Mobile and Locative Games in the "Civic Tripod:" Activism, Art and Learning

By Susana Ruiz, Benjamin Stokes, and Jeff Watson

ABSTRACT: This report addresses the mobile frontier for civic games, which is fragmented across the applied domains of activism, art and learning. We argue that these three domains can and should speak jointly — an approach we call the civic "tripod." Our site structure is part of its contribution, with a curated database of projects and interviews from the field. Analysis from each leg of the tripod draws on the examples independently, and supports direct linking with practitioner blogs and news articles. The blur between tripod "legs" is as important as each perspective. Going forward, the most useful design principles and analysis may require the ability to analyze across the civic tripod, and publishing modes that are directly shared with practitioners.

Preview and Authorship

The full version of this report is only available online at http://CivicTripod.com

Three Dimensions for Analysis

Following our introduction and overview, this report outlines the emerging field of mobile and pervasive games along three dimensions:

1. civic learning

2. play and performance

3. social change

Focusing on real projects from the field, and interviews with key designers, we aim to reveal key opportunities and constraints on the mobile frontier for civic games.

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Acknowledgments

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Overview

The "big picture" for mobile and locative games has been hard to see, and hard to articulate. One cause is that the examples are rarely woven together across disciplines. Second, theory has too often been absent or heavy-handed. Something in-between is needed. This is especially true for more deeply social designs, which are too often reduced to case studies especially in fields like education, the arts, and civic innovation. We argue that this fragmentation of isolated examples is undermining our ability to think big, design holistically, and evaluate broadly.

For this report, we ambitiously seek to curate a set of conceptually important mobile projects, and to connect them with a light weave of theory from three distinct traditions of practice. Specifically, this report outlines the emerging field of mobile and pervasive games along the dimensions of (1) civic learning, (2) performance/art, and (3) social change. Focusing on real projects from the field, we aim to reveal key opportunities and constraints on the mobile frontier for civic games.

We argue that this three-legged "tripod" is increasingly necessary to articulate how mobile game projects are succeeding (and failing). In the past, designs have been analyzed separately by the siloed domains of art, learning, and social action. Each silo remains a useful lens, but combining the lenses is increasingly necessary for mobile media.

Mobile media is different because it ties into the physical space of our neighborhoods, with longstanding relationships and neighborhood dramas. On the streets in front of our homes, most of us already know if there are potholes, and whether socio-economic segregation is getting worse or better. But we may need the vision of art to imagine alternate futures. Art on our streets resists abstraction, and raises immediate questions of civics, prompting us to ask, "what can we *do* about this?" And taking action points back to learning, since the neighborhood solution is so often to empower ourselves, which necessitates learning who we are, determining what assets and power we have, and learning the skills of collective action to push for change.

Clearly the tripod legs are not just connected — they overlap. In fact, we argue that games are pushing for further blur between art, activism and learning. Games are a form of media that do less to structure facts, and more to structure and shape the player's experience and identity. Learning is inherent in games, since their engagement depends on providing challenges that are just barely possible. (To use the language of Vygotsky, we might say that games are only fun when they scaffold the experience to keep the player within their zone of proximal development.) When games are tied to physical space, their action ties to learning about our own neighborhoods — how to move through them, and to change them. The art of such games is often the physical world itself, with better sounds and graphics than any screen! And the digital side of games draws in the civic, if only because it is so easy to link to more information on how to take action, or how to learn more. In other words, the experiential nature of games pulls mobile experiences on civics into being a mix of art and learning.

Pragmatism was partly behind our initial selection of these particular three legs of the civic tripod: as authors, we alternately identify as (a) artists, (b) activists, and (c) learners. Each of the tripod legs also points to an applied field that is a hotbed for games. Entire conferences are

exploring learning games (see, for example, GLS), activism games (see Games for Change), and artistry (see IndieCade). Finally, each leg has a kind of distinct and powerful notion of audience: activism targets citizens, art targets the public, and learning targets students and lifelong learners.

Impact assessment also benefits from the notion of a civic tripod. Art has different ways of measuring impact from civic participation, which is different from learning. Yet as games blur the tripod, the full impact of a game may be best understood by drawing together the legs in a more ecological view. In particular, the question of whether a game is "engaging" is answerable separately by each leg of the trip — since engagement is essential for learning, necessary for civic engagement, and a central question for art venues like theaters, galleries and museums worldwide. (Here we draw on the emerging analysis of situated engagement from Stokes and Bar, 2012.)

Like any curatorial project, we are not comprehensive and must exclude some fantastic projects. Yet the field also needs some basic lists of leading games, curated with some theoretical grounding. All the games selected we see as emerging at the intersection of civic learning, performance/art and social change.

- *Starting Points (how we organized this analysis and your reading experience):*

    - Entry A — **civic learning**: (1) overview on reframing learning and mobile; with deeper discussions on (2) creating paths; and (3) learning within real-world action

    - Entry B — **performance/art**: (1) overview of play and performance; with discussions on (2) the right to the city; and (3) tupperware and other containers

    - Entry C — **real-world social change**: (1) overview; with (2) observations on play, player/subject positioning, and social change; and (3) observations on play, motivation, and social change

Alternatively, see the index of games, and our Interviews.

Dimension 1: Play and Performance in Civic Space

[Section author: Jeff Watson]

This discussion section outlines the ongoing development of location- and context-sensitive transmedia storytelling and performance forms.

The Right to the City situates alternate reality games (ARGs) and environmental game design within the context of the history of cultural and political interventions in urban space. Like their antecedents in critical action and performance movements such as Situationism and Fluxus, environmental games can intervene on the prescribed/proscribed flows and constraints of the everyday through direct engagement with physical and hybrid spaces. Drawing on a variety of related theoretical traditions, I present the environmental game as an inherently political form of play with a distinct set of phenomenological characteristics. This discussion dovetails with many of the issues raised in Susana Ruiz's section of this report, "Play and real-world social change."

TupperWare and Other Containers identifies the increasingly central role of player profiling and tracking technologies in creating and deploying spatially- and temporally-distributed narratives and interactive systems. Drawing on examples from current practice, I present two classes of fragmented, distributed, performed and personalized interactive storytelling: *TupperWare™*, and *situated hypergaming*. These two classes or genres of mobile interaction design have particular relevance to those interested in applying such games in learning contexts where granular player profiling and outcome assessment are required.

The Right to the City

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is . . . one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. (David Harvey)

The capacity of lived environments to be repurposed and to acquire new meanings is what makes environmental games and alternate reality games (ARGs) possible — and, perhaps, necessary. None of us can hope to fundamentally reorganize the massive conglomerations of concrete, glass, rebar, and asphalt that constitute the urban environments of our time. Nor can we hope to reconfigure or compete with the information networks, mass media outlets, and computational agencies that are just as thoroughly integrated into our experience of life. The Web and the City are everywhere, and countless Haussmanns have come and gone and left their mark. The expansion of communications technologies (and their implicit urbanism) into every crease and corner of existence produces new social relations at a ferocious pace; and since these new relations — these new spaces — are the product of a vast and interdependent technoindustrial and military apparatus, they naturally tend to serve the interests of various concentrations of capital, power, and authority.

The ARG — even the most crass, marketing-oriented endeavor (which, it should be noted, accounts for the vast majority of such projects at the time of this writing) — intervenes on this arrangement. It says, "here's a story or a game in a space where stories or games aren't supposed to be," and in so doing, makes that space into something new and awakens participants to the potential that it could be just about anything except what it is. This is the core pleasure of the ARG. Designer and Jejune Institute creator Jeff Hull:

[Our work] is in part a reaction to the narrow confines of sanctioned activities in public space, which have been largely defined by commerce. We can legally: commute, shop, and drink a latte. Walk or run in a park between sun up and sun down. Otherwise you're somehow suspect. People feel isolated by that. I think we're all trying to loosen those reins . . . My name for it is Socio-Reengineering. That's Jejune Institute terminology, and in our story it has dubious connotations, but we're actually quite sincere about this aim. To infuse variability and play into the workaday world by re-engineering the way that people navigate and experience the space and the population around them. (Jeff Hull)

A similar sentiment is echoed by experience designer Tassos Stevens:

It was really important that we used the reality of the building and its people in the story of the adventure, wrote the least possible fiction, because that meant that people wouldn't know what was real and what was [the game]. Because the authorship is obscured, it means that everything could be part of it, and perceptions of your place are heightened and transformed. (Tassos Stevens)

This notion of a "heightened" or "transformed" perception is a common refrain in much of the critical and design discourse around ARGs. "Reality is Broken" author Jane McGonigal writes of the way that ARGs "have the effect of sensitizing participants to affordances, real or imagined" and that they "make surfaces less convincing" and "encourage magical thinking". Transmedia scholar Christy Dena claims that ARG players' perceptions are expanded and distorted during the course of a game to the point that the "actual and fictional worlds [become] one [and the same]". Such statements testify to the idea that the primary target of interventions such as these is the phenomenology of everyday life, and suggest an antidote to de Certeau's lament about the fate of the typical city dweller:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below," below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—-an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of the urban "text" they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representation, it remains daily and indefinitely other. (Michel de Certeau)

By changing the way we experience the world, we change the range of possible worlds that we can imagine, opening and elevating our perception and capacity for action. This insight has two powerful ramifications for the present discussion: first, it suggests that participation in ARGs is always on some level an act of resistance, no matter how imbricated in the apparatus of capital a particular may be. Crucially, however, this resistance itself is not immune to reappropriation and capitalization. That is, in order to produce the core pleasures of the ARG, expectations about what can happen in a given space must be turned on their head or otherwise identified and problematized, and this has important effects on the subjectivity of players.

To conceive of an ARG that does not function on the level of the unexpected or the disruptive (at least in terms of the uses of a given space) is to conceive of something else altogether. But in spite of this disruption of spatial hegemonies — or, perhaps, because of it — the ARG also serves as a kind of automatic cultural re-uptake machine, containing and rendering intelligible to power the very intervention on power that it creates.

Second, since ARGs lean so heavily on the creation of novel phenomenal states, they are an inherently unstable form. Once a given space has been reappropriated in a certain manner often enough, it begins to become a different space altogether, placing new demands upon those who would like to intervene upon it. The ARG is thus necessarily an agile and mobile space — a heterotopia extraordinaire, like Foucault's proverbial ship sailing the seas from one provisional port to the next.

In this context, what can one say about how to create an ARG that is overtly transformational with regard to civic space? The first answer is that it depends on the issue and the audience and the context. The design workflow for ARGs is inextricably linked to what Gaston Bachelard would call

topoanalysis, "[the] systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives". An ARG design workflow typically begins with some kind of source material — a story, issue, theme, or media property — that the designers then set out to explore through creative interventions into lived spaces. Determining where, when, and how to make these interventions requires a temporally-sensitive topoanalysis of a network of spaces related to the game's target audience and source material.

Blast Theory's A Machine to See With and Duncan Speakman's Our Broken Voiceintervene on the concrete space of the street and the virtual/aural spaces of call center phone trees and iPod headphones to create "films you can step inside," destabilizing identity and perspective; iPhone apps like Serendipitor and Situationistturn navigational and social use cases on their heads, revealing the myriad possibilities suppressed by our typical engagements with civic space; The Games of Nonchalance weave story and participation into the fabric of the Bay Area, blending fiction and reality toward the vanishing point. Each of these projects presents a unique solution to a unique topoanalysis, revealing civic space through experiential remix, remediation, and disorientation.
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TupperWare and Other Containers

In 1972, the BBC produced an hour-long documentary by architectural historian Reyner Banham entitled, "Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles." A central conceit of this documentary is the "Baede-kar," an automated geolocative tour guide that looks suspiciously like an 8-track tape player. In the film, as Banham drives through the city, the Baede-kar tells him about the buildings and people that he passes by, providing location- and context-specific information in real-time.

At the time of the documentary's airing, such technology was pure fantasy. Now, of course, anyone who owns a smart phone has access to all of the Baede-kar's capabilities — and more.The Baede-kar is a prototypical example of what I'm calling TupperWare™ — interactive systems that enable the embedding and retrieval of location- and context-specific metadata. The term TupperWare™ derives from another antecedent, namely geocaching, a variant of "letterboxing" that emerged alongside the first wave of consumer-grade GPS devices.

In geocaching, players use GPS coordinates to find hidden caches left for them to discover by other players. These caches, typically held in small Tupperware containers hidden beneath park benches or in the hollows of trees, contain messages and instructions left by both the players who created them and by any players who have found them. A typical geocache contains a note with simple instructions such as, "take something and leave something behind." Upon discovering a geocache, players will often leave special items, such as marked coins, which other players will then take and place in subsequently discovered geocaches.

While geocaching remains a vibrant niche activity, the capacity of contemporary smart phones to both read location metadata and search a variety of databases for related information makes the

existence of physical Tupperware containers somewhat redundant. By embedding virtual objects in real space, designers can situate narrative and game elements in the immediate physical environment of their players. Hence: TupperWare™.

Importantly, TupperWare™ alone is not enough to create powerful and potentially transformative experiences. A Baede-kar-style interface isn't a game: it's an interactive geo-archive. Players consume embedded media, but their actions have minimal or zero impact on the system's overall state. In this sense, activating geo-objects with a smart phone is just a very inconvenient way of reading. Without a strong game mechanic structuring and motivating engagement, players begin to wonder: *why do I have to walk around and go places just to view this crappy little video on my iPhone*?

Many augmented reality games suffer from this motivation problem, presenting players with little more than a media asset and a clue indicating where to find another in exchange for their troubles. Moving beyond this unsatisfying arrangement requires two things (which are really two sides of the same coin): a persistent story/game world, and a player profiling system.

In 2008, Harrah's, one of the three combines that owns and operates the Las Vegas Strip, introduced a "loyalty cards" system "to induce people to play longer and spend more money." This experimental system monitored casino players' behavior, enabling the casino pit bosses to enact a variety of interventions. Nina K. Simon writes:

The cards function like bank cards; users swipe them at the slot machines to play, and the cards register wins and losses. The loyalty cards are part of a pilot program to track individual user behavior. The casino maintains real-time data on the actions of every card-holder and uses the data to determine individuals' financial "pain point" – i.e. how much money they are willing to spend before leaving the casino. The casino uses that pain point to stage strategic interventions during real-time play. When a player comes close to her limit, a staff member on the casino floor receives an alert from a dispatcher, greets the player, and offers her a free meal, a drink, or a bonus gift of money added to the loyalty card. By mitigating the bad experience of losing with a gift, Harrah's extends people beyond their pain points and they stay and play longer. (Nina Simon)

This simple, and somewhat disturbing, example of a real-time feedback loop connecting user behavior metrics and targeted interventions is a stripped-down illustration of the core procedure of what might be called, "situated hypergaming." By using available sensor data to shape interaction — and by monitoring the response (or non-response) to the newly-structured experience — designers can rapidly evolve highly personalized experiences using a limited set of rules and material assets.

Games such as Dokobots, Parallel Kingdom, Shadow Cities, and TapCity are representatives of an emerging class of persistent locative game worlds that track individual users and enable them to asynchronously have an impact on the hybrid physical-virtual environments in which they play. These "situated hypergames" embed virtual objects in real space not as an end in and of itself, but rather as a part of something larger — a true game, wherein the progress of players is persistently tracked by the system and has an impact on what happens next, both to them and to other participants. Such projects are suggestive of the true storytelling potential of geolocation technologies.

The city itself is already a network of meanings and narratives. Intervening productively on these meanings is the work of artists.

Everything else is just TupperWare™.
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Dimension 2: Play and real-world social change

[Section author: Susana Ruiz]

This discussion section situates games and play within a conversation about non-fiction storytelling, civic motivations, ethics, and anti-oppression principles. Drawing on the interviews of several creators of the projects in this report, the focus is on location-sensitive and hybrid games and platforms that merge virtual and real-world play with engagement structures and the potential for direct civic action.

As Benjamin Stokes suggests in his Reframing Learning and Mobile discussions, learning is inherent in games because, if for no other reason, the rules need to be learned and the play system effectively navigated by the player in a way that hopefully provides some degree of pleasurable challenge. It follows that when games are contextual to real-world spaces, their learning ties directly with how we move through, relate with, and affect these spaces. In other words, as individual players, we are required to reflect upon our own place in the world and its systems, our own movement, behavior and assumptions, as well as society's norms. It is with such a reflective anti-oppressive ethical and metacognitive framework that games can be a powerful asset in the struggle towards closing the "power gap" between those who experience oppression and those who hold greater social privileges.

Equally relevant is the remaining leg of this "tripod": Jeff Watson's discussions on Play and Performance in Civic Space and the historical connections he forges between games, art, and interventions in urban space. This historical trajectory includes threading the ways in which several participatory traditions of art practice such as Surrealism, Dada, Fluxus, and Situationism, inform a particular zeitgest in game design very much alive today. These games often include physical enactment that takes place in the streets and argue for the potential of this playful performativity constituting reflection – if not direct intervention – on everyday culture. Some of the projects in this report serve as literal exemplars of social change interventions, while others are less obvious and directed; all offer unique perspectives and solutions.

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Observations on play, motivation, and social change

In February of 2010, Jesse Schell's DICE talk provoked us to consider the notion of achievementizing our everyday lives. Similarly, Jane McGonigal's book Reality is Broken proposes we look at the world and its most challenging real problems with a ludic sensibility in order to collectively work toward solutions.

While largely speculative provocations, these gamification impulses have sparked controversy and received a good deal of criticism to date. Poignantly, notable games journalist Heather Chaplin reminds us that there is such a thing as literal truth and suggests that a "gamelike layer on top of our daily lives" may help to "simulate feelings of satisfaction" though the actual change is perceived only. This is echoed by Theatre of the Oppressed's adamant stance that traditional theatre transfers a coercive catharsis from the characters to the audience because there is, in fact, no dialogue between actor and spectator; the spectator accepts without participating, without an opportunity to deliberate on story and context.

A discussion about real-world achievement structures requires a close look at extrinsic and intrinsic motivations and rewards. Game designer and educator Tracy Fullerton likens some such structures to frosting that elides "unpredictable and convoluted" yet very real motivations people have to play games. Focusing on only extrinsic rewards such as badges can block analysis of these very real and complex motivations. As any parent or caretaker understands, constant extrinsic rewards do not work. In fact, they may be counterproductive because the child has been stripped of choice and of the opportunity to assess her actions through her own evaluative processes (see Jesper Juul's blog post on external rewards as demotivators).

Matthew Jensen from Natron Baxter Applied Gaming – the developer behind the AOKgame that is part of this collection, as well as other eminent projects like Urgent Evokeand Find the Future – elaborates:

Of course, there's also the potential for extrinsic rewards to overshadow and/or devalue the intrinsic reward of civic participation. At what point could pursuit of game status even change one's political or moral fiber?

Similarly, Suzanne Kirkpatrick – lead designer of the citizen stewardship game also in this collection, Commons – explains:

Doing activities in a thematic community, or mission-centered perspective, helps keep people focused on the objective while having fun and connecting with each another… On the flip side, I think it's pretty difficult to rely solely on gaming (external reward structure) as the primary incentive for getting people to participate in civic engagement or to join a cause – they have to care about it or want to care about it first.

Game designer and critic Ian Bogost writes that without the opportunity for deliberation, "outcome alone is not sufficient to account for people's beliefs or motivations." Some of the exemplars in this collection – Akoha, Re:Activism,Interrobang, Flashback, and Community PlanIt– feature deliberation

prominently. Many of these are mission-based and incorporate achievement structures like points, badges, and levels; yet lively participatory discourse and co-creation are prominently woven into their mechanics. Kirkpatrick et al's Commons is a mobile location-aware game for urban communities that merges traditional citizen reporting tools with gamification components. The core mechanic is that of reporting a problem or recommending an improvement in your neighborhood. The launch playtest took place in NYC on May 21, 2011. Explaining that her team was worried about the fact that players would have to share iPhones because not everyone owned one, Kirkpatrick goes on to describe a key discovery:

We observed that people enjoyed having companions to bounce ideas off of, craft the wording of submissions together as a team, and share what they love about the neighborhood with each other. To our delight, the digital game almost became a sort of discussion starter, a launch pad, to get people talking amongst themselves about their city.

These may constitute the "unpredictable and convoluted" kinds of things which Fullerton notes are a major reason why we play games. Arguably, it's a big part of *how* we make games as well. As Stokes points out in this report's discussion section Learning Within Real-World Action, the gamification debate necessarily points to the risk of manipulative – if not sinister – "incentives debasing civic acts by rewarding only behaviors that are easy to measure." Interestingly, arguing somewhat for the flip side, for the potential value of this frosting-like engagement, Jensen again:

AOK is an experiment in gamification (for all of its faults) and civic action. The intrinsic rewards of kindness and positive social action come infused with such meaning that gamification might even be appropriate under the circumstances. And gamification is really quite good at one thing that really motivates activists: perceptible impact. The challenge is to assess player participation and provide game responses that are less abstract (points, badges) and more tangible (officials elected, laws overturned, communities empowered).

Creating game structures that encourage different perspectives and are inclusive, liberatory, alluring, highly responsive and measurably world-changing is challenging in many dimensions. Although as designers we may desire these qualities in every experience we create, it is unlikely any one game can achieve encompassing all. This is in part because freedom to risk failure is necessary for innovation and expression, and crucially, because designers cannot assume that their own perspective is definitive and need time in the process to proactively search out and reflect upon other perspectives.

Perhaps paradoxically, in the end it is most constructive to say that gamification is what one makes of it. In the context of activism in physical and hybrid space however, achievement structures require that we attend to hidden or uncritiqued stereotypes and that we actively create open spaces for dialogue among designers, players and stakeholders. Mary Flanagan – designer of the Massively Multiplayer Urban Games in this collection – writes: "If play and interaction in the streets are to be empowering, exactly *who is to be empowered?*" As such, the civic "tripod" aspires to contribute to an emergent and diverse community of expert and non-expert cross-disciplinary practitioners from the arts, social change, and learning domains and take part in productive deliberations about the future of equitable principles in games and game-based activism.

Read the full interviews with Mary Flanagan, Matthew Jensen and Suzanne Kirkpatrick in the Interviews section, where additional interviewees express their views on games, real-world impact and the relevance of mobile.

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Observations on play, player/subject positioning, and social change

The civic "tripod" focuses on the growing number of mobile games that seek to foster connections and pathways among players, places, social change, learning and engagement structures. These mobile games can help players identify social causes that are meaningful to them (see AOK), discover ways to volunteer (Sparked), coordinate with strangers interested in similar issues (Groundcrew, WildLab Bird), collect and send evidence of neighborhood concerns to regulatory entities and elected officials (DIY Democracy, Commons, Tenants In Action, Hollaback), participate in the urban planning process (Community PlanIt), cross neighborhood lines and forge new relationships (Macon Money), discover local pasts and imagine future narratives (Flashback, Re:Activism), and find ways to engage in philanthropic opportunities that may otherwise seem too complicated or inaccessible (Raise The Village, WeTopia). Alongside this rapidly expanding genre of games is a growing number of designers, stakeholders and players, and this requires greater critical scrutiny, more nuanced analysis and design, and more thoughtful and appropriate methods of evaluation.

In late 2007 Freerice launched; Freerice is a website with simple multiple-choice quiz games where every correct answer clicked equaled a donation (paid for by advertisers on the site) of ten grains of rice to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) to "help end hunger." Freerice is a simple site, with a simple mechanic for a simple idea. Although one could comment on the learning efficacy of Freerice given the disconnect between gameplay and the subject matter (more on that below), the point here is to focus on the game's real-world civic and philanthropic effect (see video of rice being distributed in Bangladesh to 27,000 refugees from Myanmar). At the time, Freerice was one of a small but growing number of games that challenged the virtual/physical dichotomy and helped extend the idea that the real world need not be impervious to the effects of virtual play and in turn, online and video games need not discount urgent subject matter rooted in lived experience.

A more recent test case of a casual game with in-game mechanics designed to foster real-world micro-donations is Raise the Village, an iPhone game by New Charity Era. The player's goal is to become the chairman of their village, which is accomplished by helping the virtual village prosper. The first unique aspect to Raise the Village is that it is modeled after a real village in eastern Uganda called Kapir Attira. Like many other games, virtual goods purchased in-game with real money benefit the player's virtual world (and therefore the player's status). The second unique aspect to Raise the Village is that this money is used to purchase the same exact goods in the real world and actually deliver them to Kapir Attira. The fieldwork and relationship building conducted by New Charity Era in Uganda and in Kapir Attira specifically seems commendable and well intentioned. The collection of virtual goods available for purchase change depending on what the ongoing fieldwork suggests is most needed in Kapir Attira at a given time. As feedback, photographs are sent to the phones of players documenting the deliveries (which, according to the website, take place approximately every month).

The language describing the game suggests it is a "fun way" to impact those "in need," clearly an attempt to merge play with consumer activism. This seems like a logical exploration, considering how much money players spend on virtual goods in free-to-play games. And, considering how dubious in-game spending schemes can sometimes seem (for example, the ease with which children

can unwittingly spendhundreds and even thousands of dollars on Smurfberries), Raise the Village displays a fair degree of ethical coherence, goodwill and transparency. This game is not so much an analysis on extreme poverty from a systemic standpoint. Instead, it's an attempt to wrap familiar game mechanics onto a specific situation and intervene on an immediate local problem in an actionable and literal way. And while this is an admirable experiment, something just doesn't *feel* entirely right.

The elephant in the room here relates to the myriad questions raised by playing at or through fantasies about another community's welfare. It is essential to posit the critique that this can amount to positioning the player as tourist, and neither the player nor the subject as truly empowered agents of change. However, equally necessary is the defense that it points towards at least the possibility of a transformative experience via play that offers new sorts of perspectival orientations, discoveries and agency.

The kinds of questions that arise in regard to ethics, power and the subjectivity of others – of either oppressed or oppressors – may be relatively new for the game community because the typical game doesn't take on such difficult or complex perspectives; that is, games more often than not deploy familiar fantasies of control and progress. However, other practitioner communities have longer trajectories wrestling with these issues in their own unique ways, some of which are Theatre of the Oppressed, documentary filmmaking, and social work.

Established by Brazilian theatre practitioner, theorist, and activist Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed is a practice and set of techniques that advance a participatory and politically charged theatre. In documentary film, debates about filmmakers' responsibilities to abide to ethical standards and avoid exploitation and coercion have been rigorous for decades. As applied in social work, anti-oppressive practice openly challenges discrimination and promotes rights and voice of those groups on the margins of society. It is grounded in specific understandings of equity and incorporates a sense of ethics that requires an individual to reflect upon their own behavior and assumptions, as well as society's norms. It encourages an individual to work toward closing the "power gap" between those who experience oppression and those who hold greater social privileges. As this genre of games grows and game design increasingly seeks to play within and catalyze communities, it is more essential than ever that we weave together a diverse variety of theories and traditions of practice from the arts, social change, and learning domains.

At the 2011 Games for Change Festival, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Sheryl Wudunn moderated a panel entitled Philanthropy, Movements, and Making Media Matter, with Laure Pincus Harman from Zynga.org and Pierre Guillaume Wielezynski from the United Nations World Food Programme. Zynga.org was started in 2009 in order to connect players to charitable causes. Explaining that Zynga's expertise is play and only play, Harman noted that Zynga works with partners that do "other things really well." In part due to the success of Freerice, the WFP continued to explore gaming, and, in partnership with Zynga.org, launched the Haiti campaign soon after the October 2009 earthquake. Across several of their pre-existing top games, players could purchase limited edition virtual goods that benefitted WFP's efforts in Haiti. According to Zynga, the campaign raised 1.5 million U.S. dollars in three weeks.

This is a very different approach from the one deployed by New Charity Era, as Zynga is not interested in expanding their domain of expertise or in closely aligning their game narrative content to their campaigns. This is in many ways easier and safer because it is not requiring its designers to learn much about the situation in Haiti, nor is it asking players to delve into a new and unfamiliar game, much less one that is about an extremely sobering and complex issue really happening somewhere in the world.

Every individual gamemaker, game company and/or stakeholder may differ in approach. If driven to affect social change, the gamemaker takes stock of their values and assesses how they can contribute the most with the resources they can devote. For example, is it important to raise as much money as possible, or is it most important to provide context and structure for the player to learn and affect change in their own way? Ultimately, these are challenging questions. But they are not to be avoided because they also gesture toward an invaluable and galvanizing aspect of activist games that in one way or another seek to spotlight and challenge social power imbalances. Moving forward, ethical frameworks (such as anti-oppression principles and Values at Play) are required that encourage gamemakers, companies and players to disagree productively and reflect on their values and on the contributions they aspire to make.

Special thank you to Steve Anderson, Andrea Gunraj, Virginia Kuhn, Joshua McVeigh-Schultz, Veronica Paredes, Huy Truong, Holly Willis and Ashley York for their invaluable support dialoguing with me about these ideas.

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Dimension 3: Reframing Learning and Mobile

[Section author: Benjamin Stokes]

Why learning? For games, it is especially important to talk about learning — if only to understand the game itself. Even within the commercial industry, game companies are increasingly seeking to maximize profits by studying how players *learn to play* (Isbister & Schaffer, 2008). Beyond teaching players the rules, the satisfaction of most games depends on giving players a fair chance to feel successful and get better at the challenges presented. In other words, behind games' rhetoric of escapist fun, there is a hidden alignment with the science of learning (for example, see Gee, 2003; Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2005; Salen, 2008; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008).

Which learning? Just because learning is naturally present with commercial games does *not* mean that the content is worthwhile, let alone civic. Debates have long raged over which learning is valuable, and resolution often depends on the analyst's worldview on the very definition of the good society, good culture, and good learning (for an excellent overview, see Squire, 2002).

Mobile learning? Too often, mobile learning is simply a repackaging of established content — at its most banal, re-purposing desktop content for a smaller screen, retaining unsuccessful game components that supposedly add "entertainment" (Klopfer, 2008). Mobile designs that take these incremental steps only obscure the domain's potential. (Hint: the writers of this report are not very interested in mobile games to help memorize facts about a social issue; the more profound mobile shifts are a matter of form and experience, not content access.) As a sector and as researchers, we must insist on those aspects of games and mobile that are distinctive; only then can we understand which forms of learning are most appropriate and powerful. In other words, we must beware the temptation to "add mobile games and stir" — such games work like chocolate-covered broccoli: not tasty, and with uncertain learning.

Good games, by contrast, focus on experiential learning rather than content. For example, they can help players develop intuition for the systems of physics — but may be worse than textbooks at helping students memorize physics formulas. Another example: games can offer role-play with deep insights into the perspectives and identities of oppressed peoples — but games are often worse than Wikipedia for delivering biographical facts. In other words, games are particular kinds of learning systems, not a panacea for engaging learners.

A good rule of thumb is that good learning in games happens at the level of mechanics — i.e., the moving parts of the game that make the experience both challenging and fun. For example, the game Hide and Seek features mechanics of concealing, looking, and group timing. It is by aligning with such mechanics that games foster learning that is central to the fun, where improving at the game implicitly builds target skills and dispositions.

For mobile games, the mechanics are particularly distinctive. It can be tempting to celebrate mobile for being "anytime, anywhere" since the Internet becomes just a pocket away. But as a game mechanic these two capabilities are relatively uninteresting, since they hardly point to new moving parts. Ironically, the more interesting mechanics may be about "specific places, the right people, and

timing." Mobile allows for games mechanics that introduce us to unfamiliar neighborhoods, or help strangers discover common interests. Mobile devices even have their own distinctive sensors, allowing for games that monitor pollution levels using everyday cell cameras, or detect proximity with Bluetooth, or guess at our activities based on internal motion detectors. Games are only just beginning to use such distinctive mobile affordances as mechanics, and the opportunities and pitfalls are just beginning to be explored. This report seeks such frontiers.

Civic learning? Of course, learning is necessary to prepare for effective participation in public life, just as learning is necessary for all human development. Learning needs for civic life are incredibly diverse – ranging from making better political evaluations, to how to organize volunteers online, to the skills of advocacy for social justice. Compared to past decades, it may be increasingly necessary to approach "civic learning" as a lifelong endeavor, as the tools of activism and organizing continue to shift and become more prominent online.

Consider the breadth of civic learning in terms of its goals: some organizations insist on systematic social change and teach activism, while others exclusively desire civic engagement and seek to foster dutiful responsibility (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009). The rise of videogames parallels a general expansion of the activities that are considered civic — from political consumerism, to fan protest (*Study on the State of Young People and Youth Policy in Europe*, 2001). When we fail to acknowledge that multiple models for civic learning exist, teaching goals are often mischaracterized (for a nice discussion of this pitfall, see Westheimer & Kahne, 2004); unclear models undermine design and evaluation.

I define **civic learning** as: learning that develops the skills, knowledge and dispositions for contributing to civic life. The following diagram can help compare projects by defining some of the scope of civic learning. Specifically, it illustrates civic learning in terms of two critical dimensions: (1) whether the goal is social change or engagement, and (2) whether the learning is informal or in formal organizations.

Civic Learning in Two Dimensions:
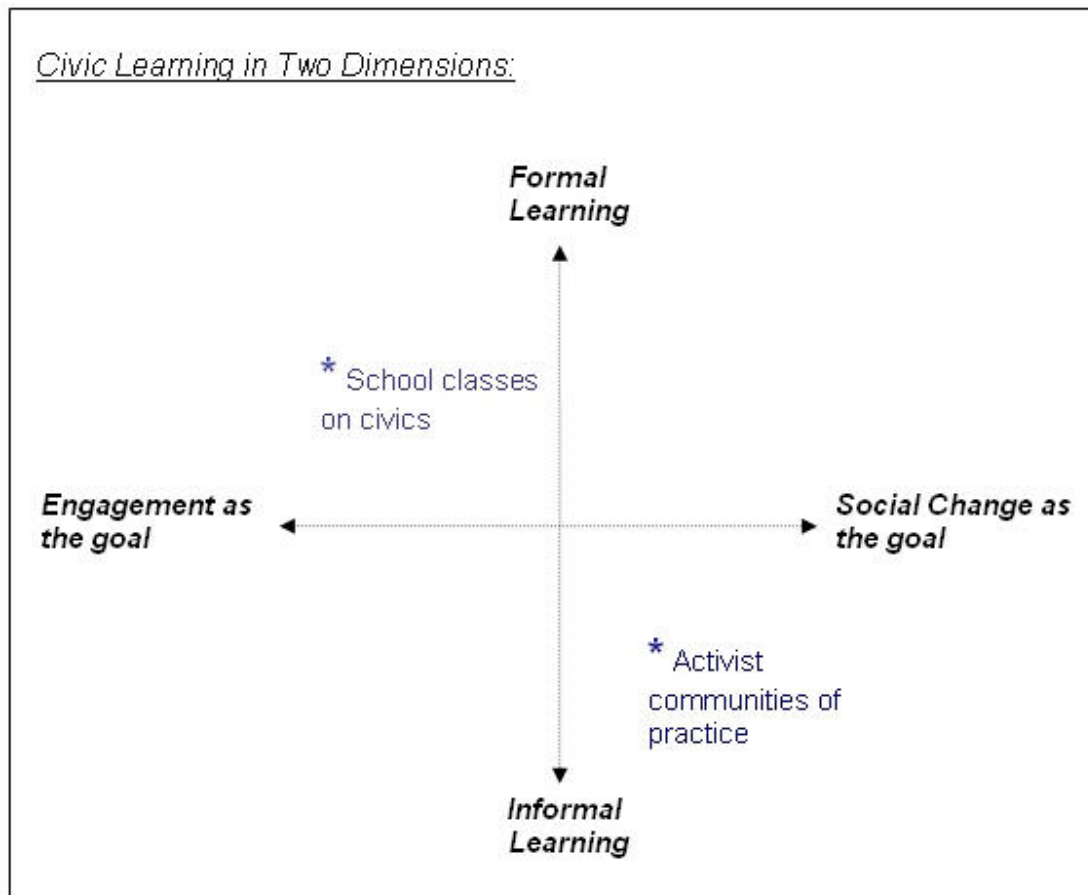
This report provides additional detail on learning in two specific contexts, focusing on specific case studies. *They are:*

- Learning by Creating Paths

- Learning within Real-World Action

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Learning by Creating Paths

- **Notable Mechanics** for learning by creating paths: creating new games and place-based tours, GPS triggering/fences, treasure hunts, narratives of overlapping realities including historical events and imagined futures

What can everyday people learn by designing games for mobile? This page highlights the potential of teaching people to design games for mobile, especially path-based games. Learning through mobile design is distinctive, given the ability to detect the location of players, and to pull them through real space — reimagining history and neighborhoods along the way. Here we feature several new apps and tools including ARIS, GPS Mission and Playground Maker, which have emerged to help youth and adults create place-based tours and games. Participants learn through design to become tour guides, experts in how the invisible becomes visible, and to tell stories through neighborhoods, not just about them.

Creating triggers in real space is a particularly powerful opportunity for designers. For example, when a player is within 30 feet of a specific building, their phone can suddenly buzz to announce that a video has been unlocked, giving a hint about the next location to visit or a new clue in a puzzle. This is possible in all three featured projects — ARIS, GPS Mission, and Playground Maker. At the most basic level, there is some learning from simply annotating and browsing physical spaces (see mobile apps like Wikitude).

Yet the annotations can just as easily layer alternate realities. Narratives can cross time, spurring encounters with historical characters from bygone eras that might have lived nearby, or foretelling a possible future that threatens to become real. Jim Matthews, a lead curricular designer for ARIS, emphasizes creating "memorable moments" when players encounter a historical figure in the virtual world when they wander into a particular neighborhood space (2011). For students, the need to create such memorable moments can drive them to study a neighborhood's history in detail, or to think deeply about what the future might look like in front of a particular library, or half-way down their own block. (Importantly, such engagement is highly dependent on the aesthetics and narratives of the alternate reality, and so analyzing this engagement often requires the tools of artists, and not just those of educators. See, for example, Jeff Watson's discussion of the cultural implications of alternate reality games in his discussion of the right to the city elsewhere in this report.)

This learning becomes more game-like when the triggers and collectibles are made scarce. Matthews uses the example of a tour in ARIS "where I can plant virtual trees, but I have only five seedlings" (2011). Such scarcity makes the play experience challenging, and the player's choices become increasingly meaningful. Suddenly the student designer must reflect on how to sequence physical locations to increase the drama of decision-making, to create paths that have consequences in shaping narrative, where repeated play leads to more careful decisions about that scarcity.

The notorious iteration needed for good design is helpful for learning social issues (Sharp and Macklin, 2011). As learner-designers repeatedly test their games, imagining their audience and putting miles on their sneakers, they can develop a sense of identity as "insiders" who feel

ownership in the neighborhood's story and a connected sense of place. For many cities and communities, fostering insider status may be an invaluable shortcut to neighborhood belonging.

Finally, content mastery is often intrinsic to making good games. This is ironic because content often takes second seat to building skills and perspectives when learning by *playing* games. Yet when the learner is positioned to *make* a game, knowledge of a social issue or community is often necessary background that they are motivated to research in traditional books and libraries. The act of designing such a game often demands an iterative curatorial review of the social issue content, choosing which historical events should be prioritized and arranged. For the mobile case, deep content is often embedded in physical neighborhoods with long histories, and so play-testing the game requires long walks, and pulls the creators into unexpected conversations with residents and local activists. Choosing a path for your player can thus be an invitation for a deep informal learning of place and history, acquiring content and perspective unexpectedly along the way.

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Learning within Real-World Action

- **Notable Mechanics**: include both learning the skills for taking civic action, and actually changing the real-world as part of playing the game

Until recently, it was difficult to imagine games that might guide real-world activism. But activists increasingly rely on the same digital tools as businesses, from coordinating small teams to online fundraising and customer recruiting. Mobile is only bringing the digital into more immediate contact with the physical world.

This blur of digital and physical has implications for learning. Volunteers and activists have long understood that helping others can be transformative for them, whether or not they successfully influence others. Experiential learning aligns naturally with games, which are perhaps the most experiential form of media available.

What does civic action look like in a game? Game elements can be quite explicit: my donations for international poverty assistance might be tracked as points or currency (see Raise the Village); I could compete for petition signatures on a local ballot initiative; or my micro-volunteering (see Sparked) could be rewarded with scout-like achievement "badges." For a framework on Direct Action Games, see the following video from a panel I organized last year at the Games for Change Festival (fellow panelists were game designer Tracy Fullerton and activist/scholar Stephen Duncombe):

Learning in these games is not for "some future action, but for now" (Gordon, 2011 – see full interview). This can be significantly different from learning civic skills in a simulation, such as the Doorknocking Game, which is a compelling role-play into the time-honed techniques of going door-to-door. In particular, the learning in games with "real-world action" is different because of what is at stake for participants.

Consider the game Macon Money, which drew players into unfamiliar neighborhoods in an effort to restore the social fabric of the city of Macon, Georgia. Players received cash gifts to support local businesses, but only if they found partners in other zip codes – across lines of socioeconomic

stratification. The game introduced strangers to one another, building real social connections – potentially leaving behind the kind of social capital that is correlated with increased civic engagement (an evaluation is currently underway). Perhaps more importantly, players learned about a neighborhood they may have previously feared, building first-hand knowledge about its businesses and residents.

Ironically, the challenge of learning may be what makes the game fun, and also leads to the civic engagement. This is a somewhat radical claim, given how desperately games are used in schools to make learning fun. The real problem is often that school-based learning is not appropriately challenging, being at times boringly easy, and at other times frustratingly hard for those who get lost. A powerful comparison for games-as-incentives is money, which is also being used in schools as an incentive for participation and grades. In Macon Money, the presence of money walks a fine line. Certainly, the cash is a powerful reward, but the amounts here are relatively small (they range from $10-100 USD). Looking more closely, the cash emerges as an excuse for residents to break out of their daily routine; the incentive is almost an excuse to tackle deep social challenges, where a lot is at stake: meeting strangers, venturing across zipcodes, and crossing socio-economic lines. These challenges are deep, and confronting them pushes participants to reflect and grow — to learn.

From another angle, this kind of learning is akin to the motivations for scientists who are deeply engaged in the scientific process: the answers are unknown, they take calculated risks to uncover mysteries, and the process is engaging for what it yields, certainly, but it is also rewarding to overcome a genuinely difficult challenge. (See also the work on virtual worlds and how they can build scientific habits of mind by Steinkuehler and Duncan; 2008.)

Perhaps we should imagine training a generation of civic scientists – each with a disposition for asking questions about how to best affect change. In an era when the skills of civic life are constantly evolving and changing, we need citizens who are lifelong learners. Like good scientists, such citizens would understand their duty as one of peer investigation, sharing strategies on how to inform each other before voting, and donation strategies to ensure impact.

One important target for mobile media is the city planning process. Consider the game Community PlanIt, which seeks to "augment the basic town hall meeting …to involve people in urban planning" (Gordon, see interview). The game can be initiated and facilitated by city planners, who might select a topic and timeframe (like traffic, with a three week discussion period). Players tackle and propose missions, eventually including place-based check-ins like "meet on the steps of the library at 3pm Saturday." The goal of the game is to create a context for learning that leads to engagement, which is a perennial problem for city planners. (This positions PlanIt game on the engagement side of our diagram for game types in our learning overview.)

Of course, mixing points and civic participation leads to controversy. Gamification echoes longstanding debates about gambling, and the dangers of manipulation. In a democracy, it is ethically troubling to imagine participation driven by weaknesses in human psychology. If citizens will be playing real-world games with civic actions, can they learn to navigate them safely? An important test case may be Raise the Village, with its curious dual-reality, where the iPhone game simulation of a poverty-stricken village mirrors an actual Ugandan village. Cash spent on in-game purchases for your game village is matched with spending in a real-world Ugandan town on the exact

same goods. For a discussion of the ethics around Raise the Village, see Susana Ruiz's observations on play and player/subject positioning in this report.

Going forward, games with direct civic action are poised to grow exponentially. Many of these games will give feedback to participants on how they are doing – what game designers call "state information." Doing better in the game will mean learning civic skills and dispositions. The challenge for designers may be to increasingly align the feedback loops of learning and civic action. Such alignment is profoundly difficult, and requires understanding both the game system, and the theory of civic change. It means training game designers in the art of strategic planning for civic issues. And it means that we need new assessment methods that simultaneously evaluate projects for their learning outcomes and their civic impact – rather than picking one or the other.
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Games

(See website for details.)

A Machine to See With

Akoha

AOK (Acts of Kindness)

ARIS

Commons

Community PlanIt

DIY Democracy

Dokobots

Doorknocking Game (Organizing Toolkit)

Flashback

Gentrification: The Game!

GPS Mission

Groundcrew

Indeterminate Hikes

Interrobang

Macon Money

MapAttack

Massively Multiplayer Urban Games

Our Broken Voice

Parallel Kingdom

Playground Maker

Prison Valley

Raise the Village

RapidRide B Line

Re:Activism

Repudo

Serendipitor

SFZero

Shadow Cities

ShopKick/CauseWorld

Situationist

Sparked (was: BeExtra/Extraordinaries)

Super School

TapCity
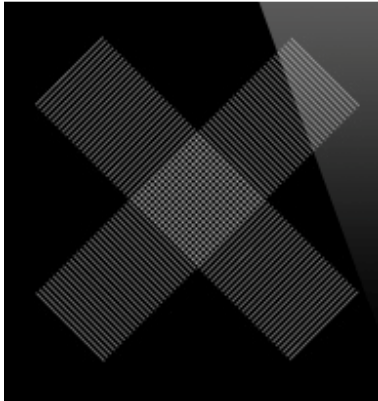
Tenants in Action

The Games of Nonchalance

WildLab Bird

ZMQ Mobile Games

Interviews

Interview: Benrik

Situationist is an iPhone app that injects surprise and serendipity into everyday life. The app uses geolocation and push notifications to alert members to each other's proximity, then challenges them to interact in random "situations". As the artists state on the app's website, "Situationist is not for the timorous . . . in fact it is a protest against the demonisation of strangers encouraged by the media. Fear not!" Benrik, the creative partnership of Ben Carey and Henrik Delehag who created the app, spoke with me about their project via email:

Situationist App really messes with my day sometimes. It makes me uncomfortable and interrupts important meetings. It fragments moments that would otherwise have been continuous. Is it all about breaking things, or does it put something together, too?

We're quite comfortable with creating uncomfortable moments. Part of the idea behind what we do is to create counter-routines, to highlight and question the structure of your everyday life by imposing an alternative that clashes with it – our "Diary Will Change Your Life" book series is based on the same principle. It's serendipity with an edge. Of course you could always just ignore the app's notifications…

One thing I really appreciate about this App is that it's somehow about an urbanism that's not rooted in any particular city — or even in any particular *kind* of city. It works great here in LA, at least when it comes to gathering-places like bars and restaurants and workplaces. I imagine it works quite differently in London, what with people actually walking around everywhere. Is there anywhere it wouldn't work? Or, put differently, what would a city look like that didn't need an intervention like this?

That's an interesting point. It does presuppose a certain kind of city, and in fact it sets out to foster it – a city where people walk around at some leisure and spend time in open communal spaces where they can see and find each other, like cafes. It also requires a certain kind of urban being and community, a city-dweller who trusts his or her fellow citizens enough to interact with them at random. We think subconsciously the model must have been Paris. Unsurprisingly, the app has done very well there, and we get lots of emails clamouring for a French version.

Do you get any kind of analytics on the back-end about where and how people are using the app? Do have a "master map" of unfolding situations to ponder?

The app was created on a shoestring, so we don't have google-like levels of back-end data, although it would be very useful. We do know the most popular tasks / interactions – the most popular is " Wave at me like a long-lost friend". The least popular is "Help me rouse everyone around us into revolutionary fervour and storm the nearest TV station", which is a shame as it's our favourite. We also discovered something interesting when examining successful situations – when you pair up the photos of the strangers who've interacted, a disproportionate number look very similar. At first we thought our designer must have somehow mismatched the data. But what this must reveal is that people are much more prepared to interact with a complete stranger if they look like them. It probably makes sense in evolutionary terms, but it's still uncanny to discover this through the app.

Constant wrote, "We are in the process of inventing new techniques; we are examining the possibilities existing cities offer; we are making models and plans for future cities. We are conscious of the need to avail ourselves of all new inventions, and we know that the future constructions we envisage will need to be extremely supple in order to respond to a dynamic conception of life, which means creating our own surroundings in direct relation to incessantly changing ways of behavior." Is this what you're up to, then?

Yep. The original situationists pontificated at great length about situations, but didn't actually come up with many – the derive, detournement, and not much else frankly. We see ourselves as continuing their work – although in very different historical and political circumstances obviously. Debord also foresaw new technologies would lead to new situationist techniques. This app is one of the first to explore geolocation technology as a means of remodelling urban relationships. Most geolocation apps seem to focus on providing coupons for cheaper coffee, which makes us despair ever so slightly.

You've got to have a touchstone quote or two. Hit me.

Hmmm. We do have a slogan for Benrik: "Your values are our toilet paper". Or in French: "Vos valeurs sont notre pecu".

What's the next step? Is there a Commune App in the works? Will you be expanding or updating Situationist App in any way?

Not sure what our next app will be yet. The market for proto-Marxist apps is no doubt huge and very lucrative. We'll update Situationist at some point, but the idea was always to keep it extremely clean and minimal. We'll probably add tasks suggested by our users.

Thanks again…much appreciated.

More info: http://www.situationistapp.com/ Situationist App developed by: Turned On Digital

Interview: Mary Flanagan
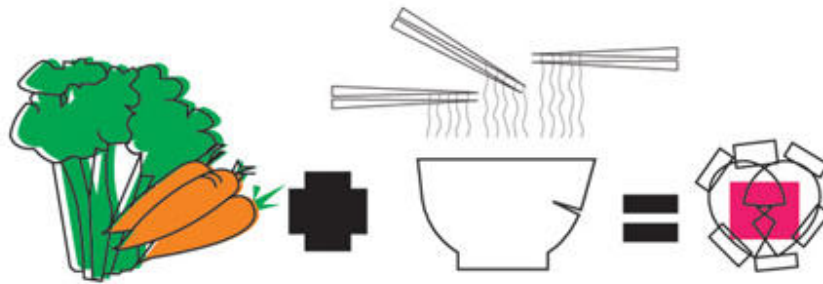
Mary Flanagan is a designer, artist and scholar focused on how people create and use technology. Her work investigates how human values are embedded and reflected across technologies, and she has written extensively on value-centric responsible design. This work – framed as Values at Play™ – also specifically investigates how "designers can be more intentional about the ways in which they integrate human values into their game-based systems." She founded the Tiltfactor game research laboratory in 2003, where researchers study and make social games, urban games, and software in a rigorous theory/practice environment. Of most interest to this discussion are Tiltfactor's series of outdoor Massively Multiplayer Urban Games. The interview below was conducted via email on June 11, 2011.

Could you give us a brief history of these games as well as a description of basic gameplay? How have the play experiences generally turned out, and what key observations did you make about how players engaged with each other, the rule-set, the city, and community members?

The Massively Multiplayer Urban games were live action games specifically designed to celebrate the values of community and diversity in a compelling game. Too often, urban games appropriate the city and its inhabitants for the entertainment of the players and game designers. Our goal was to break down the wall between game players and those in the community in which they might play, so that we could foster real sharing and communication between people.

The only way to do this is to design games differently. Such games need different reward structures and goals in order to motivate players not to merely appropriate the city and its inhabitants as props, but rather foster meaningful exchanges.

In your book Critical Play, you discuss at length issues surrounding the theory and practice of locative games. For instance, you note: "What is play in one location, in one language, in one public space, may or may not be recognized 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." Do you think that mobile and location-aware gaming poses new or unique redefinitions of activism?

It is obvious to me that games wishing to incorporate civic action need to be tied to local concerns and local ways of meaning making. This does not mean, however, that only local issues need be addressed in a game. Rather, it means that the games have to understand how players would engage in different neighborhoods, within different cities, and in different languages. Such mobile games also need to protect players' rights and the rights of those in the city.

What is your perspective on gamification? Proponents may argue that gamification involves the everyday and the urban in new, unexpected and empowering ways. Do you think there is potential for effective civic action? Do you think there are constraints or even dangers inherent in this trend moving forward?

Games as motivational structures do work to alter human behaviour on some levels. With this comes responsibility. If games end up being frameworks for social behaviour, they have the power to motivate people to lose weight, or vote, or help each other. But games could also become an ideological tool for social control and forced labor. It is essential that developers know this power and use it responsibly.

Interview: David Fono

Atmosphere Industries is a Toronto-based cross-media design collective whose projects "combine fun, community, technology, and a hearty helping of sprinkles." Atmosphere's pervasive games and experiences have exhibited around the world at events such as Come Out and Play (NYC), where they took home the 2010 *Best in Fest* and *Best Use of Tech* awards.

First, I should disclose that I have brand envy: "Atmosphere Industries" is a great name for a cross-media game design collective. What's the story behind the name?

Thanks! We actually used to be called "Giant Dice," but ultimately found that to be a bit too literal — plus, you know, the whole gambling allusion. Credit for "Atmosphere Industries" goes to my co-founder, Kate Raynes-Goldie. By "Atmosphere," we mean that while our weapon of choice is games, our broader goal is to play around with ambiences and different ways of experiencing the world. The "Industries" is just meant to be ironic because factories don't actually exist these days, or something.

Artists working in this space come from an unusually wide range of backgrounds, both in terms of theory and practice. What was your trajectory into the realm of pervasive interaction design?

I suspect I align myself with most others in this space by admitting my origin story is fairly nerdy. I went to school for computer science, discovered human-computer interaction, aligned myself with a professor who was into technology art, and developed an obsession with social media back when it was totally avant-garde. So the ingredients were there, but the catalyst was a version of The Game (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Game_(treasure_hunt)) I played while interning at Microsoft

Research. After returning home, I concocted the harebrained scheme to do something similar in Toronto, but make it last 10 times longer. So, the answer to your question is: it just seemed like fun.

Recently, some commentators have placed so-called "Big Games" in opposition to screen-based "virtual" games. Do you think this is an opposition that's going to make sense in a few years?

I spend a lot of time trying to explain what I do to people whose only conception of a game is the kind you see on a screen. Pervasive games of any sort are very much on the fringe, and I don't see this changing for the foreseeable future. If you think of what constitutes a major success in the domain right now — Foursquare, SCVNGR, a few iPhone AR games — these are simplistic games with a small user base of early adopters. Compared to the multi-billion juggernaut that is the videogame industry, they barely even register. The entire world now thinks in terms of screens (even if those screens have GPS and accelerometers.) Personally, I don't really expect to see this change; I mean it would be fantastic if pervasive games become a substantial force, but it's far enough off that I find it more productive to think of our work as a niche cultural artifact that offers an alternative vision of the distant future. That's why we're an art collective, and not a business, per se. Though if anyone wants to give us money, we can make that work.

As a side note, it's interesting to note that while virtually everyone stares at me blankly for at least 20 seconds while I describe what a "street game" is, virtually everyone has also spent a significant amount of time playing them — as kids! It's definitely a comment on society that we seem to have erased these memories from our minds, and replaced them with Halo 3. I'm not sure what that comment is, though.

I see games and activities that layer interaction over the real world simultaneously moving in two general directions: along one path, I think there's a movement toward more asynchronous or "ambient" games that players can integrate into their daily lives as a kind of background activity — think cross-media Parking Wars or Farmville. The other path leads to real-time/real-world games that work kind of like events or theatre performances, where players show up and have an intense, focused experience. As a designer, what do you see as the strengths and limitations of these paths?

One of my great internal struggles is deciding which of these I'd rather be working on at any given moment.

Ambient games are fantastic, because you have the chance to draw users into deep, sustained narrative or gameplay structures. There's more raw material to play with a long-term experience, and more user attention to take advantage of. More importantly from a "business" perspective, you can reach a way larger audience. Getting 40 people to love your game is very satisfying, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't occasionally want to appear on the cover of Wired.

In terms of crafting a powerful experience, though, nothing beats an event. Theatre really is definitely an apt analogy here. I recently had the following revelation: This is theatre, and I should be talking to theatre people. Big games are fundamentally performative and narrative-driven even when they're not, and when you start looking at interactive theatre shows, the boundary between

the two forms becomes essentially invisible. And the difference between making a casual, online game vs. a theatrical performance is comparable to the difference between writing an essay and having a fist-fight. The great thing about theatre, of course, is that it's highly visceral, profoundly draining, and over almost instantly.

More than a few of your games have covert or overt political/educational messages. Is this just a natural consequence of setting your games in the real world, or are Situationist-style political interventions a part of Atmosphere's mandate?

To be honest, this is something I've never really thought about. Our latest game, Gentrification: The Game!, was (for obvious reasons) our most seemingly political, but we went to great pains to avoid embedding a distinct political message in the game. We were primarily concerned with creating a compelling game. Our mandate is simply to provide enjoyable, playful experiences that transform and reflect a space.

Our interest in themes like gentrification isn't the result of a pointed artistic agenda, but neither is it a natural consequence of doing our work — I think, rather, it's a consequence of doing our work well. Our games are about spaces, and if you're going to have an audience engage meaningfully with a space, you have a responsibility to explore the issues and concerns that are particular to that space. If you're faithful to that design principle, political or educational themes are unavoidable. A general failure to accomplish this is central to the critiques of pervasive gaming I've seen, and just about every game could benefit from deeper ties to the context which it appropriates. But it's very, very hard to do, and I guess that's why we don't see too much of it.

What's coming up for Atmosphere?

We've got a few projects in the pipeline, including some collaborations with theatre folks, as well as some online-only games. But the big thing for the foreseeable future is trying to build up a community around pervasive games (or, more broadly, "unconventional games") in Toronto. There is a shocking lack of people doing this sort of thing in Canada as a whole. So, if you're a Torontonian and you're reading this, you should probably contact us. We have a website going up soon at recess.to, and we're planning to get some regular events running in the new year.

Interview: Eric Gordon

@ericbot / faculty page
Conducted June 14, 2011 by Benjamin Stokes

Community PlanIt is an upcoming browser and mobile game for city and community planning, featuring missions in physical spaces and a currency to reflect players' values. Currently in beta, this game builds on the success of Participatory Chinatown, which was voted into the Top 5 Social Impact Games of 2010 by the Games for Change community. Both games come from the Engagement Game Lab at Emerson College, which is directed by Gordon. Gordon's most recent book is Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World, with Adriana de Souza e Silva.

What's the latest?

We're beta testing this week, and running pilots over the summer, including with the Boston Public Schools. (For the latest, see the project blog.)

Where did the idea come from?
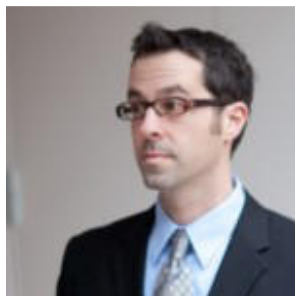
We wanted to augment the basic town hall meeting, extending it with games and experiences to involve people in urban planning. We wanted to do something similar to the project that preceded it —Participatory Chinatown, which was a 3D game, but required intensive technology and labor. So this version would be lighter, so that any planning initiative could use it.

Is the mechanic similar to other mission-based civic games, like Interrobang orAkoha?

Yes, in many ways. It is a mission-based system, where the goal might be to debate public safety, or landscaping, or traffic patterns. A curator will pick a number of missions and give them a timeframe, like a few days. Then the user can tackle the missions, or propose their own challenges. Players earn coins that they can "spend" on particular civic values, both pre-selected and user proposed. So it's essentially a spending game. But a player earns coins by contributing their thoughts and opinions about a local planning issue. And all information is placed in a community context, so the player always knows where they stand in relation to the larger community.

How is it mobile?

It is a location-based game, meant to be about and take place in a specific location. Over time we will roll-out more location awareness. We can map IP addresses to geographic points. Place-based check-

ins will be one way players can provide evidence of completing a challenge, such as in a challenge to "meet at the library at a certain time." Eventually we also hope to allow players to walk paths through space with their GPS-enabled mobile, mapping paths like the route between where you live and work.

You seem to have goals both for the community, and for expert planners?

The primary objective is a kind of community efficacy. We want to create a sense among users that they have some power to act within the community. Too often in official planning processes, individuals are not able to see how their opinion fits within the nuances of the debate and how their actions can affect the planning process. The other goal is to alter expectations of city officials or whoever is organizing the planning process. The official discourse is "we'll engage the community" but planners often conflate the need to get feedback with the responsibility of enabling community engagement.

The civic action is real?

As distinct from activist training games, ours is about doing. It is not metaphorical; it *is* the planning process itself. It is part planning tool, and part game. We've received interest beyond urban planning contexts — the school system is interested, and I've received calls from hospitals… all sorts of geographically-oriented communities that need some way of scaffolding conversation and engagement.

Is the learning distinctive?

The learning in Community PlanIt is not for some future action, but for the now. I'm not shy about calling it learning. I see the goal of this platform as being the creation of a situation or context where learning happens… and that is what leads to engagement. Learning is what motivates the investment of participants.

Empowerment comes from the learning – from feeling like you know something and can share that knowledge with someone else… that's learning! In order to satisfy everyone's needs, there has to be some teaching and learning going on. We've been talking about civic learning from the beginning.

Interview: Jeff Hull

Jeff Hull is the founder and creative director of Nonchalance, a hybrid arts consultancy based in San Francisco. At IndieCade 2010, Nonchalance won the World/Story Award for their "epic, immersive, poly-media, real-world adventure," the Games of Nonchalance.
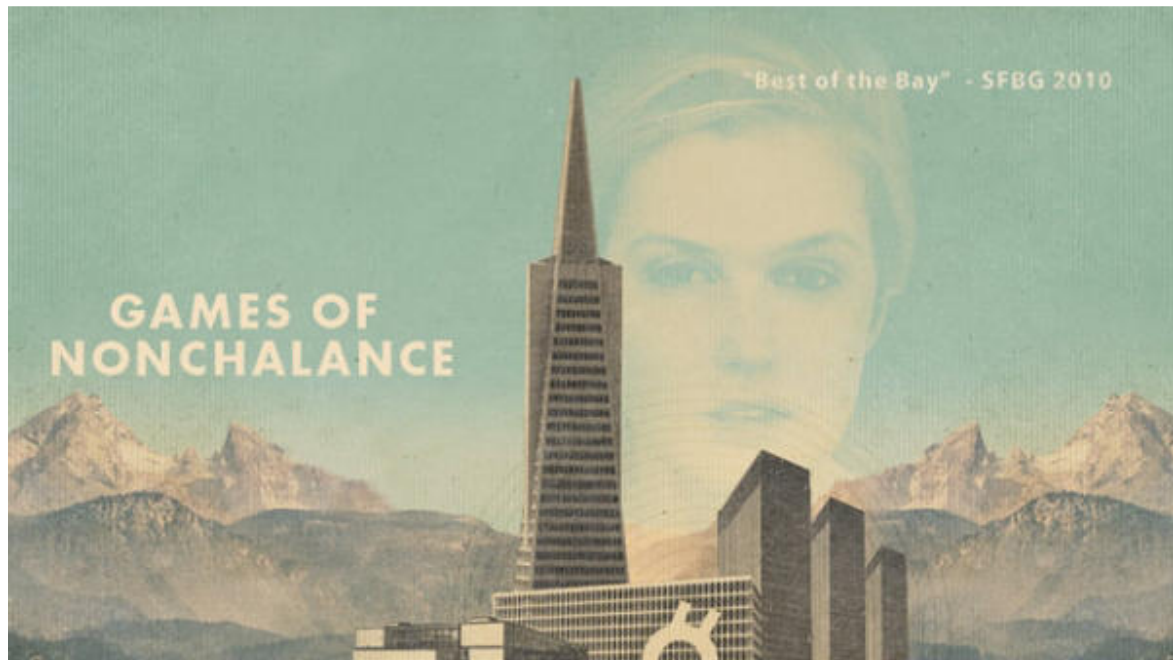
It strikes me that a lot of the work going on right now in location-based experience design can trace its origins back to Situationism, sticker art, and — going way back — graffiti. There are also some obvious connections to amusement park and museum design. What are the big touchstones for you?

Wow. I've never had any one zero in so accurately on my influences before. For years, before we started Nonchalance, I was doing a guerrilla campaign called Oaklandish that was really attempting to fuse together the ideals of Situationism and Street Art. We'd use multi-media devices and historicaly driven content to produce happenings designed to gather large groups of people together in negative urban spaces, so they could begin to interact with each other and the space around them in new ways. It was literally "the construction of situations", with a strong post-graffiti mindset. Haring and Basquiat are like Patron Saints to me for the very literate, site-specific graffiti art they did early on. And, yes, we absolutely had an amusement park mentality as we are created the Games of Nonchalance. When I grew up I worked as a child performer at a place called "Children's Fairyland" in Oakland, and it was this magical hokey little fantasy world, where you could literally fall down a rabbit hole. They had magic keys where you could turn them in a lock box and suddenly hear a recording of a nursery rhyme, while looking at a diorama of the cow jumping over the moon, or whatever. There was a yellow brick road leading through the park to an Emerald City. We want to present those kinds of interactions everywhere across the civic realm, so that trap doors and side hatches exist all around you, all the time, fuzed into the urban landscape.

Over the past few years, a lot of different disciplines have been coming together around notions of embodied experience, public space, community, and play. Everyone from performance artists to game designers to educators and curators seem to be grasping at different versions of the same thing. But what *is* that thing? Do we even have a word for it?

Interestingly, most of our intern applicants have been architecture students. Somehow they're all thinking about their work in a different way, too. There's some kind of convergence. When I asked the question to our production manager Sara Thacher, she felt like it wasn't necessarily useful to put a label on it, but we both agreed that the zeitgeist is happening. Sara is more interested in "why" so many different people are exploring this new "Third Space". We agreed it is in part a reaction to the narrow confines of sanctioned activities in public space, which have been largely defined by commerce. We can legally: commute, shop, and drink a latte. Walk or run in a park between sun up and sun down. Otherwise you're somehow suspect. People feel isolated by that. I think we're all trying to loosen those reigns through their own individual contributions.

My name for it is Socio-Reengineering. That's Jejune Institute terminology, and in our story it has dubious connotations, but we're actually quite sincere about this aim. To infuse variability and play into the workaday world by re-engineering the way that people navigate and experience the space and the population around them. Sometimes it can happen in a seemingly spontaneous way, like a flash mob, and sometimes it is the result of meticulous design and effort.

One thing I really like about the Jejune Insitute is the fact that it's a cross-platform interactive narrative that works a little bit like a gallery installation: it's just *there*, online, on the air, and in physical space. This represents a very different approach to storytelling than that found in more "traditional" ARGs, which are typically structured around the gradual unveiling of story

information leading up to a climax event of some sort. What made you pick this different path? What did you gain (and/or lose) by abandoning the unity of time?

You're correct about the induction center as "gallery installation". We wanted to create an immersive automated well-curated environment, and to have it exist semi-permanantly. We were outsiders to the ARG universe, and totally ignorant of it's culture and customs. So when we finally appeared at the ARG Fest-o-Con in Portland, we learned that we had inadvertently solved one of the major stumbling blocks of earlier ARG's; "replayability". What we had produced could be experienced over and over again, and shared with friends, and so on. The big trade off was that it was local. People in other parts of the world are not able to experience it directly. But ideally we'll be able to produce unique experiences in other cities in the future. Every city should have their own game!

The other thing that led in this direction was that after doing work in the streets for so long I became very curious about those semi-public and private spaces as well. What are the boundaries between them? A corporate office building has all those questions built into them. There's this very sterile environment that is in someways meant to intimidate people. We used that to our advantage in the narrative, and at the same time subverted it by asking people to explore and reexamine that space. That was a clear incentive for us in creating the induction center.

You've been embedding story and play into the Bay Area for a while now. What kind of dividends has this paid in terms of building community and bringing like-minded individuals together?

For players; yes, there's definitely been a coming together of like-minded people, especially with the recently released Act IV. It emphasizes group play, inter-dynamics, and trust so that when the group completes the experience they have truly been through a rite of passage together. We've been hearing from participants that they have really gelled with other players this way and formed deeper bonds. You can really see it in the EPWA protest video; all these weirdos just coming out of the woodwork to party in the streets. Ironically, because I've remained "behind the curtains" for so long, I don't feel like I've benefitted socially from any of these activities! I'm really looking forward to coming out from backstage more and interacting directly with the players in the future.

Is civic engagement an artistic imperative?

I'd say not. Great art can be something completely personal and private.

I live in Los Angeles. Do the kinds of projects we're talking about work best in denser cities like San Francisco or London? Or can we imagine locative stories anywhere, and on any scale?

I view these productions as being fully scaleable. It's not so much an issue of geography and architecture as much as culture. A map isn't unpredictable, but people can be! Once you know who the participant is then you can begin to imagine how they might interact in that particular environment. For example, I'd love to produce something for Las Vegas. There is also the "Accomplice" game in Hollywood, which operates a little more like dinner theater in the streets.

If you go back to the 1990s, a lot of people were predicting that the future of storytelling and play was going to be defined by screens, VR goggles, and, ultimately, brain implants. Thankfully, it looks like that's not the way we're heading — at least not right away. Where do you see all this locative stuff going in the next few years?

Mobile technology can potentially allow us to get away from the screen and back into the real world. I'm awaiting a few app features to be developed so we can take our immersive experiences to a new level, and which would allow other users to create their own real world adventures. I want my phone to let me know about the secret discovery awaiting me right around the corner. Then I want to share that discovery. I foresee every institution with real space developing their own interactive mobile applications; the Magic Mountain choose-your-own adventure iPhone game, the MOMA interactive mystery tour, or the narrative based campus orientation experience, as you had mentioned. I think at first there will be a ton of poorly designed ones, until people get over the novelty of it and recognize it as a true art form, like film.

What's next for nonchalance?

On the practical side, we just put together a board of advisors to help us develop our business. On the creative side, we're talking to a potential collaborator right now in the mental health field about producing a multi-sensory maze that serves therapeutic purposes. It would essentially be an inward-bound expedition through the gauntlet of emotions, with positive achievements built into it. Have you ever been on Mr. Toad's Wild Ride? It would be like that, but for your psyche. That's one thing on the table, but we're still looking at other opportunities.

For those who weren't there, could you quickly describe what you did at IndieCade?

Without building the "Jejune Institute South", we were trying to produce a street level installation to give visitors a sense of the real world nature of our game. There were a lot of art and artifacts from the game, with some gritty multi-media to back it up.

I thought of you recently as I was giving a talk on remix culture. We ended up discussing the Situationist concept of detournement, and it occurred to me that this is a good baseline description of the kind of work Nonchalance does. Is that what you've been doing all these years, detourning the Bay Area (and sundry other places)?

I never thought of it in that way, but the answer is yes, absolutely. I've always been a cut & paste, drag & drop kind of artist, and shamelessly so. I have no qualms about it because I know that what I've produced from these other sources is completely original.

One of the things I like the most about Situationist art is how it's geared toward inspiring the viewer/participant to discover the untapped possibilities of the world around them — "to expose the appalling contrast between the potential constructions of life and the present poverty of life." What are the potentials you're exposing, and what kinds of poverty — intellectual, emotional, or even economic — do your projects work against?

"Potential constructions of life" is a great description for what we've attempted. We're presenting this parallel universe in which we're actively at war with banality and routine. It's a guerrilla street war, too, not some hypothetical plane. The potential is for collective behavior that promotes warmth and trust, communicating something very meaningful through mass media, and generally allowing for variation, color and fun in the civic realm. The poverty exposed is that of spontaneity and creativity in every day life. We don't always recognize how confined or restricted or repressed we are, and I'm speaking generally about "us" as a group or society, rather than us as individuals. Re-imagining and then reconstructing how we operate and function as a culture is our greatest aspiration. We can only do it in these microscopic slivers, though. The slivers exist in tandem with the rest of the world, often overshadowed by it, but they do exist, awaiting discovery by the curious dilettante.

Interestingly, the Situationists actually thought through the idea of pervasive or ambient urban/social detournement, which they (somewhat awkwardly) called "ultra-detournement." In the same passage, they write, "the need for a secret language, for passwords, is inseparable from a tendency toward play." Is this a need that you have? What needs do you see Nonchalance as being capable of fulfilling?

You always blow my mind with these questions, causing me to deeply reconsider everything I'm doing. The reference kind of evokes "The Crying of Lot 49" in which secret symbols are leading toward an entire social strata hidden right under our noses. I love the concept because it suggests a kind of sleeping giant in our midst. I suppose Nonchalance is gesturing toward that giant, prodding at it's awakening.

A wise man once said that "[an] emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators." This kind of "emancipation" seems to be a core component of some of your recent projects, most notably Scoop!, which invited players to become reporters for an actual (temporary) FM radio station. Are even your more narrative-heavy projects like The Jejune Institute really just sly ways to get people to narrate and translate their own community?

Yes and no. We certainly enjoy superimposing our own narratives over other more dominant stories, especially on the local scale. It's very liberating. And within that framework we've strongly encouraged user generated content, and experimented with "open source" media programming, such as Scoop and the 01 project.

On the other hand, that user generated content is highly facilitated and curated by us (because we consider ourselves the ultimate arbiters of style and taste in our productions). We give people a creative template to work within. There are a few folks who have run with it, though, and gone completely off the map. I'm calling out Garland Glessner, Carolee Wheeler, and Michael Wertz, founders of the Elsewhere Philatelic Society. It borrows themes from Nonchalance, but it is it's own unique and beautiful world. That's a great example of people narrating their own communities.

Is this sort of what you mean by "Situational Design"?

Not exactly. To be honest, what I mean is "Lifestyle Curation". That is; allow us to creatively direct an afternoon of your life. To offer a real world glimpse of the "what if", and invite you to experience the world around you in a slightly different, although heavily contrived, way. I'm reclaiming the word "pretension" by the way. It is a positive force in my universe.

Do you feel that social media and screen-mediated forms of community are anathema to the kinds of visceral experiences you're trying to create? If so, how is this conflict complicated/mitigated as pervasive computing and mobile media blur the boundary between the real and the virtual?

Actually, through conversations at Indiecade we began to develop a vision for a game on a traditional platform that promotes user generated content and real world interaction. That's a direction I'd like to see video games take, where passivity becomes antiquated. Technology both empowers us and disables us to various degrees. It can support or discourage real world experience. I suppose the Games of Nonchalance represents a certain nostalgia for more sensual forms of expression and interaction. But how did we produce these experiences? How do most people discover them? Through computers.

[This interview includes material from previous interviews I conducted with Jeff atJawbone.tv and on remotedevice.net]

Interview: Matthew Jensen

AOK (Acts of Kindness) is a web-based and smartphone-enabled application that playfully challenges the notion that "You don't have to be a constant saint, dedicated volunteer, or name-taking activist to make the world better." Matthew Jensen from Natron Baxter Applied Gaming – the developer behind this game as well as several other prominent projects such as Urgent Evoke and Find The Future – spoke with me about AOK and other goings-on via email on June 15, 2011.

Can you describe AOK – what it is, who's the team behind it, what's its business model, and what (if any) are the project's future directions?

AOK is a "social game for social good" where acts of kindness are the objective and currency of trade. From our marketing language:

"AOK is a fun way to get recognized for contributing and becoming aware of the millions of kind acts happening somewhere on this planet, every day. Record, tag and share Acts and Observations of Kindness (ie AOKs) with friends and follow other AOKers, while earning points and rewards for your actions. Points convert into cause currency that gets donated to charities and relief efforts available that month. It's a double-whammy of good! AOK is a "social game for good" so while earning points and leveling up gets you status, you'll also get a heightened awareness and engagement with the world around you, and the people, creatures, and things in it. It's a new kinda kind!"

There's more info on the basics at http://aok.tv/about_us and a Gameful interview at http://gameful.org/the-mayor/behind-the-scenes-of-missions-of-kindness-challenge-3/

The business model is still being explored (unexpected opportunities have continued to pop up here and there), but it is primarily sponsorship-driven. Our hope is to work with socially conscious businesses and organizations to craft custom community challenges that both do organized good for the world and increase esteem of the sponsor.

Your company – Natron Baxter Applied Gaming – is behind some of the most visible and important recent examples of projects that merge innovative real-world play with "social good": Urgent Evoke, Gameful.org, and Find the Future. Can you talk about where you think Natron Baxter might be headed in the near future, and what you see as the main challenges to this progress?

We didn't necessarily set out to make "doing good" a mandatory characteristic of our projects, but we've come to realize that we're most often drawn to those projects that will have a tangible positive impact on communities, the environment, and the self.

As we press forward, we're making our social good druthers much more overt. Even in profit-driven corporate contexts, we're stressing the value of authenticity and meaning, and leveraging the power of relevant causes. Really, we're navigating a major shift from "productivity" and "fun" to "engagement" and "meaning". But we also want to heighten the craft within the social good category. Perhaps unfairly, games for good tend to have low expectations for production value, high-touch interaction, and stickiness. They often suffer from diadactic storytelling (or, really, "lessontelling"). They can be judicious with the introduction of antagonism and evil which, in this Baxter's opinion, excludes truly compelling storytelling opportunities. Overall, the category is trending favorably, but there is still a ways to go to equalize the perception of "serious games" and AAA titles.

We also hope to become more deliberate in targeting underserved communities (the elderly, minorities, public assets like the park system, etc.).

One major obstacle to our progress is the emergence of gamification and its diversion from holistic, player-first games. Some potential clients see this grafted solution as a silver bullet, and thus our proposals — which often involve a comprehensive, custom platform and entirely new interaction paradigm (you know, a *game*) — can come as a bit of a surprise. But we see games as solutions, so we hold our ground. To that end, we're also challenged by the need to identify unique insights within an organization and create custom solutions. We can build on our knowledge, sure, but we're making a new monster every time.

Can you speak to how social impact was/is evaluated for Urgent Evoke?

The intent of Urgent Evoke was to instill the spirit and skills of entrepreneurship in young people — particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa. But we needed to begin with real engagement. Over the 10 week run of the game, some 15,000 players from ~190 countries and territories posted ~30,000 pieces of unique content (blog posts, photos, and video). During the process, mentors identified and connected with key players, advising and supporting their real-world activities. Some participants took things to the next level: at last count, Urgent Evoke inspired some 50 start-up businesses throughout the world, including a Dell innovation award nominee.

Now to be fair, while the reach and impact of Urgent Evoke exceeded our expectations, any future versions will be more elegant and deliberate in better targeting the specific communities which inspired the project (sub-Saharan Africa, for instance). Some under-addressed gameplay limitations (internet reliability, mobile use, etc.) made for less than perfect results.

Would you say that *location* is important to the notion of being civically engaged?

Though catastrophes often inspire a flood of generosity from the other side of the globe, I think that people have trouble truly connecting to concepts if they have not come into close contact. While it's

not the only path and there are heaps of exceptions, experience through proximity seems to be a shortcut to real, meaningful engagement. And certainly, there's still an undeniable importance to travel and a feeling that one can affect greater change within arm's reach. So important, yes, but mandatory, no — technology continues to shrink the world and change the very notion of location.

Do you think that mobile and location-aware gaming poses new or unique redefinitions of civics and activism?

No doubt! AOK seeks to generate challenge-based and spontaneous "kindness mobs," and it's certainly not the first game to explore the space. Most curiously, I think, mobile and location-aware games can inspire activism in a place where there is/was not a perceived need — but the approach of critical mass generates attention in and of itself. Games of this sort will eventually make cities run better, frankly, reorganizing human and vehicle traffic patterns, optimizing public transport, and creating systematic maps for citizen-based city cleanup, for instance. Games might also organize and increase the vigilance of citizen reporters during civil unrest, revolution, and natural disaster — as we've already seen Twitter and YouTube supporting in an ad hoc way.

From the system perspective, mobile and location-aware gaming might become a means for governments track real use and opportunity costs (of a particular stretch of road during that player's commute, for instance) — and assess personalized taxes accordingly. Or (as is already being done in a limited way) provide opportunity for corporations to oversee the health choices of their employees.

What is your perspective on *gamification*?

We've dabbled in gamification, and done our level best to introduce more meaning to the method, but ultimately gamification means well but misses the point. Insight into the use of a system is valuable for understanding progress toward goals, sure, but gamification is a grafted solution designed to serve the *system* rather than the player. For the most part (as there are some very smart exceptions), gamification proponents introduce points, badges, and achievements as intended objects of desire without meaning. Holistic game design approaches badges as a representation of meaningful achievement — not the achievement itself. (For instance, an astronaut wouldn't be proud of his or her NASA badge, but they might be justifiable proud of their achievements in the space program.)

Gamification also wholly omits the power of story in gameplay, on two fronts. People are natural storytellers and naturally drawn to storytellers, and yet gamification leans on the mechanics of games — but rarely, if ever, their narrative. Additionally, gamification largely disregards the story of the player's experience — the player's journey — because the solution is not necessarily designed to contend with real player growth, gameplay mastery, and self-betterment.

Gamificatication does not generally consider the insight of latent gameplay in its design (which run afoul of one of Natron Baxter's key design principles, certainly). Instead of embracing the hacks and workarounds that users may introduce into a system, gamification more often forces behavior in a

contrary direction. Personally, I have a hard time believing that artificially induced desire will offset the profound human need to Do Things Our Own Way.

A more snarky version of the above is in our old blog post here:http://natronbaxter.com/gamification-is-pointless-get-it-pt-2

Proponents may argue that gamification involves the everyday and the urban in new, unexpected and empowering ways. Do you think that there is civic action potential?

Yes. We happily contradict ourselves a bit here: AOK is an experiment in gamification (for all of its faults) and civic action. The intrinsic rewards of kindness and positive social action come infused with such meaning that gamification might even be *appropriate* under the circumstances. And gamification is really quite good at one thing that really motivates activists: perceptible impact. The challenge is to assess player participation and provide game responses that are less abstract (points, badges) and more tangible (officials elected, laws overturned, communities empowered).

Do you think there are constraints or even dangers inherent in this trend moving forward?

Surely, but at this point we've got to poke things with a stick a little bit to discover what those constraints and dangers might be. Certainly, the more that player / activists provide nuanced behavioral data the more they would place at risk should their data be compromised. Particularly in more volatile and punitive regions, should the opposition come to possess a detailed transcript of a player's political actions there would be a real risk for retribution. Even ecological activism or other seemingly harmless gameplay can be seen as threatening by *someone*.

Of course, there's also the potential for extrinsic rewards to overshadow and/or devalue the intrinsic reward of civic participation. At what point could pursuit of game status even change one's political or moral fiber?

Similarly, what is your view on *crowdsourcing* – particularly in context to non-profit models, social change and participatory civics?

Iceland's crowdsourced constitution is a fascinating exercise, but surely the majority of citizens don't truly comprehend the nuances and geopolitical ramifications of a national makeup. I surely don't. Crowdsourced social change is practically redundant, yet a bit frightening in the face of these more complex matters. How could the majority rally around issues that only a tiny minority are equipped to understand?

Interview: Suzanne Kirkpatrick

[Commons](#) is is a mobile location-aware civic engagement game for urban communities that "merges mechanics from traditional citizen reporting tools, like 311 and SeeClickFix, with gamification components, a la Foursquare and Cityville." Commons was the 2011 winner of the first annual Real-World Games For Change Challenge, a partnership between [Games For Change](#) and [Come Out and Play](#). The Challenge tasked game designers to leave the space in which the game is played "slightly better." The game debuted during the [Games for Change 2011 Festival](#) in June and in the midst of final production Suzanne Kirkpatrick, the project's Creator and Lead Game Designer, kindly took some time to answer questions. The interview below was conducted via email on June 14, 2011.

Can you describe Commons – it's basic gameplay, rule-set and goals?

Commons is a game for urban communities to improve their city through citizen stewardship.

With Commons, you compete to do good, while problems in your city get fixed. Report a problem or recommend an improvement in your neighborhood that you think deserves attention and resources, and show your city some lovin'. Go on short missions around town to earn bonus points, and unlock City awards to level up through the game. Get your ideas voted on by other players to win the game.

In Commons, share the things that you care most about fixing and improving in your neighborhood, and discover new ways to explore your city.

Game Rules

Players can go anywhere within the game's geographic boundaries, south of Chambers Street, and can travel by any means necessary.

A "City Task" must describe a public place or issue that <u>exists outside in the open air and exterior environs</u>. Inside of buildings, vehicles, or in underground subway stations does not count in this game.

A "City Task" must include 3 things: a text description, a photo, and street intersection or location.

Players can choose whether to travel around as individuals or in groups; winners will be selected based on votes accumulated and will receive prizes.

You've had a playtest recently in NYC, how did it go? What key observations did your team make about how the players engage with each other, the rules, the city, and community members?

We had a great playtest in NYC on May 21ˢᵗ. We were worried at first that the game experience would be hindered by the fact that people had to share iPhones to play the game because not everyone personally owned an iPhone, but it turned out that there was more synergy and creativity exchanged between players when they played in pairs and in groups of three and four. As a result, we've decided to encourage people to play in small teams on game day.

We observed that people enjoyed having companions to bounce ideas off of, craft the wording of submissions together as a team, and share what they love about the neighborhood with each other. To our delight, the digital game almost became a sort of discussion starter, a launch pad, to get people talking amongst themselves about their city.

This underlines one of the original concepts of the Commons game, which is to get people to share and learn about what issues they share in common, and to form civic action groups in accordance with their common concerns and interests.

Would you say that location is important to the notion of being civically engaged and empowered? Do you think that mobile and location-aware gaming poses new or unique redefinitions of civics and activism?

Location is a very powerful marker, and oftentimes separates those who have access to information, resources, and power, and those who do not. That is why we still have wars between nation states over border demarcations, and why citizens dispute city and county boundaries, and why neighbors argue about tree lines. I believe that location is incredibly important to the notion of being civically aware and engaged, as it is the cornerstone of 'belonging' to a city. One of my favorite talks about the subject of human development and cosmopolitanism is Ethan Zuckerberg's keynote from CHI 2011, "Desperately Seeking Serendipity", in which he points out that the majority of our world's population now lives in cities in part due to the fact that cities are powerful communication technologies where there is a 'rapid diffusion of new ideas and practices to multiple communities'. This is a great feature of large cities, and I think that the more we as citizens can leverage this communal serendipity feature for our own progress and social good, the better we will make our world.

I think that location-aware gaming merely exposes that marker which we inherently know to be critically important in defining who we are and how we act in society.

The idea for the name of our game – Commons – comes from a sociological theory called "The Tragedy of the Commons" written by Garrett Hardin in 1968, which has been an issue of debate since Classical times. The 'tragedy of the commons' (per Wikipedia) is a dilemma arising from the situation in which multiple individuals, acting independently and rationally in their own self-interest, will ultimately deplete a shared limited resource even when it is clear that it is not in anyone's long-term interest for this to happen. We believe that we citizens have a responsibility to avoid this

dilemma, and we should all strive to protect and responsibly maintain our communal resources for the benefit of all.

The game is designed to foster an interesting dynamic, based on the theory of the Tragedy of the Commons, in which players are psychologically pulled between two disparate, yet intertwined worlds, where on the one hand they must compete to win the game and, on the other hand, they must cooperate to have a meaningful impact on their city environment. In the Commons game, players can't do one without the other.

Excerpts from Ethan Zuckerberg's keynote:

As of 2008, the majority of the world's population lives in cities. In highly developed countries (the membership of the OECD), the figure is 77%, while in the least developed countries (as classified by the UN), 29% of people live in cities.

Cities are technologies for trade, for learning, for worship, but they're also a powerful communication technology. Cities enable realtime communication between different individuals and groups and the rapid diffusion of new ideas and practices to multiple communities. Even in an age of instantaneous digital communications, cities retain their function as a communications technology that enables constant contact with the unfamiliar, strange and different.http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2011/05/12/chi-keynote-desperately-seeking-serendipity/

What do you think are some of the main challenges for designers wishing to create game-rooted experiences that engage a specific site, local inhabitants, and visitors?

I think some of the best "big games" are those designed for a specific site or locality that take into consideration the specificity of the geographic area and its inhabitants. One of my favorite games like this is called Pac-Manhattan, designed by an ITP alum a few years ago, for New York City's Washington Square Park because the streets and intersections surrounding the park were arranged in a grid similar to the Pac Man software game grid.

However, one of the challenges in designing a site-specific game that I find most interesting is the issue of what you leave behind in the community and the environment after the game is finished. I like to design games that leave a positive impact on the site where it was played. I think this is an important aspect to consider when designing a big game, and especially one that is at the forefront of our collective consciousness in densely populated urban environments, like New York City.

What is your perspective on *gamification*? Proponents may argue that gamification involves the everyday and the urban in new, unexpected and empowering ways. Do you think that there is civic action potential? Do you think there are constraints or even dangers inherent in this trend moving forward?

I don't think people need attractive game mechanics or dynamics to want to get involved in community service or civic activism, or any other sort of activity, but it does introduce an additional

element of fun and competition, which I love, and also I am a really big believer in the social aspect of gaming. Doing activities in a thematic community, or mission-centered perspective, helps keep people focused on the objective while having fun and connecting with each another.

On the flip side, I think it's pretty difficult to rely solely on gaming (external reward structure) as the primary incentive for getting people to participate in civic engagement or to join a cause – they have to care about it or want to care about it first.

I'm also incredibly interested in persuasive technology and design which is technology designed to change people's attitudes or behaviors through persuasive interaction, not through force. I think there is an opportunity in designing the user experience of games to shape people's attitudes and behaviors towards social impact.

Similarly, do you have a particular view on *crowdsourcing* – particularly in context to non-profit models, social change and participatory civics?

There is huge payoff in crowdsourcing information for participatory civics and social change, and this also goes back to the importance of location in cities because with crowdsourced data, you can start to see trends and patterns across the masses that may be geo-location specific.

The relationship between citizens and their government is changing. Technology gives citizens a different kind of voice than we've had in the past, making each individual's input count, collectively gathering information from crowds, and connecting people to one another through social interactions that amplify their voices. In designing the Commons game, we wanted to build an e-citizen platform to turn the process of democracy into a game that has lasting social impact on the city and community.

Interview: Sam Lavigne

Sam Lavigne is the co-founder (with Ian Kizu-Blair) of Situate, a design and consulting studio that produces "games that inspire people to create, explore and connect online and in the real world." Sam's groundbreaking work in collaborative production game design has set the standard for challenge-driven social media-making games. The interview below was conducted via email on July 27, 2011.

A lot of different disciplines have been converging on pervasive gaming (or whatever you want to call it) over the past few years. What's your trajectory into this space?

Ian and I have always loved playing games. We first started making games when we were undergrads at the University of Chicago; at the time, I was studying Comparative Literature, and Ian was studying English. We read about The Beast and were inspired by its ability to bring people together to solve seemingly impossible problems. We got an arts grant from the U of C to make a similarly structured (but entirely noncommercial) game called Helen Chanam, in which players were tasked with finding a missing art student. Shortly afterward, we moved to San Francisco and created SF0. Our goal in SF0 was to let players experience what we had experienced while making our first game: to create adventure and mystery for each other. In SF0 everyone is a player, but everyone is also a game designer. Since our success with SF0, we've started a company called Situate and have continued to make games that blur the line between everyday life and game.

There are quite a few urban derive projects out there, but one of the things that's made SF0 so special is the way that you use a pretty tight set of game mechanics to structure and drive the players' creative interventions. One line from the game's About page stands out in this regard:

"You may find that your own willingness to interact with the city in new ways varies linearly with relation to your Score." Why did you choose to structure things with rules and point systems?

Games provide an incredibly compelling vehicle for recontextualizing normal spaces. When we play a game, we let go of our everyday constraints, and our everyday motivations for action. Games open up new possibilities, and new ways of interacting with the world and each other, especially when played offline. Rules and points are an invaluable part of any game, and a key component in allowing us to behave playfully. We can ignore the rules of our everyday lives by embracing the alternate rules of the game. Points both help players track their progress through the game world, and provide a pleasant motivation for continuing to play. (Although with SF0, we found that many of the most advanced players didn't really care that much about their score after a certain point.)

Collaborative production games have a long pre-digital history. For example, some of the spirit of SF0 seems to trace its origins to Fluxus' "event scores" and other participatory performance activities and games. What are some of the big inspirations for you from the world of analog games and interventions?

We're greatly inspired by the Situationists; so much so, in fact, that one of the groups in SF0 is called the BART Psychogeographical Association. We were particularly inspired by the Situationist critique of urban spaces structured for cars and consumerism, the concept of a revolution of everyday life, and resisting the spectacle through everyday direct action and modified behaviors. That is not to say, however, that SF0 is a Situationist game-the Situationists are simply a major inspiration.

InterroBANG and Flashback are both projects intended to be engaged with by young people, students and teachers and as extensions to more formal classroom activities. Did this make the design process significantly different for you and your team? Why or why not?

The design process was actually pretty similar. We tried to structure InterroBang and Flashback in the same way that we structured SF0: give players fun and exciting things to do, and inspire them to create fun and adventure for each other. We wanted the games to act as democratizing forces, allowing students to review each others' work, and even shape curriculum by giving them the ability to create new missions for the games. We believe real learning can only happen when you're excited about the topic at hand, so we focused on inciting passion for subject areas rather than trying to teach specific dates and times. In Flashback, we wanted to present history as a living entity, something you participate in directly by taking action in the world.

Can you briefly describe these two projects? What is the main gameplay and what are some key observations about the ways in which people play them? In hindsight, is there something you think that works particularly well and in turn, anything you would change?

Both games have almost the same gameplay as SF0. You start at Level 1 with 0 points. You get points and progress through a series of levels by completing missions in the real world, and posting documentation of what you did online. Other players vote and comment on your work. You also have the ability to create missions for other players to complete. Both projects targeted high school-age students and younger. Flashback was about American history and civics, and InterroBang was

more about general problem solving. A quote from Flashback's about page sums it up nicely: "Flashback is a game in which you complete real-world missions with the aim of de- and re-constructing American History and connecting with others to change the world. You begin at level 1 with 0 points. As you complete missions and advance in level you gain the skills and historical knowledge you'll need to develop strategies for overcoming persistent historical injustices and defeating your class enemies."

We were very excited to see how creative and engaged students were in both projects–we got some truly amazing results. Most of the kids who played the games loved them, and I think part of the reason was that we gave them more freedom and space to be expressive than is usually possible in a classroom. We also learned that the games worked best in classrooms with excellent teachers who took time to work with their kids. If I could change anything about these games it would be to give students even more freedom and trust, and provide more support to participating teachers.

Do you think that location-awareness poses unique or new redefinitions of activism?

This is a very interesting question that I don't really feel qualified to answer. Knowing and being connected to your surroundings is certainly very important. That said, when we're online it doesn't really matter where we're physically located. SF0, for example, is called "SF"0 because we initially thought it would only be for residents of San Francisco. Instead, people started playing it from all over the world and SF0-like communities sprouted up in many unusual and unexpected places.

What is your perspective on "gamification" – both generally, and more specifically, in context to civic society and engagement?

I believe that games should fun and stimulating more than anything else. I love that people want to make more and more interactions playful or "gameful" but I think the current trend of trying to add a game layer to every possible activity is worthless unless the resulting games are high quality. Just because something can be a game doesn't mean it needs to be.

In terms of civic society and engagement: I believe that games can improve the world in the same way that a great work of art can improve the world. Games, like art, have the capacity to teach us, challenge us, and reveal the world to us in unexpected ways. Both games and art can defamiliarize the world, make it new, and this I think is the starting point for all forms of change.

Appendix: Sample Mission Prompts

Sam Lavigne:

Here are a few mission prompts [from Flashback and InterroBang] that resulted in some pretty awesome projects. There are many, many more…

From Flashback:

Trespassing the Future: Visit a place that you will not be able to go to in ten years; for example, a place under development that will never be the same again. This activity is known as "trespassing the future."

Find Dirt On A Hero: Find dirt on a hero that undermines their status as a hero.

Student Strike: Research successful labor strikes in American history and use the lessons you learn to organize a successful strike of your own. Force the institutional entity against which you strike to meet your demands. Make sure you document your actions with video and photos.

Wartime: Document dramatic changes your town underwent during any war.

Conspiracy Theory: Create a conspiracy theory. Use real historical documents and facts to prove your theory. For bonus points: convince a stranger that your theory is true.

Pick a Date: pick a date and interview five people about what happened that day.

Past Life Journal: Imagine yourself in America over 40 years ago. From a first person point of view, describe your life, a major event, a particular place, the people around you — as a diary or journal entry.

From InterroBang:

Vital Arts: Gather a team of students to paint their ideas about how to improve the community on big boards or canvases. Plan an art show of these panels at a senior center, children's ward of a hospital or social service agency.

Flash Forward: Create 3 self-portraits of how you see yourself in a) 5 years; b) 50 years; c) 500 years.

Painting with light: Using a digital camera and moving lights, create beautiful works of photographic art. Upload at least 2 pictures of your light painting.

Hunting for Culture: Become a cultural anthropologist by studying a community. Observe, take notes, conduct interviews, make field recordings. What do we mean by community? You decide!

Survive at All Costs: Create a shelter in nature or a public park using only materials available to you there – twigs, leaves, rocks. Harm no living thing. Hang out in the shelter with friends.

Hard Water: Hand carry no more than 5 gallons of water for at least one mile and use it to get through a day of cooking, washing, watering plants and drinking. Document and tell us how it goes.

Skateboard Science: Pick a trick from the Exploratorium's Science of Skateboarding website and get a friend to film you doing it (please wear a helmet). Post the video and explain how the trick works using physics.

Interview: Kati London

Kati is a game designer and product director at Zynga New York. For her early work in both real world games and the early Internet of Things, Kati was named one of the "Top 35 Innovators Under 35" by MIT's Technology Review Magazine in 2010. This interview primarily concerns her role as Senior Producer of the game Macon Money, which was created by Area/Code with funding from the Knight Foundation. The interview below was conducted via email on March 28, 2012.

Q: Before designing Macon Money, you toured American cities to gain ideas for games. Did that process inform your approach to Macon Money?

Absolutely, the first phase of the project was really an exercise in hyperlocal design in which we did primary and secondary research with a team of game designer, producer and ethnographer meeting with a broad array of Macon residents to understand where the biggest opportunity was for using civic games to drive community engagement. From that research we defined project goals: to connect residents across 3 zipcodes in Macon, GA to each other as a means to build person-to-person and person-to-business connections.

Q: Your print currency in Macon Money is beautiful, and clearly more than just a game asset, with its visual roots in 1800s currency from the US, the Euro, and even Macon's own Otis Redding. What inspired such attention, and how did it help the game?

Again, this grew out of the hyperlocal approach in which we identified several goals for the game piece design:

1. Accessibility to anyone within the community regardless of age or socio-economic status – paper and money are universally accessible mediums

2. Serve as an object for ritualized, repeatable points of conversation

3. A historic and hip approach – looking back to old US paper money and to contemporary Euro bills

4. Tied to Macon, GA – aspects of Antebellum architectural flourishes refer to the historic houses within the College Hill Corridor and Downtown Macon (where the game is situated), integration of partner, College Hill Alliance's logo; game icons like the kazoo (invented in Macon), column (local architecture), music note (referencing Macon's rich musical heritage) on the bonds were easy ways to find matches with local resonance

5. Broadcast legitimacy – while *Macon Money* is a game, because it involves a real currency and businesses we needed the game pieces to telegraph legitimacy and trust in order to work

Art Director, Rachel Morris, was able to seamlessly connect these goals into her elegant designs. We found that players loved the bills, bonds, and the stickers that businesses put up, and they worked very well. One "drawback" which we were pleased to hear about was that players sometimes loved the bills so much they wanted to keep them as tokens or pieces of art.

Q: The technology for Macon Money appears minimalist (including paper!), yet the game is clearly locative and mobile… what genre do you use to describe it?

I think of it as a civic, real world, or locative game. The game engages civics, how we as citizens relate to each other by driving person to person and person to business relationships. It also supports the local economy while crossing socio-economic strata.

It is a real world game, in that gameplay is not limited to the screen, it happens where people live: in person at events, on the streets, at work, via Facebook, Twitter, and the game forums.

It is locative in that it was designed and can only be played by residents of a 3 zipcode area within Macon, GA.

Q: How did you approach playtesting Macon Money, given the months of play and the creativity players showed in finding matches?

Initially, we playtested the game by modeling different scenarios, bond and bill distribution and redemption rates, and attrition rates, etc. Because it's difficult to playtest this type and scale of project outside of the community it was designed for we introduced the game slowly, closely monitoring the game when it was live. Bond distribution was tweaked on an ongoing basis. We closely monitored weekly engagement including matches made between zipcodes, bonds distributed, redeemed, money spent at local businesses, and money redeemed by local businesses.

Q: Your game Macon Money deals with financial currency, yet it also seems to build social capital. What kind of game mechanics did you use for this exchange, and did they resonate with your partners?

The game mechanic was dead simple – match icons. This required building or spending your social currency to earn a local currency. Once a player had a bond (which they might get from a targeted mailing, at a public event, stopping by the HQ, or by requesting one on our website) all they had to do was find a match. Each bond had three icons in an order ex. peach, kazoo, music note. Players

could ask neighbors, put their bond in their car window, post their icons to message boards, Facebook, or Twitter, or show up at a community event to find a match. It didn't require much more than saying hi to someone and showing them their bond, in the process they evangelized the game and made a connection to another person.

Because we involved our stakeholders from the research phase through implementation it was a healthy process that didn't require buy in after the fact. All of the partners recognized a need to build ties within the college, the College Hill Corridor, and the Downtown communities. Macon already had critical momentum in the form of weekly events that the College Hill Alliance was putting on, we built on that. In the end we supported existing Macon events and provided a vehicle for local businesses to do events around to earn attention.

Q: What is an "expert player" of Macon Money? What does it mean for players to improve? Can they "win"?

Players win by meeting new people, learning about their community, earning and spending currency locally. Businesses win by meeting new community members and expanding their customer base. Players might get better at the game by expanding the channels they use to find a match. An example of expert play might be, a group of players choosing to pool their bonds and bills to buy a big ticket item to share or donate. Expert business play might mean combining a discount with the use of *Macon Money* payment in order to drive more business. I'm sure there's more opportunities for expert play, but those are some basic examples. We definitely saw businesses offering discounts and hosting *Macon Money* events.

Q: You've said that problem-solving with games is unusual, and often requires some absurdity and even the impossible. Given the reputation of nonprofits as being dogmatic, were you able to maintain some absurdity in designing Macon?

Because this was a new type of project for the Knight Foundation they were open partners in the process.

That said, *Macon Money* was pragmatic in a lot of ways. Money is a fundamental reward that we are all already familiar with (dependent on), no matter our socio-economic status. Leaning on currency as the primary game piece was something that everyone from the Knight Foundation Board to local stakeholders understood the value in. That said, the name of the game itself,*Macon Money,* is pretty kooky and turned out to be accessible, which was the balance we were able to strike in this situation.

Q: Is there a form of activism inherent in Macon Money, or would that require modifying the game?

Activism: The policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change. (According to Wikipedia)

I suppose according to the above definition MM could be considered a form of activism, in that it sought to drive person to person and person to business connections in Macon, GA (a social change) and it did that. In my mind, the fundamental input and support from local stakeholders across the public, private, faith-based, and academic sectors forged the game which ultimately drove community-engagement.

Players could certainly pool their bonds and bills in acts of activism!

Interview: Colleen Macklin
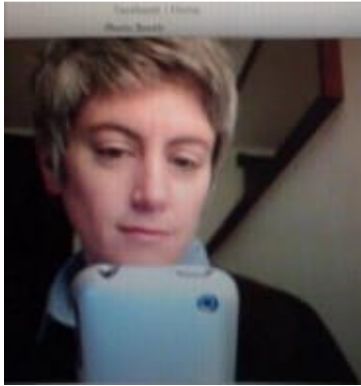
Colleen Macklin teaches at Parsons The New School for Design and directs a research lab there called PETLab. She makes games, media and curriculum in the social interest. She is also a member of the game design collectives "The Leisure Society" and "Local No. 12". This interview was conducted on June 6, 2011.

Any updates on Re:activism?

Yes! We're doing an adaptation of the game this summer at the University of Pennsylvania!

Why is it a game?

We initially came up with the idea for Re:Activism as part of the Come Out and Play Festival. There were still a lot of anti-war protests in 2008, and since we all walked to and from the subway to school everyday, we encountered protests almost everyday. (Union Square is a focal point for any kind of protest… also a place where the Critical Mass riders congregate.)

Is it art?

Yeah! For the game, I actually consulted with a couple artists who are recognized for their work, Sharon Hayes and Andrea Geyer. Sharon in particular recreates protest in public. Would it be interesting for the general public to *experience* what protesters experience?

Does the art become activism?

It is always interesting to see if you can get people involved in something that would otherwise have high stakes… it becomes a kind of access point. I don't necessarily consider *myself* an activist (since I don't go to a lot of protests and marches, though I have!).

Is it learning?

Re:Activism becomes a teaching tool — you're learning how activists engaged in the past, how they protested. There is a lot of history, a lot of facts in the game, but that's not what's important – it's

not like an urban tour. Rather, the game works by discovering these sites and then actually performing or interviewing or tracing with chalk what people *did* there. So if there was a die-in, you lay down on the ground and perform a die-in and feel what that's like. Then in some ways, when people are walking by (NY is a populated place), and they're like "what are you doing?" so it becomes a learning tool for the passersby too. The game players become teachers to the general public. I think that teaching is definitely a form of activism. This game tries to engage through an activist teaching stance of experience it, *do it* – instead of me telling you what this is about.

Any surprises?

One hidden thing in the game that most people don't think about is that you're learning how to use your mobile phone to organize your team, document events, and so you're learning how mobiles can be used in activism. That's not made explicit in the game, but if you've never shot a video on your phone and uploaded it somewhere, well now you know how, and you might do it again when you're witnessing something for real.

Interview: Maarten Noyons

Maarten Noyons is founder and CEO of the International Mobile Gaming Awards (IMGA), the leading awards for mobile games. His company, NCC, is initiator of several innovative media projects such as Playground Maker, a development platform for games using GPS and other localization techniques. I had the pleasure of meeting Maarten during a workshop of Playground Maker at NCC's home city of Marseille, France. The interview below was conducted via email on June 11, 2011.

Can you describe what Playground Maker is, how it works, and what is the project's future direction?

Playground Maker is a platform for the creation of Location Based Games, a point and click web interface which allows you to build quests and subquests on a map, characters, objects and gameplay. The platform will allow the creation a large variety of game genres:

– Simple quests, such as treasure hunts, scavenger hunts, hide and seek, geocaching, city discovery tours, etc.

– Collection games, Pokemon-type of games, Gamagochi-type of games, social games

– Action games, God Games, Highlander, RPG, FPS.

Future direction:

The company is currently in its first round of financing. A first investment will allow us to finish the platform and to do a release on Apple's App Store and Google Market.

The company's primary objective is to revolutionize the concept of location based games and to become the premier provider of these games in the market. A market, which represents an enormous and growing opportunity as consumers are massively downloading apps and games for their smartphones (10,7 Billion downloads in 2010).

The secondary focus will be on producing games and apps for third parties, such as brands, event organisers and professional organisations in the travel, training and educational sector or in the medical sector. The use of game mechanics in mobile applications for advertising, events, tourism, corporate training is set to grow in the coming years, with the growing demand for a more immersive and context aware communication with clients and prospects. These activities will help us grow our user base, develop new features and become a lucrative source of revenue.

What is the business model behind Playground Maker?

Monetize Playground Maker, by offering premium tools to game developers, such as sophisticated characters, items, sponsored branded imagery (Disney Characters, Diesel outfits, BMW cars), templates for complete games.

Monetize the mobile games with license fees on the App Stores, advertising (including location based advertising), in-app purchase.

Development of games for brands, cities and tourist bureaus, or coproduce games with media- and games publishers.

In general, what would you say are the core challenges for small to medium companies and start-ups in the EU (European Union) focused on pervasive gaming?

The main challenge for SME's in Europe is the fragmentation of everything, as opposed to the US market. Therefore the lack of scaling business models quickly and to compete globally.

– fragmented cultures, languages, regulations, operating systems, API's, commercial relationships, etc..

While Playground Maker is a platform and as such a blank canvas for game designers wishing to create location-based games, do you think that the technology can have civic manifestations?

Yes, we will have a consumer interface and for a selected number of partners we will offer an open API. I think pervasive gaming, using location as an essential element, will make consumers more aware of their direct surrounding. You will play with your neighbours.

I think apps will emerge in "Smart Cities" which will allow citizens to complain about a ditch in the road by sending a picture and GSM coordinates, or report a fire, a crime. Eventually pervasive apps can involve citizens more in complex decisions in the field of Urban Development: you can just invite them to "see" the developments on the location and ask them what they think.

More broadly, would you say that location is important to the notion of being civically engaged?

It is a tool and probably more powerful than ever, but the main empowerment is in the hands of politicians and with the empowerment, the authenticity and communication skills of the politicians will come the engagement.

Do you think that location-aware gaming poses unique or new redefinitions of activism?

The combination of the power of social networks and location (or context) aware apps and games is dynamite. It could potentially help crowds to move and react faster to the movement of their aggressor.

What is your perspective on gamification? And more generally, can you speak of how this trend is developing in the EU?

Serious Games and Gamification is on the agenda of every start up studio. In Europe there are a lot of one-man bands who are trying to sell game development services to brands, government, educational institutions, the army, and agencies.

As far as mobile games are concerned I see a few interesting cases in the field of healthcare, army and brands. In all cases there is the establishment of a direct contact between the client (end user) and the game studio or creator of the game. I know of many unsuccessful attempts by Agencies who have approached game studios. The difference in culture and working method and the commercial deal make that collaboration very difficult.

Interview: Mark Shepard

Mark Shepard is an artist, architect and researcher whose post-disciplinary practice addresses new social spaces and signifying structures of contemporary network cultures. His current research investigates the implications of mobile and pervasive media, communication and information technologies for architecture and urbanism.

His current project, the Sentient City Survival Kit, has been exhibited at the Center for Architecture, New York; the International Architecture Biennial Rotterdam, the Netherlands, LABoral Center for Art and Industrial Creation, Gijon, Spain; ISEA 2010 RUHR, Dortmund Germany, and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

What was your trajectory into this kind of art practice?

I come from a background in Architecture and Media Art, and have been experimenting with alternate trajectories for what has come to be called urban computing for about ten years now. I have always been fascinated with cities and technology, and my practice has emerged out of a curiosity regarding how forms of mobile and embedded, networked and distributed computing can shape our experience of the city and the choices we make there.

Most location- and context-sensitive apps are about making things faster and more efficient. Serendipitor slows things down and disrupts the flow. Why do you think this is an important thing to do?

Computer science and engineering are practices that hold optimization and efficiency as important design challenges. And that's all well and good when we're talking about relatively instrumental applications of these technologies in urban environments. But artists frame questions in ways scientists and engineers do not, and when considering the implications of these technologies for urban life, one has to wonder what other criteria could be relevant. Who really wants a faster, seamless, more optimal and efficient life?

Projects like this are inherently multiple — even paradoxical. As you write on your website (quoting Deleuze), "AND is neither one thing nor the other, it's always in-between, between two things." Why does this kind of instability inspire you?

Well, as Deleuze says a little further on in that quote "it's along this line of flight that things come to pass, becomings evolve, revolutions take shape." Much of my work looks for ways out of static dichotomies that serve to maintain the status quo. Destabilizing tactics often reveal the more subtle and nuanced forces at play in a given situation, and help open up lines of thinking that can help us move beyond established belief systems.

How have people been using the app? What kind of feedback have you received — and what kind of data have you gathered?

The feedback has been surprisingly positive. People seem to really enjoy the app, and have been using it around the world. Many have suggestions of their own, ideas for new instructions, ways to share their routes, etc. Much of this is anecdotal in nature, however, and I do think that the plural of anecdote is not data.

What were you looking for when you set out to design Serendipitor? And what did you end up finding?

Serendipitor is one component of a larger project called the Sentient City Survival Kit (http://survival.sentientcity.net), a project that explores the implications for privacy, autonomy, trust and serendipity in this highly optimized, efficient and over-coded "smart" city heralded by ubiquitous computing evangelists for some time now. With Serendipitor, what started as an ironic proposition – that in the near-future, finding our way from point A to point B will not be a problem, but maintaining consciousness along the way might be more difficult, and that we would need to download an application for "serendipity" from the App Store – turned out to be quite popular when implemented as an app. I didn't expect to find that the irony could be so easily lost in the process!

What's next — for you, and for smartphone-enabled humanity?

Smartphone-enabled non-humanity, of course. 🙂