of, the SI, one cannot avoid interrogating the role of not only the situation but of the location in urban play-based projects. The *flâneur*, the new drifter, held for members of SI the possibility of subversive transgression (Debord 1958). International artists, technologists, urban adventurers and the public celebrated these principles at the Glowlab's Conflux event in New York in 2006. Many of the events at the annual Conflux, the festival for contemporary psychogeography, sent participants out in playful drifts to explore the ramifications of everyday city life. From the very beginning, ideas about psychogeography were intertwined with the creation of situations, but the concept of situations expanded over time to take on not only an urban walk, but the entirety of space of the city and beyond – "totality of possibilities open in an unalienated community" (Wollen 2001, 9). Debord suggested, for example, that all the equestrian statues in Paris should be taken down and reassembled somewhere in the middle of the Sahara desert, arranged in the formation 'an artificial cavalry charge'. "Not just all the statues in Paris, in fact, but all the statues 'in all the cities of the world!' The new ensemble should be 'dedicated to the memory of the greatest massacres of history, from Tamburlaine to General Ridgway'" (Wollen 2001, 9).

It is in this spirit that one group of Conflux artists attempted to engage with locational specificity in their project. A few projects took these drifts to create situations that spanned borders and interrogated international policy. *You Are Not Here* (.org) (*YANH*), by Thomas Duc, Kati London, Dan Phiffer, Andrew Schneider, Ran Tao and Mushon Zer-Aviv, is a self-proclaimed "urban tourism" game that takes place in the streets of New York City and invites participants to become meta-tourists on an excursion through the city of Baghdad.



**Figure 3: You Are Not Here (.org) participant, photographed by Regim Debatty**

Supplied with a map of both cities printed back to back, players of *YANH* were provided a tourist map for the city of Baghdad while they are physically walking through the streets of New York City. Participants navigate to sites posted on lamps, signs, and buildings to mark various Iraqi landmarks within the spatial bounds of New York City. Offering a tourist hotline, participants could listen to a *YANH* audio guide to the Iraqi site; as an example, in central Baghdad's Firdos Square, participants received a voice over recording about the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein. In addition to the facts, the voice over noted that the event might have been staged as a spectacle for US journalists and fighters. Here, location is a contested concept, as the two cities, both the subject of US-Middle East hostilities, are inextricably intertwined through a physical alignment in the project. In this way, the meaning of *YANH* (contrary to many other location-based projects discussed here) lies directly in each site "visited," exploring the relationship between sites using technology.

To understand the importance of this shift to a focus on the spatial ramifications of a site, the history of site-specific art is particularly revealing. Long before contemporary art began to engage locative media, earthworks, architecture and ritual were intrinsically bound to particular geographies. More recently, artists such as Sol Lewitt, Maya Lin, Daniel Buren, Christo, Nancy Hoyt, Robert Smithson, and Michael Heizer created work which formed "an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site, and demanded the physical presence of the viewer for the work's completion" (Kwon 2002). The site can be a political cause, social issue, as much as a street corner, but it nonetheless engages with geographical relativity. Artists who worked on sites, as well as earthwork artists, were in part influenced by 1960s politics and attempted to move beyond the art establishment (galleries and museums, and collecting, i.e., the commercial face of contemporary art practice). In many respects, their motives in moving away from these traditional systems were similar to those of the artists involved in art movements such as the Situationists International, Fluxus, Letterists, and performance art (Note 6). By making art that was anti-commodity, that seemed impossible to collect, and was bound to location and social or spatial resonances of place, site-specific artists activate and politicise public arenas in their creative work (Dougherty 2004). If (revisiting Huizinga and the signification function of play) play is local, then play within those spaces cannot help but to refer to, rework, or conversely, avoid history, social relationships, and customs of a play site. *You Are Not Here*, then, engages the issue of locality and mobile artworks within its very premise, linking locations and therefore histories metaphorically and physically.

#### 4. QUESTIONS OF EMPOWERMENT

As the work of Augusto Boal, the Situationists, and others have shown, subtle changes in art and game play may have larger ramifications when it comes to social change and activism (Note 7). Historical evidence proves these techniques can work. The resurgence in Situationist rhetoric in locative play projects, is infused with a critique of consumerism, and touts that locative play leads to a form of empowerment for

participants. Some proponents of locative media note, "locative media strives, at least rhetorically, to reach a mass audience by attempting to engage consumer technologies and redirect their power" (Tuters & Varnelis 2006, 362). Yet earlier in this essay, I recalled Sutton-Smith's assertion that "play is never innocent" (1997). Can locative play reflect the contested nature of lived space? If technology is used, can it too reflect the realities bound to space? Is locative media work mistakenly aligned with the principles of psychogeography, which, by its very nature, is distinctly political? After all, very few of the projects in the medium address biotechnology, consumption, war, identity, militarisation, or terrorism, and these are certainly central aspects of the contemporary interactive city. Are locative media artworks merely a new form of entertainment, a new spectacle? Are city spaces simply, as theorist Dennis Judd might argue in relation to new urban renewal projects, merely building a tourist city, one that chooses not to engage with local residents (2002)? If artists' goals are to transform cities such as New York into gameboards prompting play (Chang & Goodman 2006), what does it mean to "conquer turf" or "take out opponents" without regard for the space as a lived, social space; an impoverished, or incredibly wealthy space? Judd notes that contemporary consumers of the city are unlike ordinary tourists; rather, they are "post-tourists (who) do not wish to gaze upon officially sanctioned tourist sites..."(2003, 34); he notes that cities are evolving to serve tourists, rather than residents.

With this in mind, is locative play merely another problematic appropriation of space and custom--a form of entertainment 'colonization?' In prior work, I noted the particular problematic mythos of 'frontierism' in some new media works and commercial software development. Many games nurture themes of conquest, individuality, survival, and dominance over the local inhabitants and natural landscape --a recurring trope in 3D gaming and in particular VR work (Flanagan 2006). The use of location is a delicate matter, and artists making locative work need to recognise the prevalence of site as a social, discursive category.

The discussion of locative media is ensconced in the rhetoric of innovation, liberation, and possibility. Indeed, ISEA's Interactive City 2006 call for participation included questions such as "What spaces could be accessed, created or re-imagined by a massively-scaled intervention" (ISEA 2006). If play and interaction in the streets are to be empowering, exactly *who is to be empowered?* Indeed, artists and designers must take into account ideas about *who* plays in general. In their recent study of pervasive games, Montola and Waern note that in two case study observations, each of the games raised ethical questions about the role of the unaware player in such experiences. In the Swedish game *Vem Grater* staged at Gotland University, Sweden, the act of leaving public clues via rearrangement of objects at the University, instances of graffiti for gaming purposes, and the actor used in the game (who was playing an occult investigator) were considered, at best, instances of vandalism by the staff at the University, and worse, the actor was considered to be a danger to the University community (Montola & Waern 2007). In *Vem Grater*, the custodial staff was unfortunately the losers, as they had to undo what had been created for game clues on campus. In their look at the Stockholm-based *Prosopopeia* game, Montola and Waern note that the community protested the performance based game on

the grounds that people should not play pranks on others without their consent, and that unaware participants are unwillingly commodified by the players (2007, 190). This game involved explicit tasks which fundamentally required outsiders (such as involving a priest, and others whose time and attention were not formally requested).

In major cities throughout the world, the homeless, the prostitutes, and domestic workers possess the streets in a way which speaks to economic and social *disempowerment*. Their 'drift' is a search for labor or an impossibly lengthy commute. In the digital age, with economic, intellectual, and cultural divides prevalent, some artists and theorists may have grave doubts following in the footsteps of urban games and locative media whose premise of liberatory or "interventionist" work is actually an entertainment spectacle. In practical terms, who really is able to wander through space like de Certeau's walker/reader in the city? Which locative media games take on aspects regarding language, class, race, permission, and privilege? While individual freedom and rights can construct subjectivity from looking and experience, some still emerge more empowered than others; many location-based art projects have yet to be nuanced enough to address these kinds of issues.

When artists and designers set about to create an environment for play, the rhetoric surrounding the role of play, and the rhetoric of power, are consistently intertwined. Players have abilities: in games, players are agents of action and change. For in the mere act of deciding to play, an understanding of the shift in potential occurs among players, for in games, rules set up novel frameworks for action and agency. Artists have long used games as both research methods and as outcomes of research processes. Dada, Surrealist, and Fluxus artists used games to investigate war, the unconscious, ideas about networks, and the meaning of artwork itself. Notions concerning play and games have held a significant place in both art work and in social activist movements; artists have long been critical users and consumers of play systems, and in addition to its role in entertainment culture, play has long been used as a tool for practice, education, and therapy. From war games, in which troops sharpen their skills before battle, to learning about science, to games that help one tease out reactions to phobic scenarios, these "uses" of play are thought to lead to a kind of rehearsal, a practice, a type of empowerment. When taken to the city streets, this empowerment can be transformed into a reengagement with the city and thus reclamation of that space. But if this is a goal, it must be integrated into the mechanic and the setting of the game system developed. Taking play onto the pavement, in this light, cannot be seen as a defacto act of empowerment in and of itself.

To return to Lefebvre once again, the appropriation of the city has meaning beyond the grid work or the buildings: dividing space into categories of spatial practices (perceived space, routes, patterns of interaction), representation of space (cultural and social order organised by scientists, planners, etc; the spaces tied to maintaining order and public good/knowledge), and representational spaces (lived space and lived experiences which constitute the space of everyday life, spaces which are not cohesive, consistent, but rather are embedded in a history of a group of people, or a history of a

site, Lefebvre argues that representations of space are dominated by power through architecture and planning, developers, and others who control such spaces, but representational space is a living, emergent practice, linked to encounter, art, community: representational spaces "need obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness" (1991, 41). Therefore, while many locative media games are designed around particular representations of space (a public square, or a street grid, for example), the games often leave out the emergent qualities of lived representational space. This distinction is essential to understanding both the power and the shortcomings of the social and political power of locative games. If Lefebvre is correct in his belief that the creation of new spaces has the ability to change social relations, locative games must address history, lived experience, and site in order for both participant and designers to learn how to produce something better, to learn how to produce another city, another space, a space for and of social equity and change.

Inventing new and conscientious forms of play requires inventing a cultural context for that play, one that inclusively examines empowerment, location, and the specificity of culture at that location. This does not mean that the games cannot be fun, but rather, that this type of design practice be reflective and sensitive in its design. While art must indeed break borders, there are many instances where the borders broken are misguided and actually reinforce existing class, ethnic, and other power structures. Australian writer Danny Butt, for one, calls for a "'new media' in which the technologically augmented experience of location is inseparable from a philosophy of land and belonging" (2006, 324). Critiquing what he calls new media's overly abstract, modernist stance (Note 8), Butt asks artists to re-ground their work with a sensitivity in which novelty is not the only motivating force behind the work, but that such work also include context.

## 5. FUTURE PLAY?

There are a few more examples in locative play and urban space that offer a grounding sense of place while also offering engaging experiences and social critique. This essay will conclude with a brief look at such examples. Anne-Marie Schleiner's performances and computer game projects allow users to see that the design of computer-based communities and computer games are of political consequence in real space; she exposes the construction of the types of structure imposed by systems, and what users are allowed to do within systems, as conceptual frameworks. In her game-related work, Schleiner spends much of her energies exploring taboo political subjects, reworking first-person shooter style games (such as *Counter Strike*) and responding to or undermining networked computer gaming experiences such as *America's Army*. Schleiner's collaborative work with the *Half-Life* game modification, *Counter Strike*, called *Velvet Strike*, was an effort to create counter-military graffiti for the network shooter game *Counter Strike* as a response to President Bush's military invasion of Afghanistan. *Counter-Strike* is a first-person shooter game in which players enter an immersive three-dimensional realistic game environment, blasting away enemies as they run around the game. Schleiner and her collaborators created a set of 'spray paint' graffiti image-textures that players shoot at the walls and other objects in the

game world. Participants in the *Velvet-Strike* initiative download the anti-war spray paint graffiti created by others, and can create their own for other players to use. Graffiti ranges from cute, cuddly bears to anti-war slogans and propaganda. Schleiner's 2004 work, *Operation Urban Terrain (OUT): a live action wireless gaming urban intervention*, however, used an existing game environment designed to recruit soldiers into the United States Army as a site for performance. The game, *America's Army*, was commissioned after the success of many first-person shooter games as a way to entice young American men to join the military. As a freely available recruitment tool, the game has had a strong following of primarily male players, and the gaming population includes a large right-wing Christian contingency. Equipped with a mobile Internet connection on a bicycle, a battery-powered video projector, and a laptop, Schleiner and friends projected their intervention into *America's Army* on and in public sites in New York City during the 2004 Republican National Convention.



**Figure 4: O.U.T. Performance/Game 2004**

They played the game live as they projected the game onto the buildings and streets of New York, intervening in regular player's operations and discussing anti-war and anti-military content in the game. OUT is considered by its performers to be an artistic intervention in the public space of online games and cities, working to keep:

Republicans OUT of New York. The United States OUT of Iraq and the Middle East. Escalating worldwide Militarism and Violence, from whatever source, (right wing oil hungry U.S. capitalists or wealthy Islamic fundamentalists), OUT of Civilian Life. The U.S. Army and Pentagon computer game developers OUT of the minds of prebuscent [sic] gamers (Schleiner 2004, par. 3).

Games thus can be seen as critical frameworks with which to engage space, and when used in the context of artistic practice, become environments in which player-participants can make meaning that directly relate to the urban spaces. There are additional deep ties to interventionist feminist art practice with this way of thinking about the fluidity of performance, city, and the simultaneous reading and authoring of social interaction. Schleiner's appropriation of games in large-scale, public spaces presents a potent approach to social change.

A very different approach to location in urban environs is manifest in Suyin Looui's *Transition Algorithm* (2006). Her algorithm, a set of instructions with an identifiable outcome, leads players through the streets of New York City to

document neighbourhoods in transition. Noting that places in transition are characterised by cultural fractures, clashes, she chose to design an experience where neighbourhoods in transition resulting from gentrification or places where racial and cultural communities exist and overlap, or come into conflict, are the focus. Her urban algorithm, designed to position players at points where there are such conflicts, explicitly plays with and uses a tourist lens as a way to investigate and document places in transition. Participants take home photographs and souvenirs of their "travels" from New York neighbourhoods as diverse as Jackson Heights, Williamsburg, Lower East Side, Park Slope, and others (instructions are located in the appendix for this paper).



**Figure 5: From Suyin Looui's Transition Algorithm, "les enfants terrible" French restaurant and Chinatown Stores, 2006**

Samara Smith's *Chain Reaction* (2006) is a locative game that serves to sensitise players to the vanishing independent nature of commercial enterprises in New York City. To align the project with other performative action projects, she looks to Boal's idea of action and the individual's state in such action: "Theatre- or theatricality - is the capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity... Man can see himself in the act of seeing, in the act of acting, in the act of feeling, the act of thinking. Feel himself feeling, think himself thinking (1995, 12). This urban game requires the participant(s) to change direction each time they encounter a pedestrian carrying a particular consumer item. For example, one rule set requires that the players change directions each time they see a Starbucks coffee cup or Barnes and Noble bag. They are released and allowed to walk in any direction they choose only when they encounter an independent book or music seller. Maps of each walk reveal differences in various neighbourhoods around NYC. A fun and participatory way to explore and map urban space, this type of investigative rule set hold interesting potential for community-based documentary projects. (instructions are located in the appendix for this paper).





**Figure 6: Samara Smith's Chain Reaction, 2006**

Readers may notice that many of the projects here that are most sensitive to concerns of space and place also happen to be those that involve minimal technologies, or remove them altogether. Here, I would like to suggest that it is not due to some inherent bias against technologies, but rather, that the design of locative play and games take into account lived experience first, and mediated experience second. While inhabitants of cities often experience these phenomena as one in the same thing, this is not a central unifying feature of the locative media projects critiqued earlier. These experiences also closely match the ethos of Situationist exploration and also appear to spend little of the time focused on the technological means for creating a project but rather interrogate the conceptual concerns around the staging of such projects. This type of interrogation is key to developing ethical media projects which can also challenge, inquire, and empower. As Mitchell notes, social change continues to entail a taking to the streets and a reclamation of public spaces, by creating disorder where there was once order, or by challenging a particular way a space has in the past been experienced (Mitchell 1995, 124). Yet while there is the opportunity for protest and empowerment through play, play also must be carefully organised for this type of play to have a lasting and meaningful impact. Space must be understood, ordered, and re-examined; if technology is used, it must begin to reflect the contested nature of the lived reality of such spaces.

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## 7. APPENDIX 1:

*Chain Reaction* by Samara Smith, 2006

The Rules

- 1) Stand on any Manhattan street corner (begin near a subway stop)
- 2) Wait until you see someone pass with the any of the "lead" objects. Once you see the first lead object, begin that set.
- 3) Each time you see someone with one of the "lead" objects, begin walking in that direction. Continue only in that direction until you see another lead object. At that point, continue in the direction of the new lead object.\*
- 4) When you see one of your set of "release" objects, you may stop and do whatever you want until you see one of the other sets' "lead" objects.
- 5) Once you see one of the remaining sets' lead objects, return to #3 and repeat the process with the new set of objects.

Keep a tally of the lead and release objects you see and the times you spend in each phase. \_At each release moment, stop to document your walk thus far. Map where you walked, and note what you saw. \_You may also want to, document the "lead" and "release" objects as you go.

If time is an issue, you may shorten the process by releasing yourself from any one step after 15 minutes if you have not progressed to the next set in that time.

Or, players may choose to only follow one of the four sets;

SET ONE

Lead Objects: \_1) a Macys bag \_2) a Bloomingdales bag \_3) a Duane Reade bag \_4) a Gap bag  
Release Objects: \_1) a homemade sign \_2) graffiti/ street art

SET TWO

Lead Objects: \_1) a Barnes and Nobel bag \_2) a Starbucks cup

Release Objects: \_1) An independent book or music store \_2) A street vendor selling books or music

SET THREE

You are lead by: \_1) people wearing white headphones \_2) people talking on cell phones

You are released by: \_1) street musicians \_2) anyone signing or dancing \_3) two or more people stopped on the street having a conversation

SET FOUR

1) Notice what you see and don't see. \_2) Create your own set of lead and release objects \_3) Follow your own rules  
If you want to keep going after set four you may return to set one and repeat the process.

\* Participants do not have to follow the lead objects, just begin walking in the direction they are going; they may only change direction with each new lead object that passes in a new direction or upon seeing the release objects. For example, is the first person you see is carrying a gap bag and walking east, you must keep walking east until you see another of the lead objects in that set or a release object from that set).

## 8. APPENDIX 2:

*Transition Algorithm* by Suyin Looui, 2006

The Rules

1. Visit a neighbourhood in transition.

2. Take a photograph(s).

This photograph documents physical changes to the neighbourhood and street life, whether they are juxtapositions, conflicts, changes in language, ideals and politics, interactions between people, old/new, rich/poor ...

3. Take home a souvenir.

This item cannot be purchased.

What would you take home to remind you of this place?

It should be a souvenir of the place you have visited and that marks the changes taking place in the neighbourhood.

The souvenir can also be a memory of an overheard conversation or interaction.

## 9. NOTES

Note 1: The B.U.G. project was initiated to explore more participatory methods for urban planning.

Note 2: “Play can cure children of the hypocrisies of adult life,” notes Sutton-Smith, and argues that children’s play spanning from early childhood to teenage years offers narratives which negotiate the risks of the real world: “These stories exhibit anger, fear, shock, sadness, and disgust” (Sutton-Smith 2003). To Sutton-Smith, play objects tend to be a simulation of the objects of the real world, having more or less abstracted relationships to known things (1986).

Note 3: One counter argument to this claim might be that the international prevalence of simple, nonverbal games such as “paper, scissors, rock” transcends space and culture: when all else fails, many people can at the very least play PSR together. But the rules, the counting, and even the reason to play in the first place, are still culturally specific. The author has been baffled by local variations of PSR, including one with over 50 extra gestures thrown in—a true PSR mod with levels and intense scoring.

Note 4: Anne Herbert, a *Whole Earth Review* contributor, coined the expression, “Random kindness and senseless acts of beauty” in 1982. These acts are meant to be given by surprise or performed for others for no apparent reason but generosity. See Herbert, Pavel, & Oda, 1993).

Note 5: Another of many examples of using space as a game board is in the live series of “Graveyard Games” in 2005 across the US. The games occurred in Historic Elmwood Cemetery, Kansas City, the Italian Cemetery in San Francisco, the Historic Congressional Cemetery in Washington DC, and cemeteries in New York, Atlanta, and LA. At the Hollywood Forever cemetery, 60 people convened for the grand end to a game of “Last Call Poker.” During the poker game, instructions arrive to send players on a hunt through the cemetery for a series of specific graves. Players could receive bonus points by completing “favours” to the graveyard (performing tasks such as cleaning) and documenting these favours in an email to Patricia Pizer, the lead designer on “Last Call Poker.” The game’s final instructions were for participants to gather around the grave of a little boy and pay homage by offering 500 or more “Last Call Poker” chips (Terdiman 2005). In arguing for the benefit of the game, organiser McGonigal noted, “It’s only in the last 100 years that we’ve treated cemeteries as very separate spaces and not a part of everyday lives...Prior to the 20th century, they were the original parks and recreation areas” (Terdiman 2005, par 6). While organisers had permission to run the games in the cemeteries, “some relatives of people buried in the Italian Cemetery where the event was held objected to the notion of a game being played

in what they consider to be a sacred space” (Terdiman, par 4).

Note 6: One of the key characteristics of modernist and postmodernist art is the premise of interrogation: of calling into question the role of art, the role of the artist, and how artwork fits into economic and political issues. Many artists have worked to challenge institutions, of course, but also challenge the very medium in which they work. From painters as diverse as ‘image makers’ Monet, Picasso, and Cezanne, to ‘sculptor’ Duchamp, to ‘poet’ Gertrude Stein, a formalist deconstruction of the medium is historically an inherent principle behind much of the work of artists in the last century. It is this key attribute that joins the artist and the activist, the person who plays with the very notion of the norms of a given medium, and the person challenging or disrupting social and institutional norms. It is a very different task, however, for artist/activists, ie those outside various media industries, to infiltrate and critique a medium for artistic concerns, and subsequently, use that medium for larger social critique. The most potent artistic activist projects bring an awareness of the medium to the project, and an awareness of context. In fact, historically speaking, the less transparent the artist’s role, the better, so there can be no mistaking critique with mainstream media production (think of Paper Tiger TV and early video artists, who used “rough hand me down” camera and less-than-ideal conditions to disrupt the mainstream consumption of video). In fact, for many years artists strove to achieve more professional results, with the bottom line being that they couldn’t, there wasn’t the technology, team, time, or funding. In contemporary media art circles, however this oppositional ‘low-tech’ mode of working is not necessarily central to current practices. Many video artists shoot beautiful images in high definition, blurring the line between art and commercial production values. Even “home-brew” game makers can mod existing games, using the textures and models by others or creating these themselves, and many such mods might in fact almost mirror commercial game spaces.

Note 7: Activist theatre director Augusto Boal’s public games methods were derived from his work while creating *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, developed during the 1950’s and 1960’s in Brazil. Boal incorporated games that could serve to ‘act out’ problematic social situations that directly affected participants’ rights.

Note 8: Particularly citing the work of Lev Manovitch and his detailing of the distinctive properties of new media, including discrete and recombinatory representation, numerical representation/algorithmic manipulation, automation, and variability, ie, objects existing in different versions. See *The Language of New Media* (2001).