

## **Cultural Geographies of Play Your Place: Making places, producing citizen-subjects, shaping communities**

Harriet Hawkins, Department of Geography University of London

Contact e-mail address: [harriet.hawkins@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:harriet.hawkins@rhul.ac.uk)

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### *Preamble:*

Play Your Place, is described as “an open participatory artwork for people to shape their own towns through play, for the health and prosperity of all”. Conceived and developed by artists Ruth Catlow (UK) and Mary Flanagan (USA). It takes the form of an online and mobile game in which people come together to draw, make and play the future of a place. This paper forms part of the ongoing reflection and theoretical contextualization of the PYP series for which Play Southend (2012-14) is the pilot. It will inform its development as an open, distributed global artwork about place; the next iteration of which is in development with Furtherfield focusing on their base in Finsbury Park, in North London.

### *Introduction:*

The recognition that “making is connecting” (Gauntlett, 2011) has become increasingly commonplace across contemporary arts practices and beyond, while the rise of participatory art recognizes the potential of aesthetic practices to take on a socially-instrumentalised form, connecting diverse communities and fostering ethical relationships between people and their places and the environment (Kester, 2004, 2011). Yet this widely recognized social value of the arts, and its possibilities for connecting people and places, presents a need to reflect critically on the dynamics and value of these relationships, to query in short, the forms of relationship that arts practices can produce between individuals, and with respect to the individuals, and the communities and environments in which they live.

In this report I reflect on some preliminary findings with respect to these questions and in regards to the observations and analysis of *Play Southend* (hereafter PS), conducted by myself and a research assistant, Emily Brown over the course of a six-month period in 2013. The research reported here is primarily ethnographic in nature, and focused on participant observation

and auto-ethnographic accounts of participating in the participatory workshops and on-line elements of PS.

The research carried out was driven by a series of questions concerning the cultural 'geographies' of PS, these were focused around investigating:

- 1) How does PS engage the game-*makers* with place?
- 2) How does PS engage the game-*players* with place?
- 3) How does PS engage game-makers and game-players with each other?
- 4) What sorts of ideas of 'place' emerge from PS?
- 5) What sorts of subjectivities/ identities for 'makers' and 'players' are formed during the course of interaction with PS?
- 6) How does/ could PS shape community and make place?

These research questions translated into three key aims that shaped an ongoing AHRC Creative-Works funded research programme:

- 1) **Investigate PS's audience engagement** (on location and online) by way of surveys, experimental audience research methods (video, social media) and participant observation to:
  - understand who these audiences (communities and planners) are,
  - explore in what ways they participate in both site-specific and online elements of PS, in order to enhance both "real" and "virtual" experiences
- 2) **Investigate the understandings of "place"** in both the site-specific and online elements of PS by way of team discussions with Furtherfield, analysis of data collected in i) and participant observation of audience engagement at the site and online.
- 3) **Plan future iterations** of the project (planned as a series called Play Your Place). Bring the data generated in i. and ii. together with geospatial expertise to inform the development of Play Finsbury Park.

Together these research aims inform the development of future iterations of the game which aim to create an empowering participatory game-art work, to enable people to shape the world together. We also want to begin to explore how this game design and play will feed-into planners' and stakeholders'

decision-making processes, as well as create a process and platform that is portable enough to be used by other sites.

The report that follows is structured into three key sections. In the first section I review the cultural geographies of PS through the lens of place making. Place-making, and the role of the arts within this, has played an important role in recent government policy, including New Labour's 'Creative Britain,' but also more recently within the Big Society Agenda and the Coalition Government's rejuvenation of localism. Here, place-making is of relevance to thinking through how PYP contributes to the making and shaping of a place through the creation and intersection of live experience of that place, with on-line play spaces and the imaginary place-based futures that are created there. The second section focuses on exploring the individual and social dynamics and experiences of the participatory-making and game-play processes. I argue that PYP has a role in producing citizen subjects, in other words, empowering and engaging individuals in their local political processes. In the third section I begin to explore how participatory activities in PYP shapes communities. I examine how this happens at a range of scales and temporalities, from the spaces of the room during the participatory game design process, to the computer screen, but also in the communities of the place. Of particular interest here is the game design and place as an aesthetic technology of politics, with the potential to connect 'expert' and 'lay' local knowledge, not only importantly, connecting these communities, but also creating new publics for political action and engagement. In the conclusion, I turn to examine some of the ongoing questions around mobility and the involvement of stakeholders within the ongoing development process of this game.

***Play Southend 1: Making Places- If you draw, it will happen:***

From a cultural geographer's perspective *Play Southend* is a very geographical piece of art. Not only is it very clearly based in a particular place, Southend, but as an art work it has very distinct geographies, a participatory location based element- the workshops—and an intersecting on-line element. Furthermore, at the heart of the project lies the belief that participatory arts practices can drive place-based social change, the slogan "if you draw it will happen", captures the sensibility of future geographies and political possibilities that sit at the heart of the project.

Simply put, PYP rests on the imperative to get local people to create an imaginative on-line gaming world in the belief that the production of this on-line place, and participation in it by way of game-play, can and does bring about changes to both the makers and players, and the places and communities in which they live.

Geographical scholarship on art is driven by an exploration of the intersection of art-works and worlds, and the impact thereof (Hawkins, 2014). To unpack this, geographers are primarily interested in the intersections of two dimensions:

- i) the geographies of the art- where/how is it produced and consumed
- ii) the geographical 'work' that the art work, and interactions with it, do in the world, in other words, the changes it effects.

The place-making that PS brings about intersects the creation of imaginative game worlds with the creation of places in which people can imagine and debate the current and future geographies of Southend and its communities. In doing so it contributes to the 'making' of place at a range of scales, and potentially, when intersecting with stakeholders, helping to 'make place' by bringing about change. With respect to the geographies of play-your-place, one of the most important things to appreciate is the intersection of a series of 'places' over the course of the project:

- i) the place or community which forms the imaginative materials for the creation of the game-place (in this case Southend).
- ii) the virtual / on-line "place" created by the game that the participants make,

So each of the games, in some way thematises Southend as a place, and often uses key landscape features and landmarks to 'create' virtual territories that are familiar enough for people to recognize themselves in them. Often these imaginative places combine the problems of place with the 'future' imagined place people want to see.

- iii) the 'place'/ community created in the course of the process of game-making/ game play-

The processes of the project, not only contributed to the making of Southend, but also in the process create a series of 'places', whether these be the temporary PS communities

of the Village Green festival or T.A.P. space, or the virtual place of the website and its online community.

- iv) the re-made/ shaped place that occurs in Southend as a result of the games,

There is a general recognition by geographers that places are always in process, being continually made and remade (Cresswell, 2004). These ongoing 'makings' happen at the scale of the individual experience, and are brought about by local collectives, policy makers, or commercial interests. With respect to PS, this encompasses both a shift in the relationship individual participants have to their places, in terms of the textures of their everyday lives, but it might also concern the emergence of a new community of individuals, or the role of PS in feeding into longer term planning of a place.

Across all these different types of place making, it becomes clear that the transformative force of PS lies in the intersections it makes between spaces of game-play and Southend. Place-making, the potentiality of the place-making of PS arguably lies in the intersections it makes between spaces of game play and the place of Southend.

This is reinforced by the 'localness' of the game. So, as well as the framing of encounters through invitations to participate and exhortation, to imagine "the change you would like to see in Southend", a number of the collectively created drawn assets in the online game options enable an enhancement of the place-based nature of the game. Key here is the creation of drawn backgrounds, so, for example you can chose from a series of geographically locatable drawn elements of Southend, or draw your own to add to the archive. These include recognizable landmarks and buildings, that makes many of the games into small scale maps, and enables a very particular relationships to be drawn between the game-geographies of Southend and individual experience; 'that corner', the 'bad pot-hole' etc. There were a series of popular locations for the game, the High-Street and beach proving most popular, with the pier also proving a popular choice. As such the potential futures for Southend play out across online territories that are very recognizable to locals.

It is these intersections of place that give the project its force, and in appreciating them what becomes clear is the need to recognize the productive force of game-making and play. This seems to work in two main ways, on the one hand, the

identification and presentation of a series of local issues and their discussion and strategizing through game making and play. One question under consideration, and for further inquiry, is how this material – both the process, but also the final form – could be of use to a range of different community stakeholders, whether this be community groups such as Transition Southend, or local planners, politicians or commercial interests. On the other hand, but of course not delinked from this, is the way in which the process of game play has a series of social benefits that are less linked to particular knowledges of place, and more about the shaping of individual subjectivities and communities. In other words, what is gained in game-play, is not just knowledge concerning, and political engagement with, particular local issues – such as environmental changes, common concerns with littering, anti-social behaviors, health and well being, – but rather, and as the discussion below will explore, individuals are changed through their experience of working on the game and the connections – social, material and environmental – they forge in the course of these interactions.

As such, when ‘play’ is talked about in terms of PS, what is meant is not just the importance of ‘playing’ the final games across the virtual space of the town. Rather, play here comes to mean the whole process of drawing, making, imagining. This captures some of the key political dimensions of this interpretation of the project and its world-making capacities. For, and drawing here from contemporary theories of gaming and place, there is a need to recognize that play is not a sphere apart, but is rather a process threaded through social life (Flanagan, 2009; Shaw and Sharp, 2013; Woodyer, 2012). Furthermore, that play can take up an important place in contemporary ideas of the political that raises queries around what is politics, how does the political happen and what is political.

On the surface, these are quite simple questions to answer with respect to PS, in relation to the politics of urban planning, questions of environmental politics, and vision for local futures that here become entwined with everyday political actions and decisions. These sorts of ‘mundane’ politics, of recycling, of cycle lanes and so on, are not to be dismissed and overlooked, for these are these issues around which larger collective politics play out and are born.

Furthermore, in the political workings of PS, what becomes important is the recognition of the political force of the imagination. The imagination is increasingly being recognized as a sphere in which political battles are being fought (Thrift,

2009). One of the principal reasons for this is the recognition of the politics of possibility: the possibility that something might be different. Alongside of course, the sense of making a difference, recent work has drawn attention to the empowering potential that can come from the recognition that something might be otherwise than it is. In terms of the impact it has on the moral and identity of the individual subject, this possibility of difference can be as important as action material change.

### ***Play-Your Place 2: Shaping citizen-subjects : imagining futures “somebodies” not “no-bodies”***

In this section I want to explore how the processes of imagining, drawing and gaming in PS come to shape the subjectivities of those who participate. In other words, how involvement shapes people’s identities and outlooks upon the world. PS, I want to argue, produced its users as ‘citizen-subjects’.

In the course of the study I observed the development of a game concerning the viability of cycling in Southend in the course of a two-day workshop. An early part of the PS process was the story-boarding exercise, asking someone to identify a fictional Southend hero/ine, their quest for change, what challenges they face, what the rewards and solutions might be, and what the outcome is. In this instance the ‘someone’ was a bike-rider, the ‘goal’ was a more bike friendly environment, challenges included pot-holes, aggressive drivers and traffic, rewards were more friendly attitudes and more diverse animals and plant life. One solution was to increase the numbers of cyclists on the roads to develop a collective change in attitude. To get to the point of devising the game, group discussions were had to identify key issues facing Southend and then to think through some of the conditions that gave rise to the issues. Individuals and often small groups would then break off to design the story board for their “issue”. The topics chosen across the PS games developed ranged from environmental to social issues, and encompassed some issues quite specific to age group and location to larger common issues shared across the community.

In the process of participating, individuals and especially young people were drawn, in a group environment, towards thinking collectively about key issues for the community. Further, as they developed the game, a mixture of site-specific ‘oh there are pot holes on that corner’ together with generic features entered the gaming environment. Once the idea was

storyboarded, the group would set about drawing a series of elements of the game, from characters, to environmental features. These were scanned into the computer or photographed and uploaded via mobile phone and the game environment created, sounds added, issues engaged with etc. Observations made at PS events, suggested that sometimes groups involved were easily able to identify issues that they wanted addressed within the community. For other participants the discussion and brainstorming process proved to be crucial in the emergence of the particular 'change' they wished to see within the community.

What became clear was is a sense that participating in the process, whether it was about directly making political decisions or not, seemed to have the effect of making the participants more politically aware of the place in which they lived. It also seemed to empower them with a sense of imagination regarding possible futures for their place, and a sense of investment in place, whether or not that was linked to an ability to affect change. In other words, this was to participate in a political process, that were about presenting possibilities for change, about creating the vision of future Southends. In a sense, although the question of practical and political influence were an important part of the invitation, once people were involved in the activity it was less important to this process whether or not these political visions come into being, what was important was the participation in the process of their envisioning.

Furthermore, it appeared that having been part of this process, was to walk around Southend with a renewed sense of engagement with it, its problems and possibilities. In other words, this was to attune participants to the textures of the everyday experiences of the places that they live in. In other words, making the games was both to come to know and think about particular places and issues in ways that individuals might not have done before, and was also, to come to be more engaged and aware with place and community. Makers were, in short, developed as 'citizen subjects', subjects engaged with and interested in being part of thinking about their community and place.

That authorship can have a creative agency in life and in social interactions is well recognized. In a set of ideas transferable to PS Lambert (2012,2), notes of digital story-telling, "being the author of your own life, of the way you move through the world, is a fundamental idea in democracy. We want to help everyone use the power of storytelling to project their authority". As he



continues, getting beyond our predicaments- whether as individuals or as a society, needs to be a process of telling stories about our lives, this is he emphasizes a therapeutic story-telling process that is as much about creativity and artistic processes as it is about sitting on a therapists coach. We need, Lambert (2012,3) suggests, to listen to each other's stories as a daily ritual, as a life process. I want to argue that participation in PS, in group discussion, in game-making produced individuals as engaged citizens, enrolling them in shared narrations of their experiences of their communities and places. In the process of such sharing, and having been part of this sharing, it is possible to see how individuals would, and could, become more attuned to the everyday textures and surfaces of their lives and in Southend as a place.

If making the game shaped citizen subjects, then playing made games, and participating in their on-going production of levels, provided the opportunity for others not part of the original design to get involved. To go onto the website and to interact with it was to become aware of a series of key issues of concern in Southend. Furthermore, the website is designed not only to facilitate play, but also to encourage participation in the development of these games and the issues that they concern. What remains to be done is to query whether game-play and development functions of the PS website enable the production of a similar set of subjectivities as participation in the making of the games did.

### ***Play-Your Place 3: Shaping Communities***

PYP works to shape communities in a range of ways. We witnessed PYP connecting individuals in the process of discussion, game design and building, we also witnessed the on-line platform 'arcade' starting to aggregate place-based concerns held in common by participants. Finally we witness a series of points where we could see how, as the project progresses, temporary and virtual communities, intersected with existing communities and catalyzed new Southend based communities focused around specific local issues. Furthermore, there is a sense in which these games and the platform, offer a valuable means to connect different communities- local people, and a range of political and commercial stakeholders.

### ***Small Scale: Making is Connecting***

The process of designing the games was incredibly interactive from the collective brainstorming of ideas, to small group discussions, the drawing of the game elements, to processes of scanning in these elements, and laying out the games, choosing from existing game elements, sharing sound files, trouble-shooting and strategizing issues, and of course playing the games.

The format of the process was one that seemed to easily make space for “ multiple perspectives and simultaneous existence of hyphenated identities,” (Lambert, 2012, ix), as well as for multiple different skill sets and levels of technological competence.

Witnessed at workshops were a range of different dynamics, from pairs of teenagers and older children working together to tackle issues of bullying around the town, to inter-generational discussion and engagements, with collective brainstorming leading to a process of the division of labour, that saw younger children and teenagers being tasked with drawing different game elements, whilst parents and other adults developed the game interface. The groups came back together to share in the game testing and play.

In common with digital storytelling, it could be argued that this form of collective game design and play, offers a series of ‘social goods’ that augment the benefits of individual political empowerment discussed above. What becomes important here are the proven benefits of social interactions, for happiness, confidence, self-esteem and the enhancement of social skills. In the shared discussions, the focus gradually fell away from discussion of the issue, to the emergence of an atmosphere marked by prosaic social interactions. The room was full of laughter, chat and exchange as attention shifted to the processes of collective thinking and doing in the game production. People become deeply involved in making things work – both the actual game levels and the group dynamic - with some attending both to the task at hand and to ways in which everyone in the room could contribute something.

#### *Community in Common:*

It was not just in the social interactions in the process of game-making that community, however temporary was formed, of clear importance was the coming together of people around shared local place-based issues. This happens both in the context of game-making, but is also clearly seen on the website.

In the context of the development of the game play we find a transitioning of experiences of place, from an individual, sometimes quite personal experience, to a shared understanding and a group narration of change. In terms borrowed from digital story telling this is the movement from a “me” story- a personal issue, to an “I story” in the narrativisation of the story, but then further develops in the course of the game development into a ‘we story’ and then finally into an ‘our story’ (Lambert, 2013). The result then of the development of the games was the collectivisation of a group of individuals, some of which had known each other before hand, some of which had never met, around a both specific issues, but also a shared sense of investment in the future of Southend as a place.

This community based around the common was drawn together, and strengthened through an interest and investment in Southend as a place. This was demonstrated at each event, but made particularly manifest in the “Village Green festival” that saw Southenders coming together to draw key features of the community. We see for example, a game made by a group from Southend’s allotment community, part of the existing Southend community transition group. Here the future scenario is an imaginary projection of aliens landing, but the vision of an inter-species collaboration has an interesting wider potential. We see an allotment that creates an expanded community of humans and non-humans, wherein we find an ethical vision for the future that both reinforces existing communities, whilst also providing a blueprint for their development and expansion.

Each individual game becomes part of the formation of a community, around the issues, that also extends from the makers of the games to those who play them and thus become enrolled within them. When situated on the website the individual game’s narrativisation of issues and change become part of a “large complex mosaic of stories” that between them engage with current and future geographies of Southend and possibilities for change. In effect, the website can be understood to form a community with something in common.

The website is very focused on Southend and imagining and playing scenarios for change. The community might be disparate, but what is made manifest in the website, is a community of people who engaged with their place and its future for a period of time, a community of people that those interested can sign up to, and easily participate in through the contribution of their own design features to the game.

### *Connecting Communities:*

As well as shaping new communities and reinforcing existing ones, PS can be seen as a tool for connection. It can help people to get in touch and become aware of what communities are out there and engaging with issues they are also interested in. Empowerment in PYP is not just that of personal participation, but also comes from the collective front that it presents around certain issues, and the way that it becomes an analytic force in terms of identifying key issues and thinking through local options for change in terms of the grass-roots community working practices. At its most basic level we can understand PYP as offering a set of knowledge and information upon which local planners can draw regarding the changes people of Southend want to see.

At another, more complex level, we see the very process of PS offering a tool-kit for participatory consultancy. It is not hard to imagine the mechanisms and processes of PS becoming of significant use for a forward thinking local authority or developer that was committed to making space for the voices of the local people and to taking account of their needs.

Perhaps the potentially most significant impact of PS lies in the potential it offers for radically re-thinking the knowledge making process as regards the planning of local places. To often, it is recognized, planning processes and political choices regarding our places and communities are carried out based on a conventional categories and distinctions made between 'expert' knowledge makers and 'lay' knowledge makers. While efforts are made to enable 'lay' voices to be heard, to often these efforts are limited and situate these 'lay' voices as less knowledgeable and engaged than 'expert' voices.

PS can be situated alongside other forms of public experiment, including using story-telling and workshops as part of local consultancy processes, wherein these public experiments become experiments in knowledge production (Kester, 2004; Lambert, 2012; Lane et al. 2011). Such that, in relation to PYP we can argue that the process of game design and the resultant games produced and their collection together on the website, has the potential to harness, produce and negotiate a new and collective sense of knowledge making with respect to the needs and future visions of Southend communities.

In creating a potential technology of connection, wherein the collectivised process of making the body of games, their

presentation on a website, for further engagement via play, PS has the potential to be a radical participatory method. I assert the radical here, because following discussions of participation in science literatures, I find in PS the potential to align lay knowledges alongside expert knowledge in a way that shifts the power relations in the political process. Further, and following Lane et al. (2011), PS can be understood to be radical because the project can be understood to be as much about creating a new public capable of making a political intervention and engaged with the community (see producing citizen subjects above) as it was about producing the solution itself. In this process of knowledge generation I find real possibilities for PS, to not only connect communities but to reshape the nature of those connections in ways that make space for radically democratic practices.

### ***Conclusions: Playing for a better future***

*“Politics more than any-thing else needs the magical touch of dream and desire, needs the shock of the poetic; left to professional career politicians, the political is always deemed to feel stifled and lifeless and apolitical; its always destined to induce a jet-lagged, deadening insomnia” (Merrifield, 2009, 386).*

Perhaps one of the overarching conclusions that can be drawn from this preliminary research on *Play Your Place/ Play Southend*, is that it seems to provide one answer Merrifield’s calls for an enchanted politics. For, *Play Your Place*’s politics is one that enrolls the poetic, that has, I would argue, more than a touch of dream and desire at its heart. It is a politics that removes political ambition and action beyond the remit of the career politician, to resituate it in the practices of everyday individuals and their daily engagements with their place and community. This is, in short, to shape an alternative vision of politics, who can be political, and what it means to be political engaged. The result is the shaping of an alternative realm of politics that recognizes political action and possibilities in the everyday practices of individuals and the textures of their life experiences, that realize the role of poetic and enchanting practices of drawing, gaming and play to be political. This is to enable the individual to be active and engaged, and empowered in the face of, and operate within, those more ‘transcendental’ ‘official’ and ‘expert’ political spheres that are often far distant from the live experience of a particular place.

In summary, this is to appreciate how the making of the PS games is as important as their playing, and how the manifold play spaces that PS creates are far from distinct or set apart from the spaces and experiences everyday life, but are rather thoroughly imbricated within them. What this adds up to is an assertion of Play Your Place as a project with manifold political potential, a radical political aesthetic technology, that makes places, produces citizen-subjects and publics, and the shapes and connects communities in ways that empower them to envision and produce their future geographies.

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