

The Mobile City project and urban gaming

Michiel de Lange

Michiel de Lange presents the general themes and aims of [The Mobile City](#) project and then zooms in on urban gaming. He asks why this field is relevant for The Mobile City.



The Mobile City project: conceptualising cities as physical/digital hybrids

What makes a city nowadays? Is the city a spatial collection of physical buildings, neighbourhoods, squares and roads? Is the city the setting for a broad spectrum of social interactions between heterogeneous groups and individuals in large numbers and high densities? Is the city a place where people can fully develop and express their personal and cultural identities, contributing in all their diversity to a typical urban culture?

It is no longer useful or even possible to talk about the city as being only physical or local. The geographical city, with its physical infrastructure, co-present social interactions, and diverse local cultures and identities, is overlaid with the “Hertzian space” [1] of electronic communication-, information- and observation-networks of GSM, GPS, CCTV, UMTS, WIFI, RFID, and so on. Nor is it possible to see the digital realm as purely ‘virtual’ (not real or not material). Increasingly, digital spaces are tied to geographical locations. ICTs are embedded into physical objects. The physical city and the spaces and practises of digital technologies merge into the ‘hybrid spaces’ of the *cybercity* (see Graham 2004).

Interactions between physical and digital domains—which used to be considered as largely separate—profoundly influence our conceptions of time, space and place, social relationships, citizenship and identity. Locative and mobile media technologies can be conceptualised as an interface between the digital domain and the city (see for example Ito, Okabe, & Anderson, 2009). These media technologies tie digitally mediated communication and information to physical contexts, and at the same time enable the uploading of “real world” experiences to the digital realm.

The central issue raised by The Mobile City project is: what happens to urban cultures and identities when physical and digital spaces merge? The project addresses three related questions:

- What are useful concepts to talk about the blurring/merging of physical and digital spaces?
- What does the emergence of locative and mobile media mean for urban culture, citizenship, and identities?

- What does this mean for the work of urban professionals (architects, designers, planners), media designers, and academics?

The Mobile City was founded by Martijn de Waal and Michiel de Lange, two PhD students from the Netherlands. The project aims to bring together professionals from various fields (academics, urban professionals, media designers, artists, telecom business, etc). In February 2008 The Mobile City organised a two-day international conference in cooperation with the [Netherlands Architecture Institute](#). Keynote speakers were Stephen Graham, Malcolm McCullough, Tim Cresswell, and Christian Nold. Full coverage of the conference is found on the website. The Mobile City maintains a weblog with regular reviews, interviews, and discussions. Planned activities in the near future include participating in the fall 2009 International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, and co-organising a program during the World Expo in Shanghai 2010.

The relevance of urban gaming for The Mobile City

What is the relevance of urban gaming for the issues raised by The Mobile City project? Before answering this question it would make sense to first ask what are 'urban games'. Other contributions to this journal will likely give thorough and sharp definitions. So why not take 'urban games' in the broadest possible sense? Useful to this end is the analytical distinction Von Borries, Waltz and Böttger make in their edited volume [Space Time Play: computer games, architecture and urbanism: the next level](#) (2007: 12-13) between five domains or 'levels' where games and urbanism meet. For each of these five levels I will raise one or more questions that directly touch upon the main themes of The Mobile City project. In addition we will see that these five levels point to multiple possible meanings of 'urban games'.

First; there is an 'architecture of computer and video games'. All digital games have a distinct spatio-temporal design. Not only does the design shape the gameplay and possible outcomes of the game, it also supports what kind of social interactions may arise both within the game and outside of it. Increasingly, this design is opened to the players themselves (e.g. [Second Life](#)) or even the central aim of the game (e.g. [SimCity](#)). The parallel with those other spatial professionals, architects and urbanists, is

obvious. They too are not only concerned with the spatial design of houses, streets, neighbourhoods, and so on, but also with enabling and shaping social relations between urbanites. However, mobile and locative media practises undermine these professionals' traditional monopoly in creating spatio-temporal domains for varying social interactions like household, provisioning, recreation, neighbouring, traffic (Hannerz, 1980: 102). New '[networked publics](#)' arise, no longer tied to predetermined locations and schedules, that are actively using mobile media to organise themselves along new spatio-temporal lines (Varnelis, 2008).

This poses challenges to urban design. Digital game design might provide some interesting answers. For instance, how can urbanists and architects apply elements from game design to deal with a more open co-creation of the cybercity? On this level we may understand 'urban games' in two ways. First, as games that are designed with an explicitly urban backdrop (e.g. [CTA](#)). Such representations may in turn influence our urban imaginaries and the ways we experience physical cities. Second, as games that allow or have as their central goal the user-generated design of virtual cities. Here idea(l)s about real cities are applied to the creation of virtual cities. Such in-game urban design may either contain references to actual cities (and sometimes even be an attempt at recreating them) or establish imaginary cities.



Virtual Munich in Second Life.

Image source: <http://seriousgamesblog.blogspot.com/2007/06/munich-city-in-second-life.html>

Second; the theme of “make believe urbanism” or “the ludic construction of the metropolis” has been central to (western) thinking about the city [2]. From Baudelaire’s and Walter Benjamin’s passionate but distanced *flâneur*, Simmel and Goffman’s approach to the city as a theatre for role playing, Guy Debord’s critique of the city as a commodified “spectacle” and the Situationists’ ludic interventions in urban space, De Certeau’s walker engaged in playful spatial tactics, Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra applied to Beaubourg and Las Vegas, to contemporary discourses about the “creative city” and the “experience economy”, the city itself has long been conceptualised as a playground. Interesting, from our perspective, is how urban games change our conceptual understanding and representations of the city. For instance, how does the common use of (often very idiosyncratic) maps in locative urban games influence the way we read and navigate the urban landscape?

Further, attention to the city as a playground helps to critically assess the merit of a term like “hybrid space” to describe the interplay between digital and physical domains. The long-time use of play metaphors suggests cities have always been “hybrid playgrounds” of actual physical and mediated



Parkour: the city as playground.

Image source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cosmoflash/2290964277/>

imagined spaces. It forces us to keep in mind that old new media question: what’s really new about all this? On this level, the city itself is understood as the “stage” for everyday playfulness, from playful youth cultures like *parkour*, to the city as a theatrical stage for identity display. In this case it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of “urban play” instead of “urban games”, since these practises usually are not goal-oriented but are “infinite games” (Carse, 1986).

Third; at the level of actual practise “ubiquitous gaming” or pervasive gaming may modify the social functioning of urban places. For instance, how do (semi-)public spaces and social interactions change when children and adults take their GameBoy, DS, PSP or mobile phone to schools, work, malls, transport, or actual playgrounds? Are urban/locative/casual games “colonising” or “enriching” those spaces? Can these urban games be deployed to revive that often lamented “end of serendipity”, by reintroducing playful unexpectedness? This level entails the usual understanding of “urban games” as bridging the digital-physical distinction, and taking digital games out to the streets. Urban games may range from lo-tech interventions (Situationist *dérive* and *détournement*)



Can You See Me Now?

Image source: http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_cysmn.html

and psycho-geographic walks based on a simple algorithm ([.Walk](#)), to hi-tech “hybrid reality games” ([Can You See Me Now?](#)).

Fourth; “serious games” are being employed in processes of architectural design and spatial planning. An example from the Netherlands is the game [Baas op Zuid](#) created by BBVH architects in cooperation with various public housing agencies. The game was used to help in the redesign of two old neighbourhoods in Rotterdam. Players are presented with a number of concrete design choices for their neighbourhood to which they can interactively respond. They get instant feedback about the consequences of their choices. For instance, more parking space at the expense of trees inevitably means more noise and visual pollution. An overall score reflects whether these choices fit with the particular character and history of these neighbourhoods. Outcomes were aggregated and sent to the planners. Other disciplines too now turn to “play” for urban design. The 2008 event [Urban Play](#) organised by Dutch design collective Droog explored the role of designers in shaping the urban landscape. Nineteen designers were commissioned to create playful urban design interventions. A weak point in this project was that instead of employing design quite literally as un-coding (and re-coding) pre-inscribed urban situations, the majority of projects only provoked reactions instead of lasting co-creations. The question remains open whether serious games actually work in making



Baas op Zuid. Image source: <http://www.baasopzuid.nl>

participatory reinvigoration of cities more fun, or are simply what they are: just play? Here “urban games” are understood as games used in the process of (re)building actual cities.

Fifth; urban games pose critical questions about the utopian and dystopian futures of cities. For instance, how desirable is the potential for heightened surveillance that goes hand in hand with the adoption of locative technologies such as GPS (with its military origins) in urban games? To what extent do makers of urban games turn their back on their Situationist legacy, and transform the city into a commercialised “spectacle” for big hi-tech companies or city-branding efforts after all? What privacy and surveillance issues arise from sharing position and personal preferences online? Will urban games create new divisions between those who can afford to play and those who cannot (e.g. is that hooded black male running in the streets playing [Pacmanhattan?](#))? And in the light of recurring debates about games and violence, what could be the side effects of a further blurring between gamespace and real life? This level takes games as a kind of prism or lens through which to look at the city. Games and play are an inescapable part of our current cities, and we should focus on them to understand what is going on.

To conclude, these five levels where games and urbanism intersect cover a wide spectrum of possible meanings of “urban games”. The Mobile City will keep an eye on ‘urban games’ in this very broad sense to better understand our central inquiry: what happens to urban cultures and identities when physical and digital spaces merge?

More information about The Mobile City: www.themobilecity.nl.

Endnotes

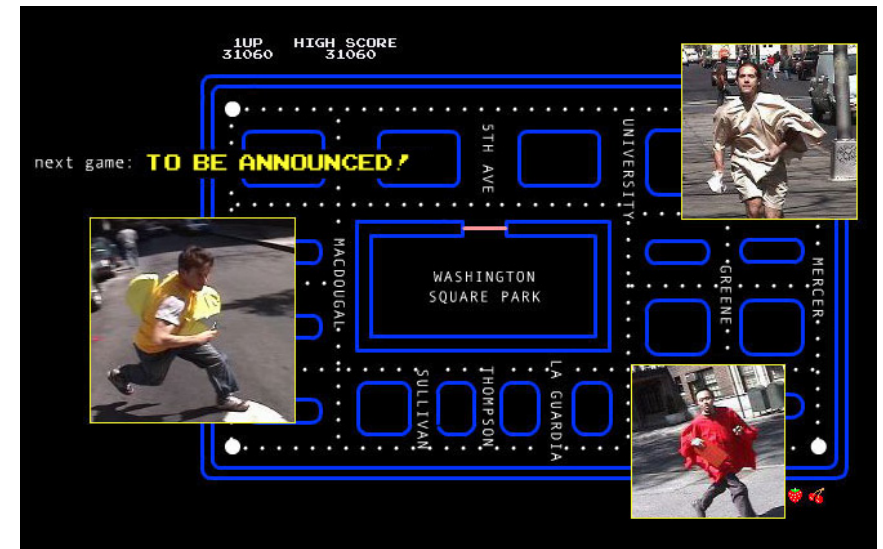
- [1] The term “Hertzian space” was coined by designer Anthony Dunne in his book *Hertzian tales* (originally published in 1999) to explore the role of design in shaping electronic objects. The term describes how electronic objects, as hybrids of both radiation and matter, exist in both physical and electronic space.
- [2] While Borries *et al.* talk about the construction of community spaces within games, I here apply this notion to physical cities.

References

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Biography

Michiel de Lange is a PhD student at Erasmus University Rotterdam. He studies the influence of mobile media technologies on identities. He is the co-founder of The Mobile City, together with Martijn de Waal. Michiel keeps a research weblog at <http://blog.bijt.org>.



Pacmanhattan.

Image source: <http://pacmanhattan.com>