

Localism with (Serious) Games: Horizontal Channels and Models

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Should all cultures play the same games? Should all cities? This paper establishes a distinct conceptual basis for Serious Games in cities by aligning with localism as a social movement rather than location-based technology.

To build local coherence, cities already invest in play— but largely in analog forms, like stadiums, parks with game courts, and the league structure of local play (like bowling leagues). Only recently have policymakers started to consider digital games. With the emergence of Pokémon GO (Niantic, Inc. 2015), many city officials were introduced for the first time to how the physical and digital will increasingly intertwine in urban play. But the platform behind this pivotal game was global, the system was centrally controlled, and the cultural artifacts were part of the global Pokémon universe; in many ways, the game was a force for globalization. For games to be studied as forces for localism and local coherence, distinct frameworks are needed – including to categorically differentiate games like Pokémon GO from those with real mechanisms to advance localism.

The right kind of game can address the needs of cities for coherence, and a host of social issues that are tied to place. In particular, cities must confront “neighborhood effects” like crime and life expectancy that are tightly tied to zip code and local networks (Sampson 2012). Fortunately, a growing number of cities are experimenting with games that go beyond educating players to build social capital and strengthen the collective sense of place. For example, Macon Money (2011) was developed at a cost of over half a million dollars USD to strengthen the coherence of Macon, Georgia (Taylor and Whatley 2012). Or consider how Mexico city used games to map its own anarchic transportation system (Sandoval-Almazan, Ramon Gil-Garcia, and Valle-Cruz 2017). And in Los Angeles, games have been used to build networks of players tied to specific communities, including universities (Stokes et al. 2013). Such games may include educational goals, but only secondarily; rather than being driven by educational institutions they are driven by city and community-building institutions, and more fundamentally, they have different mechanisms and effects, including network goals and place indicators at the group level; Like many interventions in cities, the goal is to change the place – not just the people.

This paper contributes a model for how localism is emerging in Serious Games, and why it is particularly important now as location-based technologies proliferate and global forces grow in local play. Too often, scholars lump games like Pokémon GO and Macon Money together under the broad umbrella of “location-based” or “pervasive” games (Leorke 2018; Montola, Stenros, and Waern 2009); such categories are important, but not

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sufficient to separate games that are deeply opposed in global-versus-local orientation, and for effects like place-based cohesion and local distinction. The methods in this study include a survey of major games that seek to build the coherence of places, with each case showing how “location-based” technology is not sufficient to explain and optimize the desired effects of localism through games.

Second, this paper identifies how the ecosystem for Serious Games is distinct when localism is the goal. Different funding is available to games that are city specific (including local philanthropy and regional taxation), and additional distribution channels are possible. For example, cities often distribute innovations horizontally through mutual training sessions since the barriers to distribution are not the raw plans or code but the practices that must change to accompany a new design innovation (e.g., as seen in the spread of the open data movement). Again, there are already significant investments by local government in play – but frameworks are needed to translate localism as a social movement (Kurland, McCaffrey, and Hill 2012) into the language of game studies. Prior work has included games as augmented regionalism (Chess 2014) in terms of narrative, but not yet for the economic and network effects studied by social scientists in local campaigns like the ‘buy local’ movement.

One contribution of this paper is to generalize a method for identifying the “place specificity” of a game. This measure, which is tested across the cases analyzed in the chapter, can be applied to any game that claims local alignment. Specifically, the measure addresses the game’s distinct fit to: (1) the local place-based identity **narrative** of the city/location; (2) the information and **media flows** that distinguish the place, drawing on Communication Infrastructure Theory (Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2006); and (3) the human **network structure** of the city/location, with a particular attention to dynamics of race and class that are group-level (not simply raw demographics).

Implicitly, this paper also brings a critique of how we think about scale with games for cities. Sustainable scaling is a theoretical problem for localism in games – not just a business concern. Much like building a local park, there is a non-zero cost for installing a local version that is city-specific; this is radically different than downloading a videogame. A narrow vision of games as broadcast “hits” can undermine how localism spreads in practice: not as consumer fads, but through horizontal adoption at the city and organizational level. Implicit comparisons to mass media set the wrong expectations, since the return on investing in local ties only comes with relationships that have built trust and accountability, especially across ethnic and class lines. Above all else, scaling the approach (not just a single game) requires clear frameworks that separate *localism* with games from games that simply use local space for immersive play.

The future of Serious Games for cities depends on embedding design in urban movements, not just for funding but for legitimacy and access to the platforms of cities. Localism is a particularly useful movement, but as this paper shows, bridging to this field requires going beyond the narrow technological perspective of location-based games to address outcomes on the place as more than the sum of the players. This paper compliments existing research on location-based and pervasive games for physical space, and in particular makes the bridge for Serious Games research to increasingly work at the city level.

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