

# Introduction to the Special Issue: Cities as Playgrounds/Playgrounds as Cities: Rethinking Urban Play, Civic Engagement, and Socio-spatiality

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## Abstract

Cities have long been key sites for play. Play scholars, urban theorists, designers, and creative practitioners have explored and discussed the important role of city play and urban playgrounds. As organized locations of play, playgrounds stand as an important role in representing cultural and social mores, reflecting the relational, political, and psychological dimensions of the city. They expose how a city and its society views childhood, surveillance, control, leisure, freedom, design, and space. However, play in cities has a complex and uneven history.

## Keywords

playgrounds, urban design, cities, civic engagement, urban play

Play is timeless, abundant, and ambient (Hjorth & Richardson, 2020). It is critical, serious, and subversive (Flanagan, 2009). Much more than a childhood activity, play transcends culture, age, and even species. Play is both separate from but central to everyday life (Caillois, 1958/2001), representing a cornerstone in human civilization (Huizinga, 1938), and serving a key role in evolutionary adaptation (Sutton-Smith, 1997). As Sicart (2014) has succinctly observed, “play matters.” Belying its ubiquity, understandings of play can differ radically. Meanings of play are not universal but rather culturally, socially, and contextually specific (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Given the diversity of play, this special issue enquires within the context of the city, how has play been shared, positioned, invited, organized, and located? Otherwise put—how has play been grounded?

Tensions arise between the functional infrastructures of the city and the open and sometimes subversive nature of play. As a result, play has been organized into officially demarcated areas such as children’s playgrounds, sports fields, or open areas reserved for other outdoor activities. But the nature of play transcends imposed boundaries and limits to upset the conventions of

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urban spaces. Tactics of city-based play from hopscotch to parkour to *Pokémon GO* represent interventions into the city structure that are neither officially sanctioned nor entirely embraced, but that transform public spaces into urban playgrounds (Hjorth et al., 2021).

Playful interventions in city spaces have their genealogy in 1960s social and political interventions such as Situationist International (SI) whose practices such as *dérive* (drifting) transformed cities like Paris into multisensory playgrounds (de Souza e Silva & Hjorth, 2009). Other noteworthy predecessors include the New Games Movement who, in the early 1970s, sought to transform the whole concept of the city into a playground for political, environmental, and social objectives. These movements subverted traditional ideas of playgrounds as designated and separate areas, (re)introducing play into the everyday existence of the civic domain.

In the late 1990s, expanded notions of play in public space were reinvigorated by new mobile technologies that were taken up by theater groups such as Blast Theory, Forced Entertainment, and artists such as Janet Cardiff—each expressing artistic perspectives on how city space could be understood. In 2013, play theorist Bernie De Koven (2013) gave attention to this contemporary trend of locative and pervasive game types that upset conventions by reimagining the entire cityscape as a place of play (Hjorth et al., 2021). Along similar lines, artist Katarzyna Zimna (2014) observed in 2014, that terms such as “play,” “playground,” and “playful” had crystallized as “part of the modern art vocabulary” (p. 2). The lexicon of play was increasingly adopted to describe works that are “process-oriented, participatory or interactive, based on performance” in both gallery and street settings (Zimna, 2014, p. 2–3). These playful methodologies and modes of wayfaring – of experiencing and encountering the city as a playground – moved from the fringe and into the mainstream through the global popularity of mobile and locative games such as *Pokémon GO* (Davies & Innocent, 2017; Hjorth & Richardson, 2017; Leorke, 2018).

Games and play now reach into every corner of our lives, through what has been described as the mounting “ludification of culture” (Raessens, 2006). As noted by Glas et al. (2019), play has emerged as an important principle for understanding new manifestations of civic engagement. In addition, the variety and uptake of urban games and play have not only highlighted divergent interpretations of how public space should be used, but that public space is unevenly experienced by a diversity of individuals (Davies, 2020; Hjorth & Richardson, 2017; Lammes & Wilmott, 2018). What does this inequity around playful citizens say about the democracy of cities?

Governing bodies in urban areas have sought to put play to work, to gamify activities and environments within Smart City frameworks that imagine cities are rich data hubs. In a critical response, conceptions of the “playable city” have been advocated by organizations seeking to underscore open and free acts of play (Nijholt, 2017). These include initiatives such as *Urban Play* in Amsterdam and Watershed’s *Playable City*’s in locations such as Bristol, Tokyo, and Melbourne—each demonstrating in local terms how urban play can choreograph innovative ways of being that emphasize the social, relational, and sensory. As noted by Sicart, (2016) when data-rich cities are transformed into playable cities, they become more human, inclusive, and equitable spaces.

So how can cities encourage open play instead of prescribed games? And how might cities and games be better developed to make each more accessible and equitable? Responses to such lines of enquiry have been wholly disrupted by COVID-19 which has brought a sudden shift away from our urban playgrounds and into more intimate yet physically distanced play spaces within the home. Public play has instead flourished in the virtual playgrounds of *Minecraft*, *Animal Crossing*, and *Roblox*. For many, the changes brought by COVID-19 were not a radical but simply an amplification of digital practices already in motion—of deep connections between social play, creative literacy, and quotidian performativity (Hjorth et al., 2020). While for some, videogames have functioned as a substitute for public acts of play, the pandemic saw the social and sensorial experiences and learnings of nondigital play become diminished. As noted by Hjorth and Lammes (2020), “Playgrounds—once filled with children, parents, grandparents,

and animals—now look like crime scenes, with police tape and all. They have become forbidden territories, temporal *lieux de memoirs* of how we used to play.”

As play has continued in the home, typically within the digital confines of the computer or the mobile device, the emptiness of cities has represented open spaces for reimagining new sites for formal and informal play. Yet, regardless of how city play might propose to be structured, like all play, it requires participation. Following the global lockdowns, lasting, in some cases several months, questions arise of precisely how to reintroduce citizens to city spaces. A 2017 clinical study in Japan by Kato et al. exploring how patients suffering *hikikomori* (a severe form of social isolation) were encouraged to venture outside through playing *Pokémon GO* presents one avenue. The enforced social distancing of pandemic conditions has rendered us all *hikikomori*. Perhaps, mobile-enabled games may serve to pry us out of our homes and back into the city streets by further framing them as playgrounds. Perhaps, more open, hybrid, and free-form possibilities exist. We are entering a truly globally shared moment in which how we participate, engage, and play in urban space can be radically rethought and redefined.

The articles in this special issue arise out of an international and interdisciplinary workshop held in Barcelona in June 2019. The workshop focused on emerging research into urban spaces and play—both as foci of research, but also as a means of developing new playful methodologies. Although conceived prior to the onset of COVID, the articles were written through the ensuing lockdowns that were internationally experienced. Accordingly, these articles are inflected with a sense of enclosure but also of the potentiality of playful futures ahead. This special issue moves toward such a post-COVID future by presenting a series of pieces in conversation over the expanded and evolving notion of play and playgrounds.

Opening the discussion, Seth Giddings explores the emergence of playgrounds through mid-nineteenth century industrial society as arising alongside new spatial divisions between work and leisure. Provoking questions concerning the imposition of digital technologies into embodied play, Giddings asks: What place do these “ludic infrastructures retain in a postindustrial period of rapid technological change, not least in a children’s play culture characterized by the intangible technics of streamed digital media, networked communication, and videogame worlds?”

Marco Amati, Quentin Stevens, and Salvador Rueda give sustained attention to Barcelona’s superblocks through an investigation of their capacity for urban transformation. Tracing a history of Barcelona’s urban development from Cerda onwards, they point to the agency of play as a dynamic process in city planning. They argue that legitimate public participation is one that sees control handed from bureaucratic bodies to citizens so that they might shape their living spaces in critical, iterative, and locally beneficial ways.

Outlining an urban game design workshop presented in Barcelona, Larissa Hjorth and Sybille Lammes consider the non-normalized ways of moving through the city and the act of encountering. Their workshop participants were invited to consider: how does framing the city as “playful” allow innovative and multisensorial modes of navigation? And how does the digital wayfaring of playful cities afford new intergenerational literacies, encounters, and ways to codesign urban cartographies? With a focus on the multisensorial, the authors reflect on design for the uneven experiences of non-normative bodies in the city as playground.

Combining architectural theory and practice-based perspectives, Roger Paez approaches the process of “design” as a playground and examines how urban game design practices can shape and inform new understandings of kinship and authorship in public spaces. Outlining the findings of four separate game design projects, Paez suggests that games, understood as a format, and play understood as a method, are potent tools to critically design cities toward socially enriched civic engagement.

Presenting a situated and historical perspective, Hugh Davies and Lok Fan Yi explore the eras and agendas of urban playground construction and design in Hong Kong over the past century. Outlining distinct stages of the evolution of playgrounds that reflect local issues and global trends

along social and political lines, they find urban play to be increasingly synonymous with civic expressions of freedom and self-determination in the rapidly evolving city. The question arises of how these Hong Kong expressions of play are beginning to alter with the city's transition to the Chinese mainland.

Unpacking examples of urban play from his own creative practice, Troy Innocent investigates play as a form of sovereignty making the case that when city street becomes playable, a greater sense of community and connection emerges. Moreover, he outlines how a heightened level of playful agency serves to reinforce a citizen's right to the street, leading to a meaningful sense of empowerment that manifests in the city as a playground for digital sovereignty and an expansion of the social imaginary.

Furthering this line of enquiry, Colleen Macklin undertakes a series of interviews with game makers and organizers in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan who are each working to bring new and equitable forms of play to city streets. These conversations explore how urban games and play open-up new possibilities for claiming rights to the city away from commercial and governmental forces and toward social and personal ends. Macklin concludes that when placed within public space, "games transform experiences of urban life, making the city into something new, if only for a moment, so that we might remake ourselves."

Dale Leorke and Danielle Wyatt move the discussion from the city streets to the civic space of the library. They observe that amid shrinking space for books on library shelves, games and play have become increasingly prominent in the reconfiguration of library collections. Play, they suggest, has become a key literacy, one that is disseminated within the "library as playground" as well as across the broader context of the smart city. These ludic shifts are also evident in the services offered by libraries, such as educational programs for children that employ basic game coding and tools like *Minecraft* in a range of learning activities.

As cities work to assemble a new normal in the postpandemic era, this collection not only reflects on the changing nature of urban space but opens up a range of new perspectives that expand the terrain of city-based play, inviting and provoking us to think more deeply how it can occur. Play provides possibilities for reimagining the city and nurtures creative connections between people, things, buildings, and places. Playgrounds, rather than being defined borders separating play from nonplay, serve to remind us of the importance of play within the rhythms and social fabric of healthy cities (Hjorth & Lammes, 2020). At stake in these discussions are the deep connections between play, cities, and the people who occupy them.

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**Dr Hugh Davies** is an interdisciplinary artist, media scholar and game curator. Working between Australia and East Asia for the past fifteen years, Davies has undertaken research residencies with Tokyo Art and Space (Japan), M+ Museum of Visual Culture (Hong Kong) and the East China Normal University (Shanghai). As a research fellow at RMIT, he has co-authored two books concerning games and play in the Asia Pacific region. Hugh is currently president of the Chinese Digital Games Research Association.

Distinguished Professor **Larissa Hjorth** is a digital ethnographer, socially-engaged artist and Australian Research Council Future Fellow in the School of Media & Communication at RMIT University (Naarm, Australia). Hjorth has two decades experience leading mobile media projects to explore innovative methods around intergenerational connection, intimacy, games, play, loss and death in the Asia-Pacific region (Japan, South Korea, China and Australia). Hjorth’s Future Fellow explores the relationship between mourning rituals and media practices.

**Sybille Lammes** is professor of New Media and Digital Culture at The Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS) at Leiden University. Her background is in media-studies and play-studies, which she has always approached from an interdisciplinary angle, including playful and creative methods in mapping and media practices. She is co-editor of *Playful Identities* (2015), *The Playful Citizen* (2019) and *Failurists: When Thing go Awry* (fc. 2023). She is an ERC laureate and has been the PI of numerous research projects.