"Monopoly" in Merging Digital and Urban Playspaces

Tuo Yang

Fudan University
No.400, Guoding Road, Yangpu District, Shanghai, 200433
Telephone: +86 18817590017
r.rum.rumba@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, the city and technologies are intertwined nowadays. Booming digital technologies seek to turn our cities into more interactive way, which creates a breeding ground for diversely bottom-up play and interactions emerge in urban environment, and Watershed initiatively named it "playable city" (Watershed, 2016).

Actually, the correlation between play and the urban spaces have a long history(de Souza e Silva & Hjorth 2009). The technology is not the prerequisite to turn the physical urban spaces into a play area, but it is digital technologies such as location-based services and AR technology that gives impetus to the urban transformation into a playful space, making the "magic circle" not only expand but also co-exist with the normal spot. In this paper, a new variation of the classic game "Monopoly" took place in the urban metro line would be illustrated, with the purpose to discuss how does technologies "afford" different possibilities to game designs and distinct gameplay experience? Moreover, I intend to rethink about the "magic circle" and provide a broader practical context to reflect the game's positive role on the dynamics of cities' public space and people's urban life.

THE GAME UNDER STUDY

The original version of game *Monopoly* (Magie & Darrow, 1935) was first published as a board game in 1935, people move their pieces after rolling the physical six-sides dices. Decades later, since the new medium personal computer emerged, Monopoly Tycoon (Deep Red Games, 2001) was developed for a PC platform, the physical game board, pieces, dices and other props are turned into digital images. The case I analyses named *Metro Monopoly* (Unknown, 2017) happens in a hybrid cityspace centered on mobile communication practice both in physical urban spaces — Shanghai metro lines in stations and digital messaging platform *Wechat*.

This game was launched self-organized by young people on an official account *Someet*[1] which is kind of a multimedia channel "published" on the Wechat. Any persons from the worldwide who sees the activity post can register to apply for joining the game as **Figure 1** shows.

Figure 1-1   **Figure 1-2**   **Figure 1-3**   **Figure 1-4**

Figure 1: The launch and registration of game "Metro Monopoly" on Wechat platform
Figure 1-1: The homepage of the official account of *Someet* on Wechat with weekly posted activities.
Figure 1-2: The article about game descriptions of "Metro Monopoly" with registration button on the bottom.
Figure 1-3: When successfully registered, a Qrcode would be given to join in the game players Wechat group
Figure 1-4: "Metro Monopoly" game players Wechat group (like Whatsapp group).

The game rule of "Metro Monopoly" adapted from the classic one is that players in groups compete to be the first team back to the starting point by moving the corresponding number of stops on the real Shanghai Metro lines, after rolling dices by sending the emoji gif of dices inserted in the Wechat to decide the number of steps. Similar to the board game version or PC version, there will be punishment or rewards on different stops, such as the icon of police man marked in the **Figure 2** means no turns for one round, which would affect the progress of the game result. Each team cannot roll the dice for the new round until they take a group photo with metro stop's name in the station (**Figure 3**). What differs most is that the game board of "Metro Monopoly" is parallel with the reality. As the **Figure 2** shows, the purple line is a circle line in Shanghai metro system, the game designer creatively defined this area as a playground, and applied a set of new game rules on the movement among those stops, turning the daily metro system into a playable space.

Figure 2: These two pictures are a set of comparison of game-map
of *Metro Monopoly* VS the real Shanghai metro lines map.

Figure 3 Games' turn

Because the "movement" is by the real feet rather than moving a piece as a symbol, thus game players interact with other competitors through mobile media to overcome the distance. In this environment, the "magic circle" is extended as Montola (2009) proposed for the definition of pervasive games.

METRO MONOPOLY VS TRADITIONAL MONOPOLY

Looking through the evolution of this classic game "Monopoly", we can find various versions taking place in different spaces, ranging from physical to digital space and indoor to outdoor (**Figure 4**). In the game research, two key concepts are crucial to be used for designing as well as analyzing games: game mechanics and game design pattern. Since they follow the same pattern, in order to make a comparison between "Metro Monopoly" and other ones, I would make a chart, "using verbs"(Järvinen 2008) to describe actions of players within a **context** (Sicart, 2008) of player's presence in the game world, applying the approach of game mechanics to show the comparison between the game and the classic Monopoly.
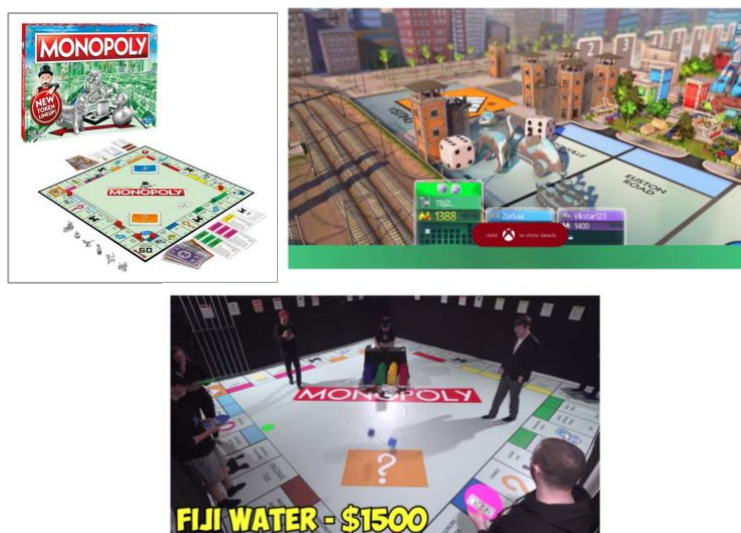

Figure 4 Variations of game "Monopoly"[2]

WALKING IN BOTH REALITY AND ALTERNATE REALITY

At the beginning of this article, it is mentioned technology affordance expands the possibilities of game play. In the full article, this would be further discussed on the game development with regards to game mechanics and contexts mentioned above. In return, the mobile technology indeed turns the city space into a hybrid space (de Souza e Silva 2006) with technology-embodied "always-on" connection, which also helps change the people's interaction with cities. When game players of *Metro Monopoly* walking in the cityspaces, they are still in the daily life acting as taking the metro, but the meaning of the activity are totally different, which might unpredictably create new social relationship and public spaces under the "social contract" of game rules.

In the full article, more content will be discussed about the potential urban transformation with production of public spaces caused by the expansion of "magic circle". As what the Gregory Bateson (1956)'s concept of "metacommunication" refers to, though people send messages as usual in the instant social App to have a speech communication to make the game go on, in the game world, each message is a "metacommunication", only standing for an response to affect the dynamics of the game. Each message in the virtual space also trigger the body's movement from one point in another point in the physical space, which constructs a new communication situation among people in a merging digital and physical space shaped by new media technology.

Game world can exist go beyond the ordinary life, of which the impact would not be regarded as valid to real life. Furthermore, the game players are also the citizens as well. When they encode and decode the city in a new way rather than a fixed official dominant sign system which are clear and unified, game activities actually can become an alternate way for bottom-up planning that makes the city more participatory and enjoyable.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Someet is a platform based on Wechat official account, gathering hundreds of bottom-up youth interest activities per week in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, which are the three biggest cities in China.