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Gamifying place, reimagining publicness: The heterotopic inscriptions of Pokémon Go

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Gamifying place, reimagining publicness: the heterotopic inscriptions of Pokémon Go

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Abstract
This article explores the transformative effects of augmented reality mobile games on society and space. By layering playfulness onto public space through a digital interface, augmented reality mobile games create a pervasive sense of play that can be accessed by players potentially anywhere, and at any time. Games like these can therefore be understood as heterotopic inscriptions on otherwise mundane environments. Since being released in 2016, Pokémon Go has become one of the most popular augmented reality games in the world. It gamifies place by embedding digital objects within public spaces; in doing so, it can bring about a reimagination of publicness by incentivising players to engage with places – and with each other – in ways that are structured by the competitive logics of play. Through an empirical examination of the playing of Pokémon Go in Singapore, I consider how the game gives rise to new modalities of emplaced meaning, new ways of navigating the city and increasingly public performances of private play. To conclude, I argue that research should continue to explore the gamifying effects of digital technologies on everyday life.

Keywords
augmented reality mobile games, gamification, heterotopia, Pokémon Go, public space

Introduction

Understanding the ways in which the digital and real worlds converge, enmesh and increasingly define one another foregrounds the 'digital turn' in human geography, and has, among other things, led to new understandings of space, place and publicness (Ash

et al., 2018). Digital technologies have brought about transformations in the 'appearance, use and attractiveness' (Potts and Yee, 2019: 1) of public space, and have come to influence how people engage with space, and with each other, in public. Augmented reality mobile games like Pokémon Go have contributed to these transformations. By 'overlaying an imaginary playful layer on top of the city space', such games are able to 'transform the familiar urban space into an unknown and unexplored environment' (de Souza e Silva, 2009: 411–412). In other words, by layering playfulness onto public space through digital interfaces, augmented reality mobile games create a pervasive sense of play that has the potential to be accessed by players anytime, and anywhere. For the players of such games it can be difficult to distinguish 'play' from everyday life, meaning digitally mediated forms of playfulness become embedded within everyday spaces and interactions. These forms can be intensely private, even though they are often enacted in public, and sometimes implicate other people. This reveals the increasingly integrated nature of the private and the public, of the playful and the serious, and of fantasy and reality. Yet, as much as these games 'define a new logic of game space' that challenges 'our perception of urban spaces, the daily mobility through the city, and the relationship between serious life and playful spaces' (de Souza e Silva, 2009: 405), their effects on place and publicness remain undertheorised.

In response, I draw on Michel Foucault's (1984) notion of heterotopia to explore the ways in which augmented reality games can enable the gamification of place, and the reimagination of publicness. While the literal definition of heterotopia is 'other places', it becomes a more valuable concept when interpreted as an outcome of change that results in some form of differentiation. In this vein, Dehaene and De Cauter (2008) define heterotopias as the outcomes that arise when outside forces 'interrupt the apparent continuity and normality of ordinary everyday space' (p. 3–4). Given that digital technologies in general, and augmented reality games in particular, provide a 'lens through which people are experiencing public spaces in novel ways' (Potts and Yee, 2019: 1), they can be seen to provide a departure from pre-existing understandings of everyday spaces. Moreover, by embedding notions of play and playfulness into these everyday spaces, augmented reality games can be seen to realise the 'vital potentialities of the ordinary' (Dehaene and De Cauter, 2008: 4), thus helping to illuminate and expand the idea that 'urban spaces have always had the *potential* to be playful, even before the ability of navigating them via mobile technologies' (de Souza e Silva and Hjorth, 2009: 603, emphasis added). Augmented reality games create heterotopic inscriptions on public spaces by gamifying place; in other words, they realise the playful potential of space. In turn, this can lead to a reimagination of the ways in which players conduct themselves, and engage with each other, in public. Furthermore, by investing public spaces with private meanings, they provide insight into how the 'public/private distinction is configured in diverse, transient, often fuzzy ways' (Qian, 2018: 7; see also Willems, 2019). This article brings these ideas to life through an empirical exploration of Pokémon Go.

Since its release in 2016, Pokémon Go has become one of the most popular augmented reality games in the world. The game embeds Pokémon within public spaces, and also attaches other game features – such as gyms and Pokéstops – to specific places. These game features are explained in more detail below. Through such embeddedness and attachments, the game incentivises players to navigate their environments, and to

engage with other players, in new ways that are increasingly defined by the logics of play. Pokémon Go can therefore be seen as 'illustrative of the playful way in which we collectively and creatively "perform" place and our social selves' (Hjorth and Richardson, 2017: 6), which, in turn, has brought about the 'transformation of both publics and public spaces' (Apperley and Moore, 2019: 7). In other words, Pokémon Go gamifies place, and can lead to a reimagination of publicness. Not only that, but as a game that 'establishes a dynamic multi-layered mode of connected and disconnected co-presence in public space' it creates situations in which 'users may be only co-present through their physical proximity' (Apperley and Moore, 2019: 7). These dynamics are relatively more pronounced in Singapore, where the data for this article were collected. This is for two reasons. One, Singapore has a tropical climate, meaning the discomfort of heat and humidity can disincentivise people from engaging with (outdoor) public spaces. Two, the authoritarian nature of Singapore's government means that public spaces are prescribed in ways that prevent collective action. Combined, these factors can limit the extent to which people engage with public space and each other therein; yet, the heterotopic inscriptions of Pokémon Go can be seen to provide a catalyst for new forms of (re)engagement.

From here, this article comprises three sections. The first section provides a theoretical overview of how digital technologies have transformed the existing understanding of play and publicness. First, I explore how play intersects with public space; second, I consider the role of digital technologies therein, and how they have led to the gamification of place. The second section introduces Pokémon Go in more detail, and highlights some of the ways in which the game can be considered heterotopic. The third section is empirical in nature, and draws on qualitative data to explore the ways in which Pokémon Go can cause players to imbue places with new meanings. This can lead to new ways of navigating the gamified city, which in turn can bring about new ways of engaging with – and behaving in – public space. I conclude by calling for research to continue developing the ideas of digitally mediated gamification, and the (re)production of power therein, which are raised in this article.

The digital transformation of play and publicness

By now it is widely acknowledged that digital technologies have transformed the ways in which we imagine, experience and navigate physical space, and engage with people. However, the role of play in influencing these transformations remains undertheorised (see Gong et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2018). This is a considerable oversight, given that digital technologies have become a 'tool mobilized in specific ways by specific actors to influence the reproduction of space and spatial practices' (Feldman, 2018: 289). Through such 'mobilisations' and 'influencing', digital technologies have come to be studied as a medium of power that are deployed in the pursuit of a particular agenda (Woods, 2018, 2019). Notwithstanding the importance and pervasiveness of such practices, I contend that the transformations associated with digital technologies can also have more benign consequences that are, perhaps, best understood through their playful dimensions. Accordingly, digitally mediated forms of play can provide rich insight into the new ways in which public space is engaged with, and how publicness is being redefined, in the contemporary world. In view of the fact that 'pre-existing cultural tensions, the politics

of contested public space, prejudice, and prevailing norms of 'appropriate' conduct in public are folded into the digital information that enlivens the material features of everyday locations' (Feldman, 2018: 295), it is necessary to bring the digital transformations of play and publicness into conversation with each other.

Reimagining publicness through the geographies of play

Recent years have witnessed an expansion of interest in the geographies of play. Generally speaking, this expansion has progressed along two overlapping axes: one, it has moved beyond a focus on children and youths; and two, it has problematised the assumption that play is something distinct from everyday, or 'serious' life (see Thomson and Philo, 2004; Woodyer, 2012 after Huizinga, 1955). Both of these expansions reflect the idea that play can, in various ways and to various degrees, define human nature, meaning 'play is not simply an instance of culture but in fact *precedes* culture' (De Cauter and Dehaene, 2008: 95, emphasis added). My aim here is to continue this theoretical expansion; first, through an interrogation of the relationship between play in/and (public) space, and second, by enfolding the transformative role of digitally mediated forms of play therein. The first expansion is covered here, the second is in the subsection that follows.

Play occurs in space, meaning space often establishes the conditions for play. Salen and Zimmerman (2003) conceptualise this relationship as the 'magic circle', or the primary play space that could, for example, include the game board, the football pitch or the computer screen. Over time, research has expanded the notion of the magic circle, interrogating instead how everyday, non-designated and often public spaces can be used in playful ways. Notably, Stevens (2007; see also Harker, 2005) has shown that because play is dialectically situated within everyday movements and actions; it can help to reveal the inherent potential of public space. In this sense, playful public spaces can be reimagined as functional spaces that fulfil a communal good. For example, by showing how public spaces of the city can be reclaimed through skateboarding, Pyyry and Tani (2017) observe how the 'reworking of urban space happens in a mode of playful experimentation and emerges from human-material encounters in the city' (p. 1). This role of human–material encounters in 'reworking' public space is important, and is extended below through a consideration of human–digital encounters. Indeed, it is encounters with the non-human that can lead to a reimagination of space, and the role of publicness therein, with playfulness providing the motivation and framework for such reimaginations to unfold. Indeed, as Qian (2018: 3; see also Willems, 2019) recently observed, 'publicness is not an inherent quality of space, but an oeuvre borne out of labours and agencies', meaning play can be reinterpreted as an 'agency' that can influence the ways in which public spaces are materialised, engaged with and politicised through human–digital encounters. It is in this vein that, through its digital mediations, play can foreground the reimagination of publicness.

These processes are, in many respects, informed by Foucault's (1984) notion of heterotopia, meaning heterotopia can contribute an avenue of theoretical expansion to the geographies of play. As mentioned above, difference is a defining trope that separates heterotopias from everyday spaces. This is, however, just one-half of the oppositional equation, as heterotopias also provide a point of contrast to utopias: whereas the latter are

desirable but unreal, the former are 'actually localisable' (Foucault, 1998: 178; see also McNamee, 2000). Being conceptually positioned in opposition to the everyday and the unreal, heterotopias can be understood as a powerful mobilising force for socio-spatial transformation. Not only that, they can also be realised through play, as the idea of play does, to a certain extent, align with these conceptual distinctions. As De Cauter and Dehaene (2008) argue, 'sports and games provide for a parallel world, a protected world in which military exercise becomes a goal in itself, disconnected from its purpose in "real life" and hence pertaining to the realm of the aesthetic' (p. 94). Here, we can see how the disconnection from 'purpose in 'real life'' can bring about new forms of playful, but also 'parallel', behaviours that are enacted through the public domain. Indeed, given that heterotopias are 'collective or shared spaces' (Dehaene and De Cauter, 2008: 6), they have a public dimension that overlaps with private ambition. Play, then, can reveal the ways in which 'private interests take over public space' (Low, 2006: 45); a process that has gained considerable traction in recent years through the growing popularity of digitally mediated forms of play. In turn, these forms have brought about the gamification of place.

Gamifying place through digitally mediated play

Practices of play have been transformed by advances in technology. The significance of these transformations is not to be underestimated. Shaw and Warf (2009), for example, describe the magic circle of video games as 'constellations of affect' that have resulted in situations where it is unclear 'whether we are seeing bodies controlling machines or machines controlling bodies' (p. 1333, 1340). More recently, digitally mediated forms of play have become more mobile, which in turn has resulted in new forms of engagement with physical spaces. In particular, the embedding of global positioning systems within mobile phones, coupled with pervasive online connectivity, has 'turn[ed] them into interfaces to navigate physical spaces' (de Souza e Silva and Hjorth, 2009: 603). Mobile digital interfaces do, however, go beyond navigation; they can increasingly be seen to inform how we perceive, experience and engage with physical spaces. De Souza e Silva and Hjorth (2009; after Lefebvre, 1991) note that by 'adding a digital information layer to places', these interfaces 'might add value to physical spaces', thus transforming them into playful spaces (p. 603). Locative media platform, Foursquare, for example, was 'designed to 'turn life into a game'' (Frith, 2013: 248; see also Hjorth and Richardson, 2014; Saker and Evans, 2016). My contention, however, is that existing scholarship has tended to treat playfulness in unilateral terms, as something that is imposed on place through digital interfaces. For example, de Souza e Silva (2009) describes how augmented reality mobile games involve an 'imaginary playful layer that is overlaid on and merges with the urban space', which turns the city into 'the game board' (p. 405). The language of 'layers' highlights this imposition, and suggests that the digital layer is playful while the real world is not. This contrasts with recent developments in the geographies of play, outlined above.

In seeking to reconcile these divergent trends, I instead offer a more nuanced understanding of the interrelationship between digitally mediated play, and the physical spaces and places through which it occurs. Importantly, I do not discount the layering of

playfulness onto physical spaces through digital interfaces; rather, I suggest that digital interfaces can also trigger the inherently playful qualities of physical spaces to become manifest. In doing so, I seek to bring discourses of digitally mediated forms of play into alignment with Pyyry and Tani's (2017) assertion that

> The city has agency. When agency is understood as a distributed capacity to affect, it can be described as a mix of overlapping and conflicting forces. There are always many things at play in any event. Causality in the world is therefore emergent: it is multidirectional rather than linear. (p. 4)

With this in mind, digital interfaces are not just a layer of playfulness that is imposed upon, and eventually merge with, physical spaces in a 'linear' fashion. Rather, playfulness is a characteristic that is embedded within digital interfaces, within physical spaces, and within people, meaning each is imbued with the potential to bring the other to life through 'emergent' and 'multidirectional' forms of 'causality'. I conceptualise these processes as the gamification of place, where 'gamification' means incorporating elements of gamefulness (or playfulness, although digitally mediated forms of play are often more formulaic and, therefore, game-like) – including game-related interactions – into an experience in order to fulfil a certain intention. The gamification of place, then, means to anchor these interactions and game-*full* experiences to specific locations in the real world, thus enabling players to experience place in a different way. Gamified places reveal how, 'through the enactments of digital, nondigital, and hybrid forms of play' we can begin to uncover how play can be used to 'generate spaces to consider, reflect and rethink our mundane and intimate practices and how they are *emplaced*, or integral to how we dynamically perceive and "make" place' (Hjorth and Richardson, 2017: 6, original emphasis). Gamified places encourage new encounters with place; through these encounters, they can lead to a reimagination of publicness. With these ideas in mind, I now consider how they are realised through the playing of Pokémon Go.

The heterotopic inscriptions of Pokémon Go

The worldwide popularity of Pokémon Go is perhaps best explained by the fact that the game brings the Pokémon franchise to life through its augmented reality application. The franchise is something that many people now in their twenties and thirties have grown up with, meaning it is both familiar and personal to them. Through the digital interface of the game, Pokémon – and a host of other game features, such as gyms and Pokéstops – are embedded within the physical landscape. The logics of the game compel players to 'catch them all', and to do so players must 'move through physical space as they tag, collect, trade, and battle for digital artefacts and player achievements' (Hjorth and Richardson, 2017: 4; see also Ganzert et al., 2017). As much as it encourages mobility through physical space, so too does it encourage players to engage with it, as the 'digital artefacts' of the game are anchored in place. In turn, this brings about a 'transformation of the local environment into a game resource, where place is literally made relevant by the extent to which it is populated by virtual currency, game objects, and rewards', and, as a result, 'banal and familiar surroundings are transformed to become significant game

loci' (Hjorth and Richardson, 2017: 10, 4). Yet, while the game clearly overlays digital meaning onto place, so too does it help players with new forms of value that are attributed to place; it gamifies place, rendering it a heterotopic inscription upon what can be an otherwise mundane physical landscape. In turn, these inscriptions can transform the ways in which places are engaged with, and publicness is performed.

Pokémon Go is heterotopic insofar as it creates a game space that is abstracted from, but also dependent on, physical places. This characteristic is important, as it differentiates augmented reality mobile games, like Pokémon Go, from video games, for example. Put differently, by encouraging players to engage with physical places through the attribution of digital objects to them, the game can be seen to bring the inherent playfulness of place to life. As I demonstrate below, these attributions give places new meanings, and create new terms of engagement. Not only that, but because 'the game's topologies are . . . ephemeral and easily destabilized' (Feldman, 2018: 290) the heterotopic inscriptions of Pokémon Go can reveal the ways in which the interrelationships between place and publicness can be reimagined through (digitally mediated) play. Apperley and Moore (2019) articulate this in a slightly different way, explaining how 'players experiencing the location through a more-or-less distracted attention to the augmented game have their relationship with space subtly recalibrated through the way the game organizes space' (p. 9). The 'distracted attention' of which they speak captures the ideas of locating private behaviours (of gameplay) within public spaces, serving to 'recalibrate' each. In turn, this establishes a 'dynamic, multi-layered mode of connected and disconnected co-presence in public space' (Apperley and Moore, 2019: 7). In other words, through their encounters with gamified places, players define new ways of navigating in and through public space. Gamified places can redefine the landscape by attracting players, and facilitating new types of interaction. Often, this goes beyond the private experience of play, as players 'gathering together in parks and other public places are affecting the spatial perception of both other players and non-players' (Gong et al., 2017: 228). It is in this sense, then, that the playing of Pokémon Go can foreground new forms of spatial meanings, behaviours and outcomes.

The gamification of place and the reimagination of publicness in Singapore

The three empirical subsections that follow explore the ways in which the heterotopic inscriptions of Pokémon Go have led to the gamification of place and the reimagination of publicness in Singapore. They draw on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with Singapore-based players of Pokémon Go. Specifically, 22 in-depth interviews were conducted in total, of which 18 were with players in their twenties; the remaining four were with players in their thirties–sixties. Reflecting this youthful skew, 13 interviewees were full-time university students, while 9 were working professionals. In itself, the skew is observed among communities of Pokémon Go players around the world, and reflects the fact that this cohort grew up with the Pokémon franchise, and is therefore most invested in it. All interviewees were Singaporean, except one who was from the Philippines. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. They

explored players' relationship with the Pokémon franchise over time; their pre-existing perceptions of places, their mobilities and their terms of engagement with the public; and how the playing of Pokémon Go may – or may not – have changed these perceptions, mobilities and terms of engagement. All interviews were fully transcribed within 1 month of completion, and analysed and coded for themes. In particular, I sought to understand the various ways in which the digital interface of Pokémon Go served to influence players' daily lives, and encouraged them to think, behave or act in a particular way. Through the analysis, I realised that Pokémon Go encourages players to attribute new meanings to familiar places, and to navigate the city – and engage with other players – in ways that were determined by the competitive logics of play. The subsections that follow explore these empirical ideas in more detail, and theorise how the playing of Pokémon Go can lead to the gamification of place, and the reimagination of publicness.

New modalities of emplaced meaning

For many young people, playing Pokémon Go is an opportunity to bring the animated characters of their childhood to life. The game embeds Pokémon within physical spaces, meaning players can engage with them as they navigate their everyday lives. Victor, an undergraduate in his mid-twenties, explained how, for him, Pokémon are 'not just digital characters, but something that has been with me in my childhood . . . something that you've played with for your entire life, it's like your companion . . . like a friend'. The attachment that he describes here was echoed by nearly all interviewees. For example, Jing Yi, another undergraduate in her early twenties, explained how playing Pokémon Go is 'like your childhood coming into real life'. The augmented reality world in which Pokémon Go is played enfolds various spatialities (digital and real), temporalities (childhood and present-day), (im)mobilities (the emplaced nature of Pokémon and the movement of the player to catch them) and layers (place and the game) into a new, and implicitly more playful, experience of public space. Enfolding these differences creates what Hjorth and Richardson (2017) describe as a 'different layering of nostalgia and affect through established digital design and game aesthetics' (p. 8–9). Mei Ling, a working professional in her mid-twenties, provided an insightful description of how this enfolding brought about a reimagination of ostensibly familiar places:

> I'm not sure how to explain it . . . it feels like there are two worlds . . . two of my worlds merging . . . I mean, I grew up with Pokémon . . . When I finally got Pokémon Go, the first time seeing my own home, my own neighbourhood, the ones [i.e. places] that I knew and then all the Pokémon popping out, that was . . . it was quite magical for me.

Here we can see how the 'merging' of worlds creates a 'magical' experience of place; it turns the everyday spaces of her home and her neighbourhood into spaces of playful, and meaningful, adventure. Mei Ling went on to explain how this merging caused her understanding of home and familiarity to expand, and to take on new meaning as 'it adds another layer of home . . . now I not only know where . . . the mama shop[1] is, where the estate is, where the blocks are, but I also know where are the Pokéstops'. Pokémon Go encourages her to give new meaning to familiar places by linking them to different

features of the game (such as Pokéstops). These processes of linking foreground the expansion of meaning, which, in turn, can be seen to gamify place. Importantly, Mei Ling talks about her experiences of playing Pokémon Go in areas that are familiar, everyday and mundane to her – her home, estate, block and neighbourhood. Yet, because these places are gamified, 'it feels like . . . exploring a new place that you kind of know . . . [but you're] seeing how other people see it . . . you can see, 'What's the attraction here? What's the attraction there?''. Gamified places are at once familiar and fun; they are heterotopic inscription on the landscape of the familiar and mundane. What Mei Ling describes above is the transformation of everyday places into 'a new place that you kind of know' through gamification. The reverse of this is when gamification serves to make unfamiliar places more attractive to players, thus giving them a reason to visit them. Steph, an undergraduate in her early twenties, explained how these notions of familiarity and unfamiliarity became enfolded through the game:

> I've seen more parts of Singapore than if I never played Pokémon Go . . . I wouldn't have explored the entire of Fort Canning Park[2] if I didn't play Pokémon Go. I walked the entire thing, so, I mean, you see places which you've already been to many times in more detail, because you need to go and hunt for [Poké]stops.

In this sense, the gamification of place causes players to engage more closely with place. Places that may seem familiar become new as the game incentivises players to explore them in more detail, which, in turn, causes them to become unfamiliar through their newness. Victor explained how, for him, this involved a process of realisation, as 'you have to go to different places, then you open your eyes to different places'. Not only does the game change the terms of movement, it changes the terms of engagement as well; it 'connect[s] everything that is valuable, or that which could become valuable, according to the values programmed in the network' (Castells, 2008: 81), meaning it creates a new understanding of place-based value through play. In turn, these values provide new motivations for navigating the gamified city.

Navigating the gamified city

The gamification of place can transform the ways in which cities are navigated. Players go to places that they would not otherwise go to, and engage with places that they already know in new ways. As much as gamification transforms perceptions of place, it also transforms patterns of mobility, and interactions with other people (de Souza e Silva, 2009). As Gong et al. (2017) put it, 'by transforming the cityscape into a game board, the ordinary space of a city can be transformed into a new, playful, and surprising environment' (p. 228). This idea of transformation was echoed by Steph, when she commented that 'Singapore has looked more interesting because I have seen more of it'. The idea of 'see[ing] more' articulated here can be interpreted as either seeing new places, or seeing old places in a new light. Either way, the gamification of place caused the city to expand in the eyes of its players, becoming both bigger, and more interesting. Victor shared how, through playing the game, he became aware that 'there are certain locales that you've never even visited, that are still within, like, a stone's throw from your house'. Ben, an

undergraduate student in his mid-twenties, reiterated this sentiment in a more specific way, sharing how,

> I am definitely more aware of my surroundings now. Like, I lived in Hougang[3] [for] more than 10 years, and until Pokémon Go came out, I never even bothered to explore beyond the route to go out to my bus stop. Then I started playing the game, 'wow, there's so many Pokéstops around me, just look around me', 'oh wait, there is this park here, this kindergarten here', 'oh, there's a vending machine here, I never knew all these places existed' . . . so when the game came out, I actually bother to look around places more.

Gamification imbues players with a sense of adventure, while simultaneously highlighting the interesting or unique features of otherwise mundane places. In doing so, it changes players' perceptions of place. Justin, a Filipino postgraduate student in his mid-twenties, explained how 'Niantic[4] put Pokéstops and gyms, and they assigned them to works of art in private or public spaces, so besides paintings, you have installation, sculptures, and I honestly never saw them before!'. What Justin describes here is the process of new meanings being attributed to places through the augmented layer of the game, which in turn causes these places to become more noticeable. He went on to share how these attributions caused his everyday navigations around Manila to become more playful encounters with the city:

> It's more fun to be commuting in Manila, even boring places like Manila are more interesting now . . . I guess there's a duality to it. Definitely your eyes are glued to the phone . . . then you look around, and there are times when you notice that a place is beautiful, right? You will stop playing . . . and you're like, 'oh my God, this place is beautiful! Where am I?'

In this sense, gamification provides a playful filter through which places are engaged with; a filter that encourages mobility and appreciation. Ivan, an undergraduate student in his mid-twenties, explained how the game 'give[s] you a new . . . appreciation for what's there around you', while Abdul, a working professional in his early thirties, shared that 'it kind of felt like I was rediscovering Singapore'. In trying to understand why the game had these sorts of effects on its players, the enmeshed nature of layers of digital experience and the characteristics of place came to the fore. Enmeshing occurs through gamification, as Ben explained: 'the game makes it such that you go there, you're rewarded, you feel happy for being there, then you associate the happy feelings with being there'. These sentiments reveal how, whereas public spaces were once used as 'circulation spaces, where one keeps constantly moving around, with the goals to arrive at specific locations, but often, the space in between lacked meaning' (de Souza e Silva and Hjorth, 2009: 609), gamification brings about a more relational approach to public space. It causes it to be treated less as a passive canvas for movement from one point to another, but instead as a meaningful terrain that can bring unexpected moments of interest, excitement and value through engaging with it. It causes the heterotopic space of the game to become less bounded, and more integrated into everyday life; it is not, in other words, a 'closed or complete system' or one with 'hidden structures that designate absolute difference'

(Johnson, 2013: 794). Justin explained how 'it incentivises people to explore', which reveals how the game can provide a new logic for navigating public space.

This exploratory logic provides many players with the motivation to change the ways in which they navigate the city. Ben, for example, admitted that 'without this game, I wouldn't even bother going to a lot of places', while Steph offered a deeper insight into how the game has changed her approach to navigation: 'I feel like I have become more open to walking around without an aim . . . it is basically just walking around aimlessly'. She went on to explain how this 'aimless' approach to navigating the gamified city has altered the ways in which she engages with her environment: 'usually walking is just getting from point A to point B, but now I walk around to look at the street and stuff'. Here, we can see how gamification makes places more interesting; it causes players to 'drop their usual motives for movement and action . . . and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there' (Knabb, 1981: 50). Indeed, while it has been suggested that augmented reality games like Pokémon Go 'influence our perception of space by increasingly turning the 'serious' ordinary space into playful space', which in turn encourages players to 'navigate their cities in unusual and enjoyable ways' (Gong et al., 2017: 228), nuance is needed. The playful is not the binary opposite of the 'serious', but is implicated in a much broader web of everyday associations with place. As such, playfulness does not necessary translate into patterns of navigation that may sometimes be 'unusual' or 'enjoyable', but are always underpinned by the competitive logics of the game. Boon Leng, an undergraduate in his mid-twenties, described the effects of such competitiveness on his experience of navigating a local park with his mother:

> Both of us started to go out to the park and play . . . That was when we realised we started to know more about Yishun[5] park in a way. At first it was more for the purpose of catching Pokémon, then we started finding better routes to take, like which routes are easier to walk, which routes are a bit tiring . . . Without the game, I don't think we will be able to walk around Yishun park using the phone. Before the game, we have to walk with our eyes watching the area, stuff like that. But afterward, the mental map of the Yishun park sort of got engrained in our minds, that we can walk without actually physically using our eyes to observe the area.

The irony here, of course, is that navigating gamified places encourages players to engage with their surroundings in a different way, but in doing so, it transforms the very terms of navigation. Rather than the park becoming familiar to the extent that they can navigate their way around using 'our eyes to observe the area', it is now familiar to the extent that they can walk around the park 'using the phone'. In other words, the game provides the landmarks, in the form of digital augmentations of place. Jing Yi explained this surprising reversal of logic as being an outcome of the fact that 'they [players] are directed by their phones, they are not directed by the physical [environment] . . . It doesn't matter to them whether it's a park or an MRT [train] station, they just want the Pokémon'. It is in this sense that gamifying place encourages movement and engagement, but it can also reveal how 'power works *through* the re-invention and re-production, rather than enclosure, of public space' (Qian, 2018: 12, original emphasis; see also Atkinson, 2003; Coleman and Dyer-Witheford, 2007). These ideas are now considered

in more detail by exploring the ways in which Pokémon Go encourages the public performance of private play.

Public performances of private play

Playing Pokémon Go encourages players to engage in resolutely privatised forms of play within ostensibly public settings. Gamified places trigger a competitive desire to move around public spaces in new, and potentially banal ways, but it does so in response to gamification, rather than place. This results in public performances of private play, which in turn can provide new insight into the ways in which pervasive forms of play can lead to a reimagination of publicness. Ben described his first encounter with Pokémon Go, which was by looking at people playing outside his bedroom window:

> One day, I woke up, I looked out of my flat, the window, and I was thinking 'why are people walking around?' Like, you know, it wasn't just normal walking around, you know . . . it's like zombies, it was really freaky until you join them and become one of them. So, I went down, it was really an abnormal number of people walking around, so I went down to go and take a look, and everybody was staring at their phone . . . I asked someone, 'excuse me, what are you doing?' and he said, 'playing Pokémon Go'.

Ben's assertion that Pokémon Go players look 'like zombies' is condescending until he admits that, when you start playing the game, 'you . . . become one of them'. The value of this perspective is that it provides an insight into how both non-players and players understand and perform different norms of publicness. Whereas the movements of non-players may be limited, they tend to be self-guided; the movements of players, on the other hand, are expansive, but are guided by the game, and are often resolutely private. Kim et al. (2018) describe this dynamic in terms of players being 'present in the physical world, [but] their senses are fully immersed in the hybrid space of the game context' (p. 3). For less active players like Alex, a postgraduate student in his mid-twenties, this hybrid immersion was 'kind of crazy for me to see', while for Alvin, a working professional in his late-twenties, the scaling-up of this immersion resulted in him observing how the game caused crowds of players to adopt a new logic of movement: 'there was a very rare Pokémon, and you see the crowd go this way, and then they move that way, hundreds of people, it was crazy'. It is this idea of scaling-up such behaviours – of going beyond one individual player, to a crowd of players behaving in the same, privatised way – that can result in the transformation of public behaviours and norms.

In some instances, the game would encourage players to overcome the temporal rhythms of public life, and treat the night as if it were the day. For example, Alvin recalled a time when,

> suddenly a lot of people came [to catch a Pokémon], we went down there . . . so many cars were there . . . motorcycles, whatever vehicles they could come in, and they were all blocking the entrance [to the estate where they lived], and it was so late, it was around 2.30 a.m.

In this case, the competitive logics of behaviour that are defined by the game encourage players to overcome the temporal underpinnings of public space, and engage in

disruptive behaviours at night. In other instances, the game would encourage players to overcome the spatial limitations of public life, and to treat all places in a homogeneous – or a gamified – way. This includes those that may otherwise be dangerous, or out-of-bounds. Justin explained how 'I have definitely gone to some places that are out-of-bounds, I once walked on expressways because it's a gym, and I'm pretty sure that illegal. But there was an opportunity I couldn't pass!' As these examples suggest, the heterotopic inscriptions of Pokémon Go encourage highly privatised forms of public engagement. Thus, while Apperley and Moore (2019, original emphasis) suggest that

> unlike many other everyday operations of smartphones that take place in public which are ostensibly private, playing *Pokémon Go* requires individual players to utilize gesture, comportment, and motion in a way that may breach the privacy 'bubble' often associated with mobile devices (p. 13)

I suggest that it expands the bubble instead. This expansion reflects a layering of the private onto the public, causing gamified places to become privatised publics that are subject to the whims and fancies of competitive play. As much as gamification makes the topologies of place more heterogeneous, multi-layered and appealing, so too does it result in a homogenisation of public behaviour. This homogenisation is often based on the competitive logics of gameplay: you play to win. Accordingly, players can easily lose sight of spatio-temporal distinctions between the public and private, the digital and the real, creating an augmented world in which place, people and publicness are transformed.

Conclusion

This article has explored the intersecting dynamics of place, play and publicness within the context of digitally mediated everyday experiences. By transforming the experience of space, digital technologies have also transformed the norms of publicness. In various ways, they help to grant people from all walks of life a right to the city. Beyond that, they can also help to instil a new desire for place: one that is based on its gamification. Indeed, as I have demonstrated above, to gamify place is mobilise people in a way that can unlock the city for its inhabitants, and to create new opportunities for public (dis)engagement. It is through the transformation of place that digital technologies can condition new norms of behaviour, movement and encounter in and through the public. In this vein, the gamification of place is a novel concept that can be more consistently integrated into the principles and rationalities of urban planning. As Poplin (2012) notes, 'playfulness and games can potentially address the issue of rational ignorance by attracting more people to participate in and learn about urban planning' (p. 196). Yet, as much as they can attract, so too can play encourage more selfish forms of participation. To the extent that play can be defined by private engagement and competitive outcomes, it can encourage people to disassociate themselves with their environments. Play encourages mobility, but not necessarily engagement; it creates desire, but not necessarily civility.

To develop the ideas raised in this article, I propose two avenues for further research. The first relates to the proliferation of digitally mediated forms of gamification

throughout everyday life. While Pokémon Go – and other augmented reality mobile games – represents a relatively formal understanding of gamification, there are many other ways in which pervasive digital technologies impart more informal types of playfulness into the fabric of everyday life. Indeed, one of the defining features of such technologies is their latent ability to gamify everyday experiences, and to encourage more playful encounters with the world. These can include practices of taking photos, sharing them via social media platforms and recursively calibrating behaviours in response to the number of likes, shares and comments they receive; the use of beacons and other geolocational software to transmit promotions and other marketing-related promotions from brands to consumers; and the development of user interfaces that are designed to engage people in new, and often more socially integrative, ways. Exploring the effects of these encounters of digitally mediated experiences of playfulness on society and space will provide new insight into the mutually constitutive nature of the digital and non-digital. Related to this is the second avenue, which concerns the workings of power in and through these constitutions. Understanding and theorising these workings will provide insight into new forms of governance, regulation and surveillance being digitally configured and reproduced within the contemporary world.

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Notes

1. A ‘mama shop’ is an independently owned convenience store.
2. Fort Canning is a park located close to Singapore’s central business district.
3. Hougang is a residential town located in the north-east of Singapore.
4. Niantic is the software company that developed Pokémon Go.
5. Yishun is a residential town located in the north of Singapore.

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