

# Playable Cities Now

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## Keywords

pervasive games, playable city, smart cities, location-based gaming, public space

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As the popularity of smart cities has risen over the past decade, alternatives and counterpoints have emerged to challenge its focus on function and utility at the expense of human needs and experiences. The idea of playable cities emerged in opposition to early technology-driven approaches to smart city design (Meijer and Rodríguez Bolívar Manuel 2016) with a focus on people and place by literally making urban space and infrastructure ‘playable’. While governments and corporations began installing sensors, trackers and cameras on every street corner, a mix of creative technologists, public artists and game designers took to the streets to experiment with alternative strategies for public engagement and participation in cities around the world.

Over the past two decades, a range of practices have led to the emergence of urban play. The term Playable City originated at the Pervasive Media Studio in Bristol initiated (Leicester and Sharpe 2011; Watershed 2012) via an annual award to develop projects that playfully situate people in relation to smart cities infrastructure. The emergence of pervasive game design (Montola, Stenros & Waern 2009) articulated an approach that expands the space of play in urban environments spatially, temporally and socially. The relationship of location-based games (Leorke 2018) to urban planning and public space has also been explored. Alternate approaches to play in cities have developed, such as the playful city (de Lange 2015) and a playable city where citizens access to existing smart cities infrastructure (Nijholt 2017) to develop their own experiences via established systems. Via the ubiquitous use of location-based services cities are now data producers (Sicart 2016) and the best approach to counter this trend is the adoption of a playful and informed approach to the use of this data.

Play in public space critiques the dominant ways of thinking about smart cities, opening up the city as playground, making it hackable and mutable. The worldview that comes with seeing the ‘smart city’ as a hackable system and the strategies that come with a playful attitude, set the scene for playable cities now, building on the pre-digital history of playable cities (Stevens 2007) and introducing a renewed perspective for citizens to engage in urban play.

In the meantime, smart cities have evolved to a second and third generation (Cohen 2015); second generation smart cities are technology enabled but led by the city, and third generation adopt citizen co-creation strategies – similar in their intent to the goals of the playable city in their placement of people as central to urban design and

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development. In this third generation, play emerges as being instrumental to citizen participation and to the reimagination of cities themselves.

This raises questions as to the role of playable cities now, in relation to the changing identity of smart cities and the emergence of new platforms for situating play in urban environments.

This paper presents findings from a one-year study investigating the relationship between playable and smart cities, drawing upon interviews with over thirty artists, designers, producers, architects working with urban environments to design and develop urban play projects. While all of the participants in the study engaged with the concept of play in some way, their strategies for working with playful urban environments are widely divergent. Interviews focused on seven questions on topics related to the role of play in creative practice and its impact on public space, the relationship between smart and playable cities, and what situations or conditions make a city playable.

This paper explores three major themes that emerged in this study that are relevant to playable cities now. Firstly, what strategies are used to invite adults to play in public space? Culturally, there is a reluctance to play in public as it is perceived as frivolous or childish as an adult activity. However, overt play in public may also be perceived as subversive, making it a performative action of individuality, or productive, making it seen as a social contribution. In relation to this, secondly, what is the cultural and social value of play in cities? Play has intrinsic value but it's also important that it's recognised more broadly in culture in society as something worthwhile in daily life without needing to be productive, to 'do something' or have economic value. Thirdly, what are the current opportunities and challenges for urban play? Pervasive game design is crossing over and connecting with other creative disciplines and smart cities are adopting playful strategies for citizen engagement – these developments are changing audiences and approaches to urban play.

Via an analysis of responses to these questions and themes, the complexity of playable cities now is explored – particularly the ways in which urban play is becoming increasingly embedded and pervasive in the language and thinking around public art, placemaking, urban planning and design. This paper argues that this both connects this field of game studies to a more diverse range of creative disciplines and theoretical discourse and expands the relevance of urban play in culture and society more generally.

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