

# The Importance of Play in Digital Placemaking

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## Abstract

In this position paper, I argue for the importance of play when designing systems for digital placemaking. I offer examples of existing placemaking systems that embody the openness prescribed by ludic design and provide an idea that could be further developed during the workshop: digital graffiti.

## Introduction

Games and play are activities that have been taking place in public space for centuries. Richard Sennett claims that people learn how to act in everyday life through play. By playing within a set of predetermined rules, children are essentially practicing for how to behave in accordance with social conventions. The ability to play is essential to the feeling of the power of the self to control because otherwise, “to lose the ability to play is to lose the sense that worldly conditions are plastic” (Sennett, 1992 p.267). The importance of play extends beyond children to adults as well.

## Play and Place

Bill Gaver describes play as open-ended and self-motivated with a lack of imposed structure and outcome (Gaver, 2002). He adopts Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* term defining humans as playful creatures, but tweaks it to be focused on self-determined play rather than competitive games with explicit goals. Satisfaction derives from play for its own sake rather than any immediate accomplishment. A prime example of ludic design is Drift Table (Gaver et al., 2004). This coffee table includes a viewport of the British countryside that moves according to the weights of objects placed on the table. How people should interact with the table is not prescribed; rather, it is up to

the users to create meaning for themselves. Paralleling Gaver’s definition of ludic design is the distinction between space and place (Dourish, 2006). The physicality of a city exists as a result of spatial practice, but greater meaning is developed as people interact and socialize in these areas. As De Certeau explains, “the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers” (De Certeau, 1998 p. 117). Urban planners create cities in the same way that designers create products, but the walkers and users are the ones that prescribe greater meaning to these designs. E Silva & Hjorth (2009) emphasize this connection in their historic examination of urban spaces as playful spaces. They connect Simmel’s early 20<sup>th</sup> century concept of the *flâneur*, the city’s capitalist wanderer, to Luke’s dystopian phoneur, the consumer who is constantly being tracked. Mobile play is the conduit through which the phoneur is able to disrupt the power of the surveyor. By merging the physical space and play, the phoneur can move beyond the standard of constant information consumption. Indeed, there is evidence of people playing with location-based systems. Foursquare users often create imaginary locations to check into, thus disrupting the traditional ability to track someone’s location using the application (Cramer et al., 2011). As designers of systems for digital placemaking, we can take advantage of the strong connection between space and play by explicitly creating ludic designs.

## Examples of Play and Placemaking

The following are several examples of recent play systems that have been designed for public spaces. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but serve to show a few different ways in which play has manifested itself when aided by technology.

## 21 Balançoires



Fig 1. 21 Balançoires in Montreal (Daily Tous Les Jours)

21 Balançoires (Fig. 1), swings set up in a revitalized part of Montreal between two busy streets, is an installation that plays music notes as people swing on them (Daily Tous Les Jours). When people swing in tandem, the music notes play together to form a melody. 21 Balançoires rewards exploration through discovery that swinging in tandem produces a different sound than when swinging alone. The design uses a common activity in public playgrounds and moves it out onto the streets. By using a familiar interaction mechanic, people know how to use the swing without having to be told through instructions. Swings automatically generate roles: actively swinging, pushing a person on a swing, and waiting for a turn. This design subtly encourages social interaction since swinging alone does not allow for the full musical experience, but it does not force exposure onto the individual if undesired. The goal of this project was to bring people to this formerly undesirable section of the city, and the installation successfully turned it into a place where people could play, discover, and meet.

### Ingress

One of more popular augmented reality games is Google's *Ingress*. The game turns landmarks and street art into portals that people can interact with on their mobile phones. Players choose to join one of two factions and then compete to claim portals for their faction. A core component of the game mechanic is that users must physically go to portals to claim them. The application utilizes the phone's GPS to overlay their location on a map of portals. The game has created a new reason for people to enter these public spaces, and while most interactions between players occur virtually, strangers have organized meetups around the world to take over portals with the help of other strangers (Hodson, 2012). While *Ingress* is explicitly a game and therefore contrasts with some of the elements of pure play as defined by Gaver, the game encourages playful behavior by motivating people to discover areas in their surroundings that they had not noticed before. Because it is a mobile game, people can play at any time, and even once

a player reaches the highest level, gameplay continues in an open-ended manner.

### Sentiment Games

In a partnership with researchers at Intel, we designed a series of sentiment games for a coffee shop (Sun et al., 2014). The mechanics of one of the games prompted players to assign sentiments to images from Instagram in an attempt to match words with another player. Through paper prototyping sessions, we discovered that failure in the game, which normally is a negative experience, was actually a crucial point of social interaction. Players would be amused when their choices would contrast, such as when one player picked "Happy" and the other "Fear" for a picture of a stuffed dinosaur. It was also during these moments that we found players sometimes revealed something about themselves in order to justify their choice. By sharing a personal anecdote or experience, players could learn more about one another without being explicitly required to do so by the game. Although the gameplay was goal-driven, our sentiment games were designed to be playful; we explicitly allowed cheating and encouraged players to upload their own pictures to the system using a specified hashtag.

These examples highlight the engagement that can occur in public spaces. The systems encouraged interaction between collocated individuals through unobtrusive means that could be spontaneously discovered. They provided a shared experience that could serve as a starting point of conversation between people.

### Connected Play



Fig. 2. Sketch of the digital graffiti idea

One potential idea that could be explored during the workshop would be an application for digital graffiti (Fig. 2). Users would be prompted to take photos of the public

spaces around them and contribute to the space in an open-ended form. They could add seating or trees, draw pictures, or extend paths to areas that they frequent. People could share their graffiti on a feed, vote on each other's ideas, and build off of other's works. Ideally, the application could be a form of participatory design, engaging with people who actually use the space to contribute their thoughts in an unobtrusive way. City officials could prioritize construction based on the graffiti with the highest votes to realize particular features, moving ownership of the space from the designers to the people who habituate the area. If successful, a play system like this could connect people who have similar interests in using the space. For example, if one user added a basketball net to a park and saw that someone else did the same, they could start a pick-up game of local basketball players. The application would provide them with the opportunity to make meaningful connections between people who use the same space.

Digital graffiti is an idea that could contribute to a group brainstorm during the workshop; it is by no means a completed design. As part of the design process, I would want to conduct observations of the space. A different concept inspired by the area could better fit the specifics of the location for which we are designing. Nonetheless, the same principles of playful, social interactions would be important to include regardless of the design solution.

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