




Playing a City

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Abstract. This paper is based on exploratory interventions in a small city in the south-eastern part of Sweden. The interventions were inspired both by the art movement of Situationists and site-specific games. The activities were also supported by a diversity of theoretical perspectives. During winter 2016 eight women explored by developing playful methods what a city, understood both as a social and material space, could mean for a group of women recently moved to the city. Through the playful approach the project opened up room for participatory design and abled the group to formulate eight rules, also available for other city explorers in other cities.

Keywords: Site-specific games · Rules · Playful · Explorative method
Participatory design · City

1 Background

This paper is based on a series of exploratory interventions in a small city in the south-eastern part of Sweden. The project described in this paper is part of a bigger research project about how site-specific games and play in cities can create engaging citizenship.

During one year (2016–2017) we (the authors) met a group of 6–8 Syrian women every second week, and together we experimented with our joined playfulness, different locations in the city. The aim was to study and develop participatory methods of playful design for citizenship with help of urban places.

The focus of this paper is to present and discuss specific methods of experimenting and intervening with site-specific playfulness in public spaces. This method development project is a pre-study of how big data that cities produce (like population, income, education, political affiliations traffic, and air quality) could be used for making playful cities [1].

The structure of this paper is as follows:

In the *Research frame* chapter, the paper explains within what fields this transdisciplinary project is situated. *The introduction* describes how cities often are represented as a future artifact and, wants to give the reader a picture of how the project got its spark.

A relational city tells how the project started and what important questions were raised. *Walkers and walking women* is a short description of why walking was an important method for the project. *Let's move on - Let's play* is about the experimental approach while playing together. *The rules* is the chapter where the rules made out of

the explorative interventions are listed. *Threads* section is a playful rulemaking how to encounter with the references for the paper. The *Final concluding thoughts* chapter closing the paper with a discussion about the role of site-specific play in cities.

2 Research Frame

This work is transdisciplinary [10] and thus finds inspiration and methods both from academic fields, in our case from Participatory Design and site-specific games. But we also looked for inspiration from the Situationists, the art and activist movement. These approaches together created a rich combination that gave the project the character of an exploration with an open ending and sometimes also a messy excursion.

As our first point of departure, we turned to site-specific games as a field for research and practice [1, 8, 15] to playfully handling signs and systems in the urbanity.

This genre of games is played on a specific physical site, usually, in an urban space; using the player's full bodies and the material in a surrounding to create a game experience. Site-specific games embrace physical environments and the everyday life while playing [15]. By locating and integrating the game with the urban space playing no longer occurs in solitude but becomes rather a performance and manifestation in public.

To consider the specific site with its history, social networks, culture and fauna, even languages is to situate and impute meaning to the game in creating urban engagement [6]. The play transforms the consciousness of our everyday life meanwhile exploring the participatory possibilities of city spaces.

Our goal was also to connect our study and interventions to the field of Participatory Design (PD) [19]. PD has its roots in the Scandinavian labor market in the 1970s, aiming to develop inclusive means and methods to involve employees in the design of computer-based processes. The core ideas for PD was and still is, the democratization of the society as a whole. In design processes, the implementation of democratic participation demands inclusive arenas open for experiences of people, whose lives, design results are going to affect. Since the early days of PD tools and means of participation have expanded widely and found their way to areas outside working life. In our specific case; projects connected to urban development and planning [7, 20] have inspired and encouraged us to develop further the ways citizens and urban environments can be connected. Being inspired of PD we especially wanted to carry on the work already initiated in PD and further develop the topic of how citizens experience their lived environment and focus on how playful means and tools can be designed as a collaborative exercise in participatory ways for urban participation. Inspired by the many years of designing the very participation within diverse and numerous design processes, we were able to phrase questions guiding our own participatory intervention, and in that way bringing PD based ideas with us to the field of game/play. We entered the study with an open-ended question: Can we create a process where the methods and goals are not decided in beforehand by us, the researchers? This indicated that we needed to challenge our own expertise and be open and responsive to the participants' ideas, suggestions and comments in the planning, decision-making of the interventions and also during the interventions conducted during the study.

Our desire to play in the city took us to the fifties, when the artistic and activist movement of Situationists (1957–1972), took the dandy strolling further by making walking to a practice of political action of the everyday consciousness. They played with rulemaking for specific city routes to get new perspectives and to move away from the representation of lives into a more experimental behaviour. Under the representation of the city, the true city was hidden, away from the spectacle [17]. To move rapidly in different atmospheres that the city offered to experience that specific situation was the main idea [17]. The Situationists perceived space both as a political and as a philosophical action of everyday situations, which have inspired artists and game developers to explore urban spaces for playfulness [17].

3 Introduction

Frozen cities

If you open up a Swedish local paper and see a visual presentation of a future suburb, you might be surprised. Everything is clean, quiet, the few (white) people present in the picture sit neatly. Not too near each other. There is no noise. No disturbances. No friction. No contradictions. The city in this picture is a substantive, a stable assemblage [9] not shakable. There is no invitation to join or even enter. The city is a presentation. A pre-defined object [2] which is already in place without troubles and so clean. An illusion of harmony and stability. The city is done as a readymade package. The slice of the city presented in the picture ‘*is*’ - a perfect object we can talk about and like because it is impossible to dislike its seductive perfection.

There is, of course, an alternative story of the city, the back side. With dirt, discomfort, and noise. Crowded places, traffic. Worn down houses. Dark tunnels.

Echoing parking lots. But this contradictory presentation of the city would as well be a frozen story. As a result, we would only get an either-or story, a binary story based on dichotomies but still a substantive. The city still ‘*is*’ something, still an object we can talk about, dislike because it is impossible to like.

These two frozen presentations of a city, disturbed us, the authors. How could these two city pictures be unfrozen and translated into complex zigzags, and uncover other stories? Could we break the frozen images as they were imposed on us, and from the shards make new images, stories and understandings? What is a city we asked ourselves?

We wanted to experiment and in non-fixed ways play in public places. Compose actions that could be transformed into engagements with and in the spaces. We did not want to be the only explorers, but to find other curious co-explorers to join our team. This is what we had in our mind. But where could we find bold people ready to step in our endeavor willing to challenge frozen images, to become brave but modest explorers in a city? To be ready to be affected and to affect?

3.1 A Relational City

To find the brave ones, we also needed to find a context interesting, inspiring and challenging enough to locate and situate our experiments and interventions.

People are on the move. Not as nomadic border transgressing subjects [4] but as involuntary refugees. During the last couple of years, approximately 850 persons ended up in a small city in the south-eastern Sweden looking for a peaceful asylum and waiting for a permit required for a permanent stay in Sweden. This small city underwent a transformation, not made by representations but rather through resistance, desires and wishes.

Our experiments and methods presented and discussed in this paper took off when refugees from Syria started to arrive in the city with the hope of a non-violent future.

The governor and her allies decided that the county of Blekinge, where the city is located, would be the county in Sweden that would manage best to integrate immigrants. A lot of so-called integration projects and activities in order to welcome the newcomers to the city were set into motion. Everything from formal Swedish courses to singing in choirs, football and bandy training, sewing circles, and dinner parties. Authorities, schools, voluntary organizations, charity organizations, sports clubs, and individuals started to act and contribute in a variety of ways. All under the umbrella term of integration.

Taking a closer look at all these positive initiatives some aspects need to be reflected upon. Who are the initiators? Who are the ones who exercise power to organize and ‘open their hearts’ (a slightly modified phrase of the Swedish prime minister from 2014)? Who is integrated to what? And what is integration all about?

In critical reflections upon the ‘what is’ and ‘who is’ and the trajectory of the notion and practices of integration, we (the authors) were keen to see if there could be other ways and also reasons to create a more messy and mobile socio-material assembly consisting of the city and its diversity of inhabitants.

We started to think what the small Swedish city might mean for the newcomers. If and how they could be part of shaping the city. Maybe their eyes, ears, and feet could tell us new stories about the city? What would the city mean for us already staying there? Could our eyes, ears, and feet together make new versions of the city? What if the city could tell stories of its own, seldom heard or already forgotten?

What would become if we brought our bodies, memories, and questions into the city with its own body and started to walk, disturb and claim space? Our very first question when moving further on from thinking and discussing was: how can our interventions change our perceptions and feelings of this seemingly boring and a bit tired small city? How can our joint interventions start to change the place? Without any pre-defined goals and boundaries of what and who as static entities [2] we started to imagine to challenge the city as an assemblage of humans and non-humans [9] through walking, playing and talking.

However, a city as an open arena for everyone is not always reality. All functions that exist in a city side by side; spatially, juridical, economically, culturally, and socially are related to gender and class relations [13]. The possible interactions a city can offer, occasionally meetings of different kinds are restricted by the difference of what social relations citizens are included in and in what spaces they belong to [13]. Women’s mobility has been restricted historically and culturally [14] and women’s

lives and experiences are defined as private and men's as public, and even though women have changed their position in the public over the last century, men still take a bigger part of the public life [13].

But we wanted to carry on, taking both the possibilities and constraints with us, and via the training course, 'Swedish for immigrants', we got in touch with six Syrian women in the age of twenty-three to fifty-five.

We asked them: "Do you want to play with us?" and they all said "Yes."

3.2 Walkers and Walking Women – Methods for Exploration

To walk can be an inspirational movement [13] if you spontaneously follow up what you see or meet on your path.

Influences from the Situationists inspired us as a group of women with restricted movement patterns, to explore how we can take action over places instead of letting the places rule over us [17]. As a group, we wanted to be part of the city and well as observing, being observed, to make a statement of our participation in the city.

To go from looking at the map of the city to start walking into the city and its places was an exploration of the existential moments [16]. By walking and traversing the streets, the conversation about how we perceived the city tied us together and created narratives of what places have been in the past and how places and objects could become something else. Together with the city, we started to reformulate places by using our bodily senses expanding the spatiality.

With the experiments of mapping spaces outside ourselves but as well as within our bodies [16], we were teased to create our own site-specific games, momentarily designed by us and by the places while encountered them. For us the site-specific game as an inspiration and frame is to connect to power, gender and ethnicity and as questions how alienated patterns are transformed to everyday life matters. By walking we stitched together parts of the city to become our playground to turn space into place.

4 Let's Move on - Let's Play

We, the group of eight women, took walking as a rhythm to explore the city chosen by us, stopping to re-name a statue of a naked woman. Imagined the creek full of crocodiles and waggled the icy downhill like penguins. We played with each other, made new paths and expanded our movements. Collectively we co-created situations by picking up on each other's inventions and ideas. The playing emerged for a while and dissolved into an embodied touch when stopped taking part of the play. Slowly a relationship between us and the city developed. Our re-engagement with the city also became a reclamation of a space as a collective manifestation. The reclamation grew bigger for each time we pushed our spatial expansion [16] further, tried our 'do not' to 'why not'. Who could we become in these places trying out new belongings?

All the playful explorations we did during several months made us wondering. To stand in the dark forest screaming out a wish to the stars made a connection to the future. We (the authors) analyzed and reflected on our expeditions with the group, read notes, listened to the recordings, watched the photos and drawings. Made open frames

for next occasion. Sometimes we sighed over the mess in our planning or the rush we always felt before meeting the women. Do we have the pens and the paper? Where is the recorder? But every time when playing together, our bodies told us that we were heading towards something in the becoming, something unexpected. For several months we played crossed boundaries, challenges ourselves and the city. Asked four young men on a park bench if they knew where the other benches, usually standing there, where? Getting the answer from one of them knowing that the benches needed to be renovated.

From the map, we chose spots to visit and brought some props to play with. With open minds, we explored and did not expect much. Is it possible to invite citizens to come to the city square to claim their space by drawing a chalk circle around their feet?

When we finally zoomed out there it was: eight co-designed rules which defined a set of different activities to play with [18].

Rules are what make a game's fundamental [18] and in this game, the rules were not made from moral, not from regulations or norms, but aimless and unpredictable. They dictated how the game behaved [18]. If you follow them you can make friendships, get to know your city in a new way, challenge your everyday life or just have a moment of fun. The set of rules that were developed are explicit rules, do this and do that. But in between these commands, the space for implicit rules is embedded and welcoming negotiations and renegotiations of the rules [18].

The ambiguity of the rules opens up possibilities for a leap of joy from an everyday activity into a playful moment which simultaneously initiates a situation of participation.

Our rulemaking became a pattern of accepting and giving in a motion towards the unknown. The city turned into a companion and together we revealed the secrets of entanglements instead of splits.

5 The Rules Designed

We **mapped** places that we visited often, or never visited or wanted to visit. Places we avoided.

We **walked** to a place chosen on the map, explored it, talked about it. We left a mark and we took something from the place to bring with us.

We **lighted** a dark forest playfully. In the darkest spot, we shouted out a wish.

We **transgressed** boundaries, stopped in front of people's houses and asked ourselves which place felt welcoming and which do not.

We **reformulated** by randomly cutting out sentences from books and made new stories.

We **asked** strangers questions that we had made up from nowhere.

We **measured** the town square carefully with a yardstick and counted every object in the square.

We **claimed** the square by inviting citizens to come and draw a colorful circle around their feet.

6 Threads as a Possibility for New Rules

The project we have lived with and loved for one year and a half has been an act of crossing of many vibrant threads. Like Donna Haraway's [9] figuration, or game as Haraway also calls it, of *cat's cradle* we have taken a combination of doing/thinking/making together. Creating occasional patterns by receiving and proposing threads coming together and apart. Sometimes threads form patterns and co-operate kindly, though momentarily. Sometimes threads misbehave and just end up in an endless tangling so you have to make a violent cut. A cut which opens up for something unexpected, a new entanglement.

Playing the cat's cradle is a never ending play, there is no final goal to strive for. It is more a resistance to fixity and dominant visions. Something ever changing is hard to catch but gives the rhythm of playfulness.

By inviting interesting people and their texts and experiences to think together with us, we can highlight some of the threads in our cat's cradle and invite texts and thoughts to continuously play with us. We want to challenge the understanding of how we can read and intervene with theories while making playfulness.

The Rule-Make a cat's cradle

Read Donna Haraway's article about the cat's cradle from 1994.

Find someone to play with. Choose the threads. Create a pattern. Play until it is not playful and fun anymore. Start again. Stop. Keep on going. There is no end.

Thread number 1 Cross boundaries

Re-read Donna Haraway's text about cat's cradle.

Cross boundaries, both visible, physical and imaginary in your city. Do not stop there. Ask instead what kind of work boundaries do. What kind of city do they produce for you? Can you survive? Do boundaries of the city hurt you?

Thread number 2 Let the city fluid

Read John Law's and Vicky Singleton's article about object lessons from 2005.

Find a park bench. Sit down. Ask yourself: Am I sure everything I see is fixed? Things, people, animals? Imagine a city as a fluid space. Does the city keep its shape? Does a city have to keep its shape? Can a city come in many shapes?

Thread number 3 Forget objects and subjects

Read Karen Barad's book about agential realism, intra-actions, apparatuses and cuts from 2007. Read once more. And one more time.

Choose a place in a city. Look around. Gather everything you see. Do not categorize. What's going on? Surprise yourself and tell a new story you have never told before. What and who acts? What did you include in your story? What did you exclude? What are the consequences of your choices?

Thread number 4 Know & care

Read Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's article about knowing as caring from 2012.

Make a map of your relations. Whom do you think with? Whom do you think for? What do you care? Borrow a dog, if you do not have a dog of your own. Have a walk together. Listen to the dog. What does the dog know that you do not know? What do you know together?

Thread number 5 Design your Thing

Read Pelle Ehn's article about participation in design things from 2008.

Decide what you think about design? Who is designing for whom? Who is using? What is to be designed? Move on and start to play a design game. You are all designers, users, and participants. Design the city as a parliament. What kind of devices do you need? What kind of infrastructure do you need? How can design carry on after you have left the design game?

Thread number 6 Do not avoid contradictions

Read Carl DiSalvo's book about adversarial design from 2012.

Return to your design game of a parliament. The Consensus is not an option. Make sure that controversies can flourish in your democratic design experiment. Arrange a choir of multiple voices. Let the choir sing at the city square. Listen. Do you tolerate disagreement? Does it feel uncomfortable? Do you, by all means, try to reach harmony? Think again. Develop your design game further. Reserve space for polyvocality. Practice. Reflect. Keep on going. Have patience.

Thread number 7 Add a thread of your own choice

7 Final Concluding Thoughts

We would argue that a city is not either or, nor it can be defined or fixed as a problem. The city is in becoming with its citizens. It is a living net of material-discursive relationships [2] and made of different constellations of humans, artefacts, infrastructure and memories, depending on who is playing with the threads. A city is a pattern open to reformulate or change, as you want and a game could be the vehicle for that change [8]. It is about designing living relationships together, to be aware of the unknown and the always there. A city is a living object, a messy condition always with partial understandings of what it could become [12]. The trickster is that we who live in cities do think we know the city, our hoods, we see it as a stable network [11] but it is at another level something undefined, something possible to imagine and construct the opposite to what we know and experience. By stuttering and stumbling, we can sometimes reach further by letting us dwell in the fluidity or the void if you prefer so. A city has as many shapes as there are interpretations.

It is not the rules that dominate and master a game but the relationships evoked when playing [18]. What our rules did was not only shaping a relationship to a city and amidst the players but they additionally designed a place, a Thing [6] to manage players' own imaginations, relations and actions within. Rules that put the adversarial into the light, a city can be a livable place for everyone but not as a fixed place of consensus but rather with tensions to play with [5]. Cities could thus be more of a place for collective articulations [5] and defined by rules at the moment.

Cities should not be defined as in the picture described in the very beginning of this article but more as a caring map of vibrant relations [3]. To create a playfulness by using a site-specific game in a collaborative design process with messy steps is to embrace the imperfect which let us continuously ask questions along the way. Questions important for the exploration and formulation of implicit rules. The imperfections can show what is hidden under the surface and open up for what can be a possibility.

By imperfection, citizens can meet and induce a possible city as a novel everyday collective practice. What is it to participate *with* a place? With the everyday environment? What is it to design a city life?

The work we did initiate is one possible line to start questioning what polyvocality might mean and how we could mutually, in joint playful performances of humans and non-humans, shape and re-shape the accustomed city. We can also relate our process to a figuration of Thing [6] for thinking and practice design processes. According to Pelle Ehn, design is not only about designing objects and systems. Design could be more considered as collaborative assemblages, i.e. the Thing. Participants like the city, citizens, artifacts, infrastructure, culture, values, and economic conditions were the members of our Thing, the explorations and interventions. In our case, the Thing took form because of the members' commitment, which was the prerequisite for initiating the design practice of both citizenship and the future of the city.

We tried on a small intimate scale to challenge beliefs and values of what a livable everyday place might mean. By becoming humble witnesses to an ongoing change there can be potentiality to redraw the pattern of the caring understanding and knowledge that we, the inhabitants, on daily basis, create in urban relationships, both visible and invisible.

In the end, we all dream of cities and places that we can become playful with.

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