Localizing Location-Based Gaming: Situating Australian Urban Play

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INTRODUCTION

With increased technological innovations, urban mobile games are becoming increasingly more frequent and innovative. From Blast Theory's widely discussed *Uncle Roy All Around You* to more contemporary forms of urban mobile gaming such as Niantic Lab's *Ingress*, playing in public is becoming increasingly commonplace. While more frequent and accessible, these practices are not globally universal. Similar technologically mediated engagements with urban environments, such as pervasive games, have been discussed as a form of blurring, bending, or indeed breaking the sociocultural boundaries that are ascribed to digital gaming (Montola, et. al. 2009; Nieuwdorp, 2005; 2007). Such forms of public playfulness are increasingly understood as tied up with notions of 'the everyday'. Yet, the nuances of a localized everyday are often lost in the process of understanding such forms of gaming as primarily a spatial or temporal concern. This paper continues on a larger study of urban mobile gaming as a form of situated play (Moore, 2015a; 2015b). In doing so, this paper proposes situated play as a new conceptual tool for understanding the everyday practices of playing location-based games in urban environments. The question of how do we come to understand specific localized, and indeed situated, gaming cultures within these emerging play practices is explored firstly through a discussion of historical forms of playful urban mobility, and secondly through key shifts in theoretical thinking about these practices. The goal of this paper is use key case studies to develop a fluid theory of play as situational, with the ultimate goal of understanding specific cultural practices within Australian location-based gaming.

As Shira Chess (2014) notes, games like *Ingress* are an articulation of global and regional knowledge. Here, play is understood within a global media ecology, and local situated practices (Apperley, 2010). Such forms of urban play are not strictly global and local, but rather exist in tensions between Western notions of urban environments as functional or playful spaces. Historical approaches to urban mobile gaming (de Souza e Silva and Hjorth, 2009; Flanagan, 2007, 2009; Stevens, 2007) draw comparisons between playful urban mobilities, most commonly the Situationist International Practice of *derive*. Such forms of urban mobility, while influenced by Huizinga's (1955) conceptualization of

play, are best categorized as a form a playful activity rather than strictly as an act of play in itself. In relation to localized practices, such practices and concept form a basis for a larger discourse of play as form of critical and subversive reading of the urban space as a site of capitalist functionality. Alongside these notions, the utopian discourse of the New Games Movement (Pearce et. al. 2007) provides insight into the design of public forms of play as social and providing a civic function. Contemporary art movements, such as that of the Playable City (Reddington in Baggini, 2014) draw from these influential movements and ask the question what purpose does play within the context of shared public spaces. In proposal a situated approach to urban play, this paper focuses theoretically situating specific forms of urban mobility within the context of Australian location-based gaming. In doing so, this paper explores tensions that emerging between games and art, with specific focus on both practice as playful engagements with the urban environment. This investigation leads to questioning power dynamics within the city, spaces and activities deemed as cultural production or leisure, and lastly, the question of who gets to contribute to a sense of urban mobile gaming culture.

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