Guest Editors' Foreword
Games, Play, and the Urban

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In April 2019, the Game Research Lab at Tampere University, Finland, held its annual spring seminar with a theme of urban play. Much of the lab's discussion in planning the seminar concerned the very broad, difficult to define nature of these two words. Both "urban" and "play" come with a lot of baggage—conceptually, historically, and politically—so bringing them together as a seminar theme presented challenges. This seminar was the Game Research Lab's first to engage explicitly with the field of urban studies—a reflection of the proliferation of ludic interfaces in the contemporary urban environment and the resurgence of interest in mobile and location-based gaming in the wake of *Pokémon GO*'s global success. It also reflected the long-standing interest in the intersection of play, public space, and social interaction through scholars like Hannah Arendt, Erving Goffman, Henri Lefebvre, and Georg Simmel and artistic and political movements like the Gutai group, New Games, Fluxus, and the Situationist International.

This special issue of the *American Journal of Play* builds on the seminar but broadens its theme to encompass games, play, and the urban. This theme both reflects the wide range of papers from the seminar, not all of which were specifically about urban play, and explores the complicated, contradictory, and sometimes messy intersection of the three concepts—games, play, and urbanism.

The authors in this special issue come from such fields as urban studies, interface studies, architecture, and the design disciplines. Especially, the emphasis on play, instead of games, allowed a variety of approaches. Although definitions are always problematic, as a rule of thumb, we consider the concept of game to emphasize a rule-bound approach to play. This definition often tends to describe and include artifacts (game boards, video games) specifically intended to use for acting within these rules. When we use play as a term, we include

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more activities, and our emphasis shifts to cultural practices that are versatile, ambiguous, and quixotical (Sicart 2018; Sutton-Smith 2001). This allows us to go beyond the strict divide between digital and nondigital prevalent in the field of game studies. Play can be part of many activities that gives one pleasure, including but not limited to games.

This broadness proves particularly important if we want to shed light on the complex relation between the urban and play. After all, the unevenness and layered character of (public) urban spaces allows a great many different ludic practices, from running, touring, *Pokémon* hunting, parkour, hide-and-seek, and playground activities to more stationary activities such as street chess or tabletop games in cafes. Hence, we need a more processual and contextual approach. In this special issue, we address precisely this complexity and versatility. We work from an understanding of the urban as consisting of intense networks in built environments that can give rise to different manifestations of play and include in them different artifacts, senses, and actors (human and nonhuman).

Lefebvre (1991) famously wrote that spaces are not a pregiven but are always an outcome of social processes. The same goes for play in urban environments, which come into being through players engaging with streets, buildings, parks, bridges, and walls. Ludic spaces are constantly produced through this engagement. As soon as these actions stop, urban play disappears and is unproduced. Yet Lefebvre was also critical of making a clear distinction between the urban and the rural in the late twentieth century. He observed that during urbanization, since the industrial revolution the difference between the rural and the urban, or the city and its hinterland, has gradually faded. Nowadays it has become untenable to speak of them as separate spaces or spheres (Brenner and Schmid 2015). In our times, this erosion of the difference between the urban and the nonurban has become even more palpable (Biagi 2020).

The articles in this issue specifically address such challenges in the context of the experience of play in contemporary urbanized cultures—from the game *Night in the Woods*, where a return to postindustrial suburbia is linked to social inequality and well-being, to the experience of the urban as a curated space through playful artistic interventions to playful mapping as an urban (or even posturban) experience. But the boundaries of the urban also become complicated in the Japanese mobile experience of nondigital collecting as a prehistory of *Pokémon GO* and in some pervasive games played in public places. Such

examples produce hybrid spaces (de Souza e Silva 2006) in which urban landmarks like monuments or bus stops can acquire a certain ambiguity. Together the articles show how play can unfold in our urbanized environments and how play uses the affordances of the city as a playground, the shape of which can shift according to context, time, and engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to worsen as we write, has only further highlighted the vital importance of play, face-to-face social interaction, diversity, and equality for urban public life by constraining the freedom to move and act of so many (de Luca 2020; Du, King, and Chanchani 2020; Ducharme 2020). Playtime and play spaces have become extremely limited as gyms, sportsgrounds, and playgrounds close and an overall restriction gets imposed on what we can do and where we can go, especially in dense urban environments where space is scarce (Hjorth and Lammes 2020). Yet, curiously, people have not stopped playing but have found play elsewhere and in different things, sharing their experiences through social media and game platforms and making their homes and backyards into playgrounds (Alden 2020; Khan 2020; Raza 2020).

Debates around urbanism might at first seem disconnected from research about games and play. But we frame this special issue in conversation with them precisely to complicate and challenge fixed assumptions about the relation between games, play, and the urban. Any discussion of this intersection inherently involves how we define and analyze urban space. Too often scholarship in game studies and related disciplines still uses the city as a static, generic, and unproblematic category. Cities and urban space are construed as abstract canvases over which digital interfaces can be superimposed or with which they can be seamlessly merged. If we perpetuate these assumptions, we risk overlooking the materiality of cities as assemblages of objects, infrastructure, and human and nonhuman organisms. We also risk ignoring the urban as a construct, often biased by European and American perspectives and informed by colonialist assumptions about modernity and progress. And lastly, we risk falling into easy distinctions between urban and nonurban, separating the rural, urban, and natural even as these distinctions visibly collapse around us. Engaging with scholarship about urbanism opens up a range of new perspectives that can expand the terrain of games and play scholarship and challenge us to think more deeply about the terms we use. To this end, we hope the articles in this special issue pave the way for future research that responds to the nuances and ambiguity of both play and the urban.

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