

Mobilising desire through play and games in community-based research and learning

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Paper

This paper looks at how the 'the future' is mobilised in community-engaged research by reflecting on the role of play in collaborative research and learning environments. It draws on examples where play and games were used in research to tap into human desires and aspirations for the future and to open up a new affective politics.

Huizinga wrote that play was 'a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly' (1955, 13). Huizinga's work is notable for its explication of the 'magic circle' – a space of play positioned outside of ordinary life. From this perspective, what counts as play (as well as the emotions and playful encounters and experiences) is strictly separated from the 'real world'. However, if any such border did exist, it is becoming ever more difficult to discern. One only needs to look at the pervasiveness of smartphone games and apps to recognise that we are incessant 'players'. Yet, the examples I will discuss – from the area of pervasive and alternate reality games – not only blur the boundaries between ordinary life and play, they demonstrate how play can facilitate critical thinking and collaborative knowledge creation by tapping into human desire.

Pervasive games (Montola, Stenros, & Waern, 2009) are purposefully designed experiences or situations – played in the 'real world' – which draw together elements of space, technology, narrative, physical movement, immersive play and participation. They are directed towards a combination of enjoyment and creative expression and commonly include opportunities for learning, exploration and social critique. For example Ken Eklund's *World Without Oil (WWO)*, players were asked to imagine their lives under the conditions of a sudden oil shortage. The goal of the game was to have ordinary citizens from all around the world tell stories about what their life would be like in the world without oil. Using a mix of web based communications, WWO provided a space for expression – a democratic, collaborative platform for exploring possible futures. By collecting and connecting individual stories, the game constructed a future landscape through which to think about the challenges we might face and some of the solutions we might use to solve an oil crisis.

Experiences such as *World Without Oil* are inherently and necessarily utopian. They follow the contention that the utopian impulse is an intrinsic part of what it means to be human – that 'to measure life "as it is" by a life as it *should* be ... is a defining, constitutive feature of humanity' (Bauman 2003, 11). Nevertheless, this utopia is not, as some might claim, a blueprint or

prescription, but rather, as Ruth Levitas explains, 'the expression of desire for a better way of living' (Levitas 2003, 4; see also Levitas 1990).

Of course, there is a long history of writing and thinking about the notion of utopia going back to More's *Utopia*, Morris' *News from Nowhere* and Howard's *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, to cite a few. During the 1950s Bloch's *Principle of Hope* explored how elements of utopianism run through a range of everyday activities and cultural forms. However, the post-modern era could be characterized by an absence of utopian thinking. In *The End of Utopia* (1999), Jacoby argued that in contemporary politics, real opposition and real critique was no longer possible and in place of utopian visions of alternative futures, all we are left with is the potential to modify rather than re-invent or challenge the status quo. Others welcomed the so-called death of utopianism, connecting it to the failed urban design projects of post-war Britain or the authoritarianism of the 20th century socialist and communist state bureaucracies. Indeed, a recent column by Oliver Burkeman in the Guardian even made the case against being hopeful – citing research which claimed that hope, rather than leading to positive emotions, makes people feel worse. However, for Levitas, the essence of utopia is not hope but desire. 'Utopia expresses and explores what is desired' (2011, 191), she proposes. Moreover, we may hope that these desires are fulfilled in reality, but there may be other possible outcomes, such as changed outlooks and altered psychological states. Such a definition suggests that utopianism is pervasive – an everyday part of our lives – and not at all dead or in decline.

I suggest that play, by tapping into possible futures, can serve an important role in collaborative research and learning environments. To see this in action we can look to a recent Connected Communities project – *Cultural Activism in the Community* – where play was deployed as a means to explore desire. Taking inspiration from groups such as the Situationists as well as recent artistic and playful interventions in urban public space, we traversed the permeable boundary between play and ordinary life by introducing colourful, large-scale toy blocks into a neglected public space. In our activities, we became aware of a multiplicity of desire(s). For us, there was the desire to change space, to challenge assumptions, and to bring colour into an otherwise grey landscape. For some others, there was a tangible desire to play or to *become-child* (Deleuze & Guattari 1988) – not in the manner of a child or imitating a child – but rather, taking on the affects of childhood by bringing one's body into connection with the world in a new way.

To conclude, I have suggested here that lenses of play and desire can provide fruitful means of approaching projects of community engagement and social change. Bringing such an approach

into collaborative, community-based research and learning environments create the opportunity to conceptualise ideas about possible futures both dynamically and openly.

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