The study of everyday life would be a completely absurd undertaking, unable even to grasp anything of its object, if this study was not explicitly for the purpose of transforming everyday life.

—Guy Debord, “Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life”

**Introducing Contemporary Game Interventions**

In earlier chapters, forms of player subversion were observed in games ranging from Victorian era girls’ play to board-game play to Simus play. Reskinning, unplaying, and rewriting formed the basis of some of this interventionist play. Physical movement, however, and the active use of space are frequently used as interventionist tactics as well, and location-based games are also often designed to unplay the dominant systems of control.

As early as World War I, Dada artists staged a number of interventionist street events, moving performance into public locations and engaging a mass public audience. Public game projects create critical alternatives not only to other games, but to street culture as well. Artists of the 1960s and 1970s, facing an art world still ensconced in tradition, specifically and playfully disrupted public space, often using nontraditional media like posters, video, and performance in reaction to a culture steeped in the themes of modernism and focused on masculinity.

Today, artists borrow freely from mapping and location technologies for creative purposes. Groups like Blast Theory and Glowlab bring a new physicality to play. Many performative projects require mass participation, occur in cities, and are designed more or less as games. There is much contemporary interest in locative media and in particular, locative games that occur in forms of the public sphere such as news broadcasts, movies, parks, street corners, and in any form of advertising including graffiti, clothing, game characters, and music. At the same time, the use of certain technologies, some of which may be overly reliant on a compromised communication model or a Cartesian worldview can, by extension, reinscribe a power structure’s implicit mechanisms of social control. There have been several recent papers focused on the critique of a locative media that lies perilously close to industry and the military. Network theorists like Andreas Broeckmann note projects that might be the “avant-garde of the ‘society of control.’” Others ask whether, given the ubiquity of media and messages, and the collective privatization of the public sphere, play and games are emerging as instruments of protest, or as misguided specters of agency. Some investigators question the role of city space in these activities. Here, and with respect to historical movements, the work of the Situationists is particularly relevant.

Therefore, while examining locative games and spatial interventions, further questions arise, including: How might location-based play environments be presumed to hold problematic assumptions about space and the city? Why are urban locative media games emerging at this particular point in history? In what ways are the works emerging as political artifacts? Who is left out of these games? Finally, if technology is used, what are its effects? Can industrial systems reflect the contested nature of lived reality, space, and place? As will be shown, the current social and technological landscape presents certain peculiar characteristics and
challenges to locative media works.

**Toward an Interventionist Space**

In discussing the uses of space and the tactics ordinary people deploy as a means of resistance, the transdisciplinary work of French historian and philosopher Michel de Certeau offers significant insight. As de Certeau noted, “Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character if they become independent from the rhetoric of power. And so are, more generally, many ‘ways of operating.’” In other words, one’s daily decisions can affect the hegemonic power structures that oppress. De Certeau wrote primarily in a historiographic mode, describing how gestures of resistance among the “disenfranchised” or “the other” give the powerless a way to survive and, at times, even thrive within or against dominant cultures. In particular, he examines the act of consumption, noting that consumers, instead of being passive and malleable, are in fact deploying “tactics” that operate within and against power systems such as capitalism. Going further, de Certeau then describes his resuscitation of historical accounts as interventionist and, like Foucault, works to outline the dynamics of power that lie hidden in the very act of recording such marginalized histories. In turn, the attention de Certeau pays to everyday acts of resistance provides the evidence needed to question the prior, totalizing narratives fashioned by historians.

With his emphasis on the ordinary tactics of workers and artists who are “making do” with the fragments collected from power to support the individual, de Certeau’s ideas can be used to argue for the effectiveness of subtle interventionist tactics on small, everyday levels. For example, his observations on resistance tactics in consumer culture are well matched to behavior in games, especially when one examines the ways players determine their behavior. Player actions in video games frequently include tricking authority figures such as game administrators, using codes to comment upon, alter, or invert game play, and reskinning characters to introduce humor or absurdist readings in a game. In the online environments of the “digital vernacular,” these tactics become de Certeau’s “art of the weak.”

**Mobile Media**

Within this breadth of thinking about play on location, we should now move to an example of a work that has been described by its maker as a communicative game. Steve Symons’s *Aura* (2004) is an interactive sound installation based on GPS, augmenting a particular participant’s experience of a real space with three-dimensional sound environments. To engage with the work, participants wear backpacks containing small computers or PDAs (personal digital assistants) and walk around an outdoor space whose coordinates have been preprogrammed with sound clips—specifically, musical sounds and beats. As participants move to various positions, a particular sound mix is created based on the location and direction of movement, providing “full spatial listening that blurs the real world and artistic intervention. Sound takes on a physical quality in *Aura*, thereby encouraging the creation of ‘sculptures of the mind.’” The sounds stay fixed in terms of location, but the participants move from sound node to sound node. Therefore, space can be “mapped” by participants in terms of the sound they hear in a particular location.

Symons’s project has been staged throughout various public squares in Europe and North America. Noting that interaction between participants becomes “a communicative game based on aesthetic cooperation,” the intention is for participants to somehow communicate and engage with each other to enhance or alter their own sonic experience of the space. In *Aura*, sounds are assigned not only to spatial coordinates but also to interactors. Each participant, and his or her movement in relationship to other
participants, creates sounds shared by several in the vicinity. When in proximity to each other, participants listen to the “collision” of sound as it is processed in real time, becoming, in effect, a sonic encounter. In this way, Symons compares the work to a multiuser computer game, in which such collisions can create a cooperative sonic game.

As much as the project creatively engages with participants as they encounter space, and each other, in the field of listening, the use of various latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates is not assigned particular meaning in the work. That is, the emphasis is on a music-like soundtrack, mixed live, and based on the relative positions of participants rather than on the space of encounter. On the one hand, this means that a public space, such as a square, is an entirely appropriate site to experience the work, for these are indeed sites for engagement and congregation. The work can be shifted to nearly any location and stay relatively the same in terms of audio location, proximity. On the other hand, the emphasis on the mix over the place infers that this work, like games to be discussed later in this chapter, is “location free,” even though it has tended to take place in urban locations of historic and social relevance. Here, the issue of locality, of the embedded meaning of space, is a strategy calling for further development, even though Symons notes that Aura “is site specific work.”

It is useful to reflect on location and its relationship to play. Play, in its Huizingian magic circle, is not an activity that stays purely in the realm of the physical, but is also a mental construct, one in which participants might experience human values like beauty, goodness, justice, fairness. Even when crossing into taboo subjects, or resorting to extreme physical actions such as tackling in field sport, play possesses for Huizinga that “well-defined quality of action which is different from ‘ordinary life.’” Play is possible only when players decide it is possible. This involves permission, an agreement between players, and also between spectators or passersby.

On the first page of Homo Ludens, Huizinga asserts that play—whether it is among dogs, lions, or people—always has meaning. It is more than a mere physiological or psychological phenomenon, but a process of signification. Regardless of the specific definitions of play offered earlier in this chapter, one commonality figures into most scholarly interpretations of both games and play: the significance of signification. As a process of signification, play traverses ordinary life and allows players to take on difficult issues from an insulated position. From games to humor, from role-playing to the arts, from wordplay and poetry to gambling and festival, these activities are only play in context. What is play in one location, in one language, in one public space, may or may not be recognized as play in an entirely different context. With only a few exceptions, one can conclude that the phenomenon of play is local: that is, while the phenomenon of play is universal, the experience of play is intrinsically tied to location and culture. Therefore, when examining locative media projects, one must interrogate the role of the site. Spaces have histories, social relationships, associated languages, customs, flora, and fauna. The importance of the site in terms of one or more cultural aspects is a frequent consideration in site-specific work. It is useful to ground the issue of locality and mobile artworks within earlier practices, such as that of urban engagement through the figure of the flâneur—that European detached pedestrian, the stroller/observer among city streets.

Much recent cultural studies scholarship has focused on flânerie, from its historical origins in early nineteenth-century Paris, to its promotion by Western thinkers such as Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, and a host of critics throughout the twentieth century. Eighteenth-century flâneurs across Europe walked both to see and to be seen, committing to an urban engagement for social and aesthetic reasons (see an eighteenth-century painting depicting such strolling along a Venetian promenade in figure
6.1, and a nineteenth-century depiction of a Belgian promenade in figure 6.2).

In the twentieth century, flânerie slowly but surely transformed into the far more psychically grounded experiments of psychogeography, a discipline or method to study and experience the effects of environment and geography on emotions, thinking processes, and behavior. Built largely on the writings and practices of a loosely associated group of writers, anarchists, and artists who formed the Situationist International (SI) movement, the group worked in and around Paris in the mid-twentieth century.

**Figure 6.1**


**Figure 6.2**

Baron Jan August Hendrik Leys (1815–1869), *Promenade hors les murs* (Walk out by the walls), 1854. Image is courtesy of the Art Renewal Center.
**Situationists**

Perhaps most well known of the activist-artists were the members of the Situationist International movement, a movement that described both a philosophy of space as well as political action. Formed in Italy (1957) by thinkers and artists of diverse practices, the various factions of the group were a force in political art until the 1970s. Whether it was the writing of philosophers Guy Debord, Michel de Certeau, and Henri Lefebvre that stimulated artists and students to carry out protests, actions, and art works in urban city centers, or whether these philosophers were inspired by students and artists already taking the streets by storm, the Situationist group emerged in the 1950s and grew to become influential for over a decade with projects aimed at everyday consciousness. 1968, members of the SI were involved in the May student revolution in France and in the occupation of French universities.

Drawing inspiration from Dada and Surrealism, the Situationists were interested in the banal, everyday acts of urban life that could be subverted in a radical redefinition of everyday experience. The first issue of the journal *Internationale Situationniste* (1959) defined “situationist” as “having to do with the theory or practical activity of constructing situations. One who engages in the construction of situations.” Henri Lefebvre was closely involved in the group’s early activities. Guy Debord (1931–1994), also known as the founder of the Letterist movement, and famed for his later ideas that society has now become a society based entirely on shock and grandiose display, called for the practice of “psychogeography” to consciously document the experience of environment and geography on emotions, thinking processes, and behavior. One of the significant intentions behind psychogeography, as Debord described it, was to be mindful of space in the method's open-ended, deliberately vague mission of encouraging people to explore their environment, usually the streets of the city. Psychogeography provided a means for participants to open themselves up to play and chance in context. It was a method of studying the world, combining compelling, inventive proposals with “the long-term aim of transforming ‘the whole of life into an exciting game’—the play principle before the work principle.”

Through their manifestos, publications, and other writings, the Situationist International members detailed specific strategies to help achieve their critical purpose: to examine the psychological ramifications of the urban landscape: “We now have to undertake an organized collective work aimed at a unitary use of all the means of revolutionizing everyday life.” This revolution would occur through the creation of temporary situations that would offer a brief moment of transcendence from boredom, thought to be a counter-revolutionary state. Using what they referred to as the dérive (derive), or “drift,” Situationists explored the urban terrain by enacting derives or drifts—migrations undertaken with the intention of discovering new perspectives on city life—and practiced an active type of flânerie whereby the formerly aristocratic walker was transformed into a conscious, political actor. According to Debord: “Our central idea is that of the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformations into a superior passional quality. We must develop a methodical intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the comportments which it gives rise to and which radically transform it.”

Obviously, this view was based on particular assumptions about statehood and human rights. As theorists, Situationists were bound by their time, place, class, language, and ethnicity, and may have failed to understand the dérive as an activity with race, class, gender, and ethnic implications. Theirs was also a class-specific view, in that they prioritized the autonomy of the individual who has unrestricted movement. The flâneur was a figure possessing independence due to the celebration of freedom that walking
intrinsically confers. They had the power to stroll at their leisure.

On the other hand, walking for most individuals was still a necessity. The majority of nineteenth-century workers made their way on foot over long roads; see figure 6.3 for a romantic view of this walk from painter Jean-François Millet from 1851. This image might serve as a reminder that much of this ideology speaks from a white, educated, and privileged middle-class specificity. Who after all really has unrestricted movement on roads, or in large cities? Which members of society have the time to follow whatever direction their curiosity takes? Who is really able to wander and drift?

While these limitations do detract from the potential of the SI members’ efforts toward radical social and political change, theirs was still a movement founded in Marxist ideology, serving to critique a commodity-driven culture and a growing bourgeoisie that allowed the consumption of both space and objects by a voracious cultural and economic machine. Inspiration was sought elsewhere with situations and experience elevated through playful, intuitive methods. The participant became the artist, constructing the art experience and using urban walking as a reflective, and critical, tool. On the surface, locative projects like Symons’s *Aura* seem to be a type of sonic *dérive* created to both offer a heightened sense of space and forge social instances of cooperation and community. If it is indeed a site-specific work, the issue of locality, of the embedded meaning of space, is an aspect of the work that appears far less relevant to the intention of the piece than the facilitation of social interaction.

“Locative Media”

Play’s ability to empower, build community, and foster collaboration and cultural change has been cited as a significant motivating factor in many location-based media projects. Intel researchers of ubiquitous computing
recently helped organize the Inter-Society for Electronic Arts festival in 2006, noting that “the contemporary city is weighted down. We can no longer technologically or socially be constrained by something planned and canned, like another confectionary spectacle. We dream of something more, something that can respond to our dreams. Something that will transform with us.”

As a genre of projects and set of tools and technologies involving computing, mobile technologies, physicality, and location, locative media is asked to speak to those dreams through playful scenarios, interactive events, or actual games with rules and win states. Artists in this field are repurposing GIS/GPS, communications, and mapping technologies to create experiences labeled as diversely as “Urban Games,” “Locative Art/Games,” “Massive Games,” “Flashmob Art,” “Ubiquitous Games,” “Hybrid Games,” “Alternate Reality Games,” and “Pervasive Games.” Locative games offer an ambiguous or ambient game experience. Players explore ideas of participation and space, particularly the space of the city, by combining physical and technological play. In most locative games, players also experience the game as belonging to the realm of ordinary life, since the events or play sessions often occur in recognizable places and situations. In many of these projects, themes of mobility and play are touted as liberatory, opportunities for interactions of scale and in environments where play has not been experienced. Here, play emerges as fabricated or designed phenomena in various locations. Commercial games, which already exploit locative media technology or pervasive play styles, include *The Beast, La Fuga, I Love Bees, Mogi, ConQuest, Numbers*, and *Crossroads.* Locative games can have fixed play lengths or offer a scenario for play until a winner, or winning team, emerges.

In major cities such as New York, London, Sydney, Amsterdam, Minneapolis, and Tokyo, urban games and locative media have steadily increased in popularity. New York has hosted *Nodernunner* (2002), a game in which players race to particular location nodes defined by the urban Wi-Fi grid. Another game, called *PuManhattan*, led by Frank Lantz and a team of New York University students, enacted a locative performance of the *PacMan* game in Washington Square Park and its environs. Asphalt Games used street corners as territory for players to capture.

Outside New York, the Design Institute of the University of Minnesota commissioned *Big Urban Game* (2003), also known as the B.U.G. project, as a part of its Twin Cities Design Celebration. In this game, participants moved large-scale game pieces around the city in coordination with online voting on city maps. Megan Heyward's *traces* (2005) explored locations in Sydney, Australia, and the relationships of these locations to people, place, and narrative. Australian based *Snap-Shot-City* (2006) is an ongoing international locative photography game. Blast Theory’s *Can You See Me Now?* (CYSMN) (2001), *Uncle Ray All Around You* (2003), and *I Like Frank* (2004) enacted tag-like play patterns to merge offline and online play.

Internationally, there have been a significant number of location-based media events held in the twenty-first century media arts arena. These share an acclaimed history with other city-based research initiatives. In 2006, the Inter-Society of Electronic Arts held a conference in San Jose, California, centering on the theme of an “Interactive City.” The conference focused on interactive systems and games based in urban terrains for “passers-by participants.” Some of these games add participants until they are quite large play groups, potentially approaching the size of social smart mobs. The *Come Out and Play* event, held annually in New York City, is another instance of the convergence of game design, art, and the use of technology. The appeal of urban play events and festivals demonstrates the increasing interest in urban play through locative media. In fact, media scholars have long linked psychogeography to games: “Psychogeography provided a means for participants to open themselves up to play and chance in context. It
was a method of studying the world, combining compelling, off-the-wall proposals with the long-term aim of transforming, as film theorist Peter Wollen has suggested, ‘the whole of life into an exciting game’—the play principle before the work principle.”

With aims similar to, though perhaps not as far-reaching as, this particular claim, the UK arts group Blast Theory’s work is among the best-known collections of locative gaming projects in the world. Blast Theory makes interactive performances, installations, video, and urban-based mixed reality projects. Based in Manchester, England, the group combines research and development with games, narrative, and new technologies. The group’s project Can You See Me Now? is a locative media game that has been performed in Sheffield, Rotterdam, Oldenburg, Köln, Brighton, and Tokyo. In this game, players around the world can challenge the members of the Blast Theory group online in a virtual city. Blast Theory runners, mapped via satellite, appear on a city map. Carrying handheld computers that track and transmit their location, the runners can also communicate with each other via walkie-talkie interaction, which in turn is broadcast to online users via streaming audio on the web. Allowing for up to twenty players at any given time, the game explores the ubiquity of handheld communications technology in the city. Noting that “some research has suggested that there is a higher usage of mobile phones among the homeless than among the general population,” the group explores the mobile device as a common denominator for urban experience.

In Blast Theory’s work, technology is thought to be normative. According to Kate Richards, the stance is significant, and Blast Theory projects “extend user and audience affect outside the game—rather than delimiting our consciousness to the stereotypical and virtual, the game play pushes us to understand aspects of communities, our social responsibility and ourselves. This is partially achieved by the very visceral game play—in CUSMN? the players and gameplay self-generate affects of pursuers and pursued... It was encouraging to see Blast Theory awarded the Prix Ars Electronica Golden Nica, which has in the past lauded some commercial, apolitical projects.”

Here, with the acquiescence of the participants, the city is transformed to play-scape and city landmarks and streets become mere spaces on an existing game board, without meaning or history in their own right. An appropriation of the city as enacted by Blast Theory and other locative media groups means that space has been abstracted and decontextualized, in part because, as theorists such as Lefebvre have pointed out, the abstraction of space is in certain ways a capitalist strategy of power. According to Lefebvre, it is through everyday habits, and through the body, that people experience urban space. One’s personal preferences, identity, language, and social group or status all have a significant effect on urban experience. As Lefebvre notes in The Production of Space (1991), spaces that are defined in the abstract—that is, those aspects of space that can be installed anywhere, can be configured and reconfigured—become manifestations of a way of thinking produced entirely by capitalism. This is significant since capitalist spaces, to Lefebvre, are systems of property relations, surveillance, and consumption. Certainly most of the urban games discussed here, and the type of space these games typically produce, rely on an abstracted, loose relationship to the location in which they are played, thereby commodifying the urban landscape.

In this sense, urban critic Dennis Judd might be close to the heart of the matter when he argues that major urban centers have become spectacles of tourism and entertainment, and that these spectacles no longer serve residents, but have become tourist destinations in their own right. Cities attract a new form of tourist, a “post-tourist” and “unlike ordinary tourists, post-tourists do not wish to gaze upon officially sanctioned tourist sites,” argues Judd. Framed this way, one can imagine ways in which locative media may remind us of an emerging industry that offers middle-class capitalist entertainment for the twenty-first
century.34

In addition, questions that applied to Situationist efforts must also be asked of locative games: Who has time to engage in “alternate playgrounds?” Who has the freedom to explore those urban spaces in which designers should “create new sandboxes in the metropolis” and promote playful encounters?35 Some artists and designers certainly have answered the call to create such works at numerous events, but, objectively speaking, their efforts may need to better address real-world disparities.

Located Media: Organizing Tactics and Resistance

While international arts organizations and artists are beginning to explore the use of game-like projects in terms of space, this is still largely an emerging field outside wealthy Western nations. Therefore, the ways in which critical play manifests itself outside games and game scenarios in larger critical networks should also be noted here. In other words, there is another point of focus here, and having noted the popular new methods of locative media, it is instructive to turn to the everyday realities of “located media.” This fledgling field, commendable for its plurality and transnational reach, as well as for its ability to build on both intellectual and grassroots contributions, crosses into powerful new territories. In doing so, located media provide a unique way to link institutions, such as galleries and universities, to the social and cultural organizations working with the ordinary issues of embodiment, play, and social interconnectedness. What is recognized in this practice is the need for further experimentation with play embodied in a location and the possible benefits of newer and more inclusive models of collaboration and social change.

For example, one way to access larger societal issues is via [mapscotch] (2007), a locative game that focuses on play and the interpretation of the environment in terms of mapping (figure 6.4).36 Players are asked through small provocative cards to draw out hopscotch patterns on the pavement, addressing themes of displacement, translation, cultural negotiation, language, class, food, and power. For example, participants may be asked to construct a “laborscotch,” or even a “humanrightscootch.” All maps represent priorities and interests, embedding in their design philosophies about the environment and the way in which it is experienced. [mapscotch] translates the experiences of the city into playable maps, with the goal of instigating some kind of social change, or at least conversation about social change. Using the old street game of hopscotch as a tool to explore and critique existing issues in social, preferably public spaces, [mapscotch] builds a counter-image of possible urban futures. Hopscotch works best with simple rules, but simple rules can generate complex, emergent, and intelligent systems.
To understand the importance of this shift to a focus on the spatial ramifications of a site, the history of site-specific art is particularly revealing. Long before contemporary art began to engage locative media, earthworks, architecture, and rituals were intrinsically bound to particular geographies. More recently, artists such as Sol Lewitt, Maya Lin, Daniel Buren, Christo, Nancy Holt, Robert Smithson, and Michael Heizer have created work that formed “an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site, and demanded the physical presence of the viewer for the work’s completion.” The site can be a political cause or social issue, as much as a street corner, but it nonetheless engages with geographical relativity. Artists who worked at particular sites, as well as those artists who take the idea of site to the very material of the location and create earthworks (Smithson and Goldsworthy are two examples), were in part influenced by 1960s politics. In many respects, their motives in moving away from the traditional art systems of the museum, the gallery, and the collector were similar to the impulses of artists involved in Situationist International, Fluxus, Letterist, and performance art. By making art that was anticommodity, that seemed impossible to collect, and was bound to location and social or spatial resonances of place, site-specific artists activated and politicized public arenas in their creative work.

**Play Actions vs. Spaces**

Though historically artists have carefully involved the site in prior work, there are numerous examples of recent media-rich experiences, which refer to and appropriate space while divorcing it from its meaning, history, and significance. In September 2006, Eyebeam in New York City hosted Come Out and Play, a festival dedicated to street games. The festival offered three days of talks, parties, and events, all focused on “new types of games and play.” Some games did not refer to specific spaces, preferring to imply the use of space. In one example, Frank Lantz’s *Identity Game* could have been played in a large house, conference center, or school instead of the urban street. Other games specifically took on street themes in their design.

In the locative media game *Cruel 2 B Kind (C2BK)*, initial teams of two players act as assassins, stalking other teams and “killing” them with acts of kindness. These acts could be anything from a compliment to helping someone cross the street. Because play takes place in urban environments amid the
general public, C2BK players cannot easily identify who is a player/actor and who is a bystander. In order to use a weapon of kindness, a player might, for example, try to compliment the shoes of a target from the other team to “kill” them. Players may, however, compliment a complete stranger in determining who is a player and who is not. Yet this compliment might also “kill” a target from the other team (figure 6.5). As a team-based mobile game, the assassination targets from the other team are successfully “picked off” the game board of the city, and those now “dead” join their killer’s team and continue to play. The teams grow larger and larger in this manner until the climax, which features a showdown of two mobs descending upon each other for a “spectacular, climactic kill.”41 As the game rules note: “Will innocents be caught in the cross-fire? Oh, yes. But when your secret weapon is a random act of kindness, it’s only cruel to be kind to other players.”42
With *Cruel 2 B Kind* (figure 6.6), the use of “random acts of kindness” to dismantle the opposing teams involves, at times, unwitting participation of passersby, and thus seeps over into an appropriation of passersby as game objects or nonplayer characters (NPCs). Interaction is motivated by the personal gains garnered in the game, not by kindness in general.43

At a time when the gap between the richest and the poorest Americans is wider than it has been since the end of World War II, and the gap between the richest and the poorest in Manhattan is surpassed only in the disparities among a group of seventy households near a former leper colony in Hawaii, it seems as though the transformations of the city as a game board have been destined for the enjoyment of the privileged.44 Therefore, the audience for locative games could be expanded and the concerns the games address could be more inclusive.45 Many more examples of locative play could also be analyzed for their appropriation of space.46

Large-scale, mob-like games like *C2BK* offer a new type of human-centric, technologically mediated spectacle. Perhaps it is the contemporary conditions of labor, or the role of mobile technology and media, which contribute to resurgence in Situationist thinking in relation to urban games.47 Historian Adam Barnard theorizes: “People have become divorced from authentic experience, are passive spectators of their own lives and no longer communicate or participate in the society of the spectacle. The dominant form of spectacular commodity production and consumption ensures that people do not engage in self-directed or autonomous activity, but answer the needs of the spectacle.”48 Once again, the question of empowerment must be noted in contemporary locative media examples.

**Questions of Empowerment**

As the work of Augusto Boal, the Situationists, and others have shown, subtle changes in art and game play may have larger ramifications when it comes to social change and activism.49 Historical evidence proves these
techniques can work. The resurgence in Situationist rhetoric in locative play projects is infused with a critique of consumerism, and offers the promise oflocative play that leads to a form of empowerment for participants. Some proponents note, “Locative media strives, at least rhetorically, to reach a mass audience by attempting to engage consumer technologies and redirect their power.”

Yet there are reasons to tread carefully through the space of locative games. It is useful to recall Brian Sutton-Smith’s assertion that “play is never innocent.” While play has long functioned as a tool for cultural transmission, and as a forum for empowerment and cultural change, it has also been ascribed a number of other functions. Ideas about the cultural role of play are at times conflicting. Scholars frequently use terms involving choice, need, practice, and the like. To consider the idea of possibilities of liberation inherent in play, Sutton-Smith notes that play is fun, voluntary, intrinsically motivated; incorporates free choices or free will; offers escape; and is fundamentally exciting. Linking play with taboo and survival issues, Sutton-Smith holds out a wide net for what play can be, including gambling, children’s play, festival, sport, creative activities, and nonsense. Some of these have already been explored at length. But the question remains: Can locative play reflect the contested nature of lived space? If technology is used, can it too reflect the realities bound to space? Is locative media work mistakenly aligned with the principles of psychogeography, which, by its very nature, is distinctly political? Few of the projects in this medium address key concerns like biotechnology, consumption, war, identity, militarization, or terrorism. These are certainly central aspects of the contemporary interactive city. Are locative media events billed as artworks merely a new form of entertainment, a new spectacle? Are city spaces, as theorist Dennis Judd might argue in relation to new urban renewal projects, merely building a tourist city, one that chooses not to engage with local residents? If artists’ goals are to transform cities such as New York into game boards prompting play, what does it mean to “conquer turf” or “take out opponents” without regard for the city as a lived, social space? Is the city an impoverished space? An incredibly wealthy space? As discussed earlier, Judd notes that cities are evolving to provide spectacle in the service of tourists, rather than of residents.

With this in mind, is locative play merely another problematic appropriation of space and custom, a form of entertainment “colonization”? In prior work, I noted the particularly problematic mythos of “frontierism” in some new media works and commercial software development. Many games nurture themes of conquest, individuality, survival, and dominance over the local inhabitants and natural landscape, a recurring trope in 3D gaming and in particular virtual reality (VR) work. The use of location is a delicate matter, and artists making locative work need to recognize the prevalence of site as a social, discursive category. Scholars and artists must beware of a discussion of locative media that is ensconced in an unexamined rhetoric of innovation, liberation, and possibility. Indeed, for the Inter-Society for Electronic Arts (ISEA’s) call for participation in Interactive City 2006, questions included “What spaces could be accessed, created or re-imagined by a massively-scaled intervention?” If play and interaction in the streets are to be empowering, exactly who is to be empowered?

Finally, artists and designers must take into account ideas about who plays in general. In their recent study of pervasive games, Swedish games researchers Montola and Waern note that in two case study games, each of the games raised ethical questions about the role of the “unaware” player in such experiences. In the game Vem Gruter staged at Götland University, Sweden, players provided public clues by leaving notes, rearranging objects around the university, and making graffiti for gaming purposes. These acts were considered, at best, instances of vandalism by the university staff. And, for some, the use of an actor in the game in the role of occult investigator posed a danger to the academic community. In Vem
Grater, the custodial staff members were unfortunately the losers, as they had to undo the clues, graffiti, and what had been moved. In a look at another game, the Stockholm-based Prosopoeia, Montola and Waern note that the community protested the game on the grounds that people should not play pranks on others without their consent; Prosopoeia involved explicit tasks that fundamentally required participation by outsiders, such as a priest.61 In this game, most participants are not players; the NPCs are unaware that there is a game going on, and unwillingly commodified by the players.

In major cities throughout the world, the homeless, prostitutes, and domestic workers possess the streets in a way that speaks to economic and social disempowerment. Their “drift” is not one of exploration or privilege, but a search for a place to sleep or for labor. In the digital age, with economic, intellectual, and cultural divides both effective and prevalent, some artists and theorists may have grave doubts about following in the footsteps of creators of an urban game or locative media event whose premise of “interventionist” work actually manifests as an entertainment spectacle for an advantaged audience. While individual freedom and rights can construct subjectivity from looking and experience, some participants still emerge more empowered than others. Few location-based art projects are nuanced enough to address these kinds of issues.

When artists and designers set about to create an environment for play, the rhetoric surrounding the role of play, and the rhetoric of power, are consistently intertwined. Players have abilities. In games, players are agents of action and change. In the mere act of deciding to play, an understanding of the shift in potential occurs among players, for in games, rules set up novel frameworks for action and agency. Artists have long been critical users and consumers of play systems, and in addition to its role in entertainment culture, play has long been used as a tool for practice, education, and therapy. From war games, in which troops sharpen their skills before battle, to games involving learning about science, to games that help one tease out reactions to phobic scenarios, these “uses” of play are thought to lead to a kind of rehearsal, a practice, a type of empowerment. When taken to the streets, this empowerment can be transformed into a reengagement with the city and thus reclamation of that space. But if this is a goal, it must be integrated into the mechanic and the setting of the game system developed. Taking play onto the pavement, in this light, cannot be seen as a de facto act of empowerment in and of itself.

To return to Lefebvre once again, the appropriation of the city has meaning beyond the urban grid or its buildings. One can divide space into categories of spatial practices, for example, perceived space, routes, and patterns of interaction. Divided in terms of representations, space can be a cultural and social order organized by scientists, planners, and so on. Space can furthermore be tied to maintaining the public good, or to knowledge. Lived space and lived experiences constitute the space of everyday life. Such space is not cohesive or consistent, but is embedded in a history of a group of people, or a history of a site. Lefebvre argues that much of urban space is dominated by the powerful through architecture and urban or town planning, while representational space is a living, emergent practice, linked to encounter, art, or community. Representational spaces “need obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness.”62 Therefore, while many locative media games are designed around particular representations of space, a public square, or a pattern of streets, the games designed for these spaces often omit the emergent qualities of lived representational space.

This distinction is essential to understanding both the strengths and the shortcomings of the social and political power of locative games. If Lefebvre is correct in his belief that the creation of new spaces has the ability to change social relations, locative games must address history, lived experience, and site in order for both participant and designers to learn how to produce something better—another city, another space, a
space for and of social equity and change.

Revisiting Huizinga and play’s signification function, if play is local, then play within those spaces cannot help but refer to, rework, or, conversely, avoid history, social relationships, and customs of a play site. Inventing new and conscientious forms of play requires also inventing a context for that play, one that inclusively examines empowerment, location, and the specificity of culture at that location. This does not mean that the games cannot be fun, but rather, that this type of design practice be reflective and sensitive in its design.

While art must indeed break borders, there are many instances where the borders broken are misguided and actually reinforce existing class, ethnic, and other power structures. Australian writer Danny Butt, for one, calls for a “new media’ in which the technologically augmented experience of location is inseparable from a philosophy of land and belonging.”63 Critiquing what he calls new media’s overly abstract, modernist stance,64 Butt asks artists to reground their work with sensitivity so that novelty is not the only motivating force behind the work.

**Offline Locational Gaming**

Since locative media projects borrow heavily from both the language and philosophy of the Situationist International, one cannot avoid interrogating the role of situation as well as location in urban play-based projects. The flâneur, the new drifter, held for members of SI the possibility of subversive transgression.65 International artists, technologists, urban adventurers, and the public celebrated these principles at the Glowlab’s Conflux event in New York in 2006.66 Many of the events at the Conflux, the annual festival for contemporary psychogeography, sent participants out in playful drifts to explore the ramifications of everyday city life. From the very beginning, ideas about psychogeography were bound to the creation of situations, but the concept of situations expanded over time to take on not only the urban walk but also the entirety of space of the city and beyond. The idea was to propose delirious experiences that would not only seduce citizens to become participants, but that would end up “transforming the whole of life into an exciting game”—the play principle before the work principle, homo ludens, in Huizinga’s words, before man as thinker or worker.67

Debord suggested, for example, that all the equestrian statues in Paris should be taken down and reassembled somewhere in the middle of the Sahara desert, arranged in the formation of “an artificial cavalry charge.” He added: “Not just all the statues in Paris, in fact, but all the statues ‘in all the cities of the world!’ The new ensemble should be ‘dedicated to the memory of the greatest massacres of history, from Tamburlaine to General Ridgway.”68

In was in this spirit that one group of Conflux festival artists attempted to engage locational specificity in their project. Other projects use the drift to create situations that span borders and interrogate international policy, but You Are Not Here (YANH) by Thomas Duc, Kati London, Dan Phiffer, Andrew Schneider, Ran Tao, and Mushon Zer-Aviv is a self-proclaimed “urban tourism” game that takes place in the streets of New York City and invites participants to become metatourists on an excursion through the city of Baghdad (figure 6.7).69

Supplied with a map of both cities printed back to back, players of YANH were provided with a tourist map of Baghdad to guide them through a walk down the streets of New York. Participants navigate to sites posted on lamps, signs, and buildings, which mark various Iraqi landmarks within the spatial bounds of the American city. Offering a tourist hotline, participants could listen to a YANH audio guide to the
Iraqi site. At the point designated to represent central Baghdad’s Firdos Square, participants received a voiceover recording about the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein. In addition to the facts, the voiceover noted that the event might have been staged as a spectacle for U.S. journalists and military personnel. Here, location is a contested concept, for the two cities, both the subject of U.S.–Middle East hostilities, are inextricably intertwined though physical alignment in the project. In this way, the meaning of YAH, contrary to many other location-based projects discussed in this chapter, lies directly in each site “visited,” and uses technology to explore the relationship between sites (see figure 6.8). You Are Not Here, then, engages the issue of locality and mobile artworks within its very premise, linking locations and therefore histories metaphorically and physically.
The Rules

1. Visit a neighborhood in transition.
2. Take a photograph(s). This photograph documents physical changes to the neighborhood and street life, whether they are juxtapositions; conflicts; changes in language, ideals and politics; interactions between people, old and young, rich and poor.
3. Take home a souvenir. This item cannot be something purchased but should mark the changes taking place in the neighborhood. The souvenir can also be a memory of an overheard conversation or observed interaction.

The transitional aspects of an urban environment are manifest in the work of new media artist Suyin Loou. Loou’s Transition Algorithm (2006) (box 6.1) presents itself as a set of instructions with an identifiable outcome, and leads players through the streets of New York City, documenting neighborhoods characterized by cultural fractures and collisions (figure 6.9). Loou chose to design an experience focused on neighborhoods under the threat of gentrification, places where racial and cultural communities exist and overlap and come into conflict. Her urban algorithm, designed to position players at points where there are such conflicts, explicitly plays with and uses a tourist’s lens as a way to investigate and document places in transition. Participants take home photographs and souvenirs of their “travels” from New York City neighborhoods as diverse as Jackson Heights, Williamsburg, Lower East Side, and others.

Likewise, the sound artist and locative media practitioner Samara Smith designed Chain Reaction (2006), a locative game with the goal of sensitizing players to the disappearance of independent enterprises in New York City (figure 6.10). To align her project with other performative action projects, Smith looked to Boal’s idea of action and the individual’s state in such action: “Theatre—or theatricality—is the capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity. . . . Man can see himself in the act of seeing, in the act of acting, in the act of feeling, the act of thinking. Feel himself feeling, think himself thinking.” This urban game requires the participants to change direction each time they encounter a pedestrian carrying a particular consumer item. For example, one rule set requires that the players change directions each time they see a Starbucks coffee cup or Barnes and Noble bag. Participants are released and allowed to walk in any direction they choose only when they encounter an independent bookstore or music seller. Maps of each walk reveal differences in various neighborhoods around New York. A fun and participatory way to explore and map urban space, this game’s type of investigative rule set holds interesting potential for community-based documentary projects (instructions are detailed in box 6.2).
Media artist Ariana Souzis’ *Cell Phone-Free Temporary Autonomous Zone* (2006) (*CFTAZ*) is inspired by Augusto Boal’s community theater exercises and Hakim Bey’s concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). Bey’s theory, based on his research of pirate utopias, islands where pirates of the eighteenth century formed communities outside the law, is clearly influenced by the Situationists’ notion of constructed situations.\(^1\) In his elaboration of these concepts, Bey claimed that the way to revolt against modern life was through the creation of temporary autonomous zones that enable “socio-political tactics of creating temporary spaces that elude formal structures of control.”\(^2\) As Bey notes, “Like festivals, uprisings cannot happen every day—otherwise they would not be ‘nonordinary.’ But such moments of intensity give shape and meaning to the entirety of a life. The shaman returns—you can’t stay up on the roof forever—but things have changed, shifts and integrations have occurred—a difference is made.”\(^3\)
Figure 6.10

A diagram of one session of Samara Smith’s *Chain Reaction*, 2006.
Along these lines, Souzis designed and implemented a TAZ where participants would agree to not use their cell phones, in order to liberate participants from what she saw as a demanding, and at times oppressive, technology (figure 6.11). In this game, also conducted in New York City, Souzis required participants in a specific space and time to follow a set of rules—which, ideally, they determine themselves.

Participants wear “cell-phone free” badges to mark themselves as nodes in the zone, and move through space wearing them. This zone explores a simple way participants can transform their experience of public space both individually and collaboratively and with or without technology. CFTAZ also provides liberation from the demands of time and communications technologies, the goal being a transformative space that encourages participants to envision a different experience outside that with which they might be familiar.

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| Box 6.2 |

Chain Reaction by Samara Smith, 2006

**The Rules**

1. Choose from one of the following sets:

**SET ONE**

**Lead Objects:**

a. a Macy's bag
b. a Bloomingdales bag  
c. a Duane Reade bag  
d. a Gap bag

Release Objects:  
a. a homemade sign  
b. graffiti/street art

SET TWO

Lead Objects:  
a. a Barnes and Noble bag  
b. a Starbucks cup

Release Objects:  
a. an independent book or music store  
b. a street vendor selling books or music

SET THREE

Lead Objects:  
a. people wearing white headphones  
b. people talking on cell phones

Release Objects:  
a. street musicians  
b. anyone singing or dancing  
c. two or more people stopped on the street having a conversation

SET FOUR

Noticing what you see and don’t see, create your own set of lead and release objects and follow your own rules. If you want to keep going after set four you may return to set one and repeat the process.

2. Beginning near a subway stop, stand on any Manhattan street corner.
3. Wait until you see someone pass with any of the lead objects. Once you see the first lead object, begin that set.

4. Each time you see someone with one of the lead objects, begin walking in that direction. Continue only in that direction until you see another lead object. At that point, continue in the direction of the new lead object.*

5. When you see one of your set of release objects, you may stop and do whatever you like until you see one of the other sets’ lead objects.

6. Once you see one of the remaining sets’ lead objects, return to step three and repeat the process with the new set of objects.

7. Keep a tally of the lead and release objects you see and the times you spend in each phase.

8. At each release moment, stop to document your walk thus far. Map where you walked, and note what you saw. You may also want to document the lead and release objects as you go.

9. If time is an issue, you may shorten the process by releasing yourself from any one set after fifteen minutes should you have not progressed to the next set in that time.

*Participants do not have to follow the lead objects, just begin walking in the direction they are being carried. They may only change direction with each new lead object that passes in a new direction or upon seeing the release objects. For example, is the first person you see carrying a Gap bag and walking east? Then you must keep walking east until you see another of the lead objects or a release object in that set.

Readers may notice that many of the projects discussed in this chapter that appear most sensitive to issues of space, location, and place also happen to be those that involve minimal technologies or remove technologies altogether. Here, I would like to suggest that it is not due to some inherent bias against technologies, but rather, that the design of locative play and games might evolve to take into account the lived experience of those spaces, and the mediated experience of such spaces as a secondary issue. While inhabitants of cities often experience these phenomena as one and the same thing, this is not typically the central or unifying feature of the locative media projects previously critiqued. These “low-tech” experiences also closely match the ethos of Situationist exploration, spending less time on the technological means for creating a project and choosing instead to interrogate the conceptual concerns surrounding their staging.

This type of interrogation is key to developing ethical media projects that can also challenge, inquire, and empower. As geographer Don Mitchell notes, social change continues to entail a street-centered reclamation of public space by creating disorder where there was once order, or by challenging a particular way a space has in the past been experienced. While there is opportunity for protest and empowerment through play, play also must be carefully organized to have a lasting and meaningful impact. Space must be understood, ordered, and reexamined, and, where technology is used in a project design, that technology must begin to reflect the contested nature of the lived reality of such spaces.

**Hybrid Play?**

What happens when game makers and players begin to blend spaces such as public urban space and online game space? These instances of play bounded by space offer yet another social critique of the influence of electronic games. Computer games especially can be seen as critical frameworks that engage space and, when used in the context of artistic practice, become environments in which player-participants can make meaning that directly relates to urban spaces. There are additional deep ties to interventionist art practices in viewing the fluidity of performance, the city, and the simultaneous reading and authoring of social interaction in electronic game worlds. In turn, artists’ appropriation of games in large-scale, public spaces
presents a potent approach to social change.

Here, the projects of game designer Katie Salen are useful for thinking about performance and games. Her Big Urban Game, mentioned earlier in this chapter, was designed by Salen, Nick Fortuno, and Frank Lantz to call attention to urban planning and involves massive, local participation. The B. U.G. project served as an innovative way to investigate social change through urban space and participatory play. The game was a race between three teams—red, yellow, and blue—each composed of Twin Cities residents, who try to move their own twenty-five-foot-high, inflatable colored game piece through different neighborhood checkpoints in the shortest time with the common goal of reaching the Lake Street Bridge. The progress of the three teams was tracked electronically each day, and shown in the local newspapers and on TV news. The public could participate with the players to choose the fastest route to the next point by voting online or calling the B. U.G. 800 number. The players, volunteers from the community, raced their pieces through the city following the path that earned the most votes.

The most interesting part of B. U. G. is the emphasis on watching the game pieces crossing neighborhoods, sometimes quite disparate neighborhoods, and the resulting tendency groups of residents had to mingle and play together. Big Urban Game, which not only took the city of Minneapolis by storm but represented an adventurous experiment in urban design research, led to Karaoke Ice, a project that also explores the realm of the participatory public work (figure 6.12). Like an earlier political work by Tactical Ice Cream Unit (2005) by the Center for Tactical Magic, this entertaining project, which centers on a karaoke-rigged ice cream truck, was a collaboration by Nancy Nowacek, Katie Salen, and Marina Zurkow, with help from students and graduates of the CADRE Laboratory for New Media, with music produced and arranged by Lem Jay Ignacio in 2006. Karaoke Ice first took place in the city of San Jose during the ISEA digital arts conference in 2006 and continues to operate.73

| Figure 6.12 |
In *Karaoke Ice*, the truck, named “Lucci,” is staffed by a master-of-ceremony character (in actuality, a person in a computer graphics-inspired squirrel outfit) named Remedios who hands out ice pops to the public. At certain intervals, the rear of the truck becomes a stage, opening to reveal space for two singers complete with a revolving disco ball. The designers believe the truck can be used to unite people in a collective mission to perform and document community character, as it did in the 2006 ISEA Interactive City events. As the truck moves from neighborhood to neighborhood, new groups form to sing and play together. The truck, stopping in parking lots and on street corners, automatically attracts a crowd whose busy trajectory is interrupted by a participatory, musical interlude.

Any passersby may climb into the truck, choose from a menu of “interpreted pop,” or familiar songs morphed to match the ice cream bell-style theme of music, and perform for the audience (figure 6.13). The play space generates player pleasure and engagement, and this understanding translates to light-hearted, collaborative play experiences. An entertaining form of social intervention emerges commercial-free from the spectacle, fostering new experiences of community and fifteen seconds of neighborhood fame for those willing to sing.
In a similar manner, Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga’s *Vagamundo: A Migrant’s Tale* highlights the experiences of illegal Mexican immigrants in New York City through a transportable arcade-style interaction. The artist describes the game as a “mobile public art” project. Using a battery-powered ice cream cart containing a computer, joystick, and monitor, he takes the immigration game into the urban neighborhoods.

In *Vagamundo*, players stand alongside the cart (figure 6.14), looking down at the computer screen as they control and play the role of the central game character called “Cantinflas.” Cantinflas, a character from classic Mexican cinema, engages in slapstick humor while attempting to overcome obstacles to get ahead in the game. After sneaking across the border in a standard arcade style, the player must avoid flying liquor bottles in order to get a job. Evoking the serious underlying themes of this game, Miranda Zúñiga notes: “Since 9/11, the Bush administration has added 100 million dollars to border patrol, increasing the annual tab to 2.5 billion dollars. However the number of people crossing the border has not decreased, though the number of mortalities along the trek across the border has increased, perhaps this is the point.”

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**Figure 6.14**

Vagamundo is constructed with three levels of play, each intended to represent a “move up” the social scale and, therefore, an assimilation into U.S. culture (figure 6.15). Between levels, grave facts about immigration, border crossing, and immigrant life inform the players that while the game may appear simple and fun, the situation for most immigrants is a dire one. In level two, Cantinflas arrive at a New York corner store, where cockroaches emerge and wander towards our hero while mutating into huge, threatening thugs (figure 6.16).

While the graphics in the game cross into the ridiculous—for example, players can guide Cantinflas into a knockdown fistfight against a gigantic cockroach in order to learn English—the immigrant Vagamundo poses some of the same questions and concerns that propelled Victorian doll play. As a framework for “home,” Vagamundo engages questions of assimilation and the process of fitting into cultural norms, albeit lightly through its arcade-style game play. Other similarities to Victorian doll play are highlighted in the ways in which players are confronted with information about the death rates of immigrants attempting to cross the border. The macabre, violent play of flying liquor bottles and disturbing insects exposes the dark side of custom and culture.
The work of cultural theorist Homi Bhabha addresses the issues surrounding migration and the complex relationships among community and kinship, language, and the concept of nation, by arguing that the loss produced by migration translates into a metaphor of home that makes the meaning of belonging manifest. In this time of unprecedented human movement, is there something about the metaphor of home that works to unify a sense of place in the liminality of digital environments? Games may be apt vehicles to explore the complexities of migration if only because they emphasize the problematic boundaries of modernity and enact the “ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space.” If, as Bhabha argues, “the ‘unhomely’ is a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition,” what does it mean in play spaces to “write home” in such contexts? That domestic play here can be read within the larger manifestation of the idea of home, a theme that becomes a site of international political and social importance explored in critical play.

Creating meaningful social change with artists’ games has larger implications for activists. Theorists of activism such as Michel de Certeau note that power must be changed in fundamental, internal ways. Tactics such as bartering, trading, la perruque (meaning to work for oneself while “on the clock” for another), and the use of discarded materials undermine the rules of the larger social game one is bound within. Judith Butler has also offered a critique of contemporary activist strategies. Along with other theorists, Butler argues that it is not enough to present a simple subversion of a stereotypical norm, such as the strategy I’ve identified as reskinning might imply. Rather, it is only through changing the logic of traditional relationships and categories—in Butler’s specific case, categories such as gender—that larger systemic changes can be effected. Positions such as Butler’s recognize the fact that social systems hold many fixed categories from gender to class, race, and economies and that these systems can only be challenged by examining the categorizations that sustain them. Players in these locative game systems also become players outside the system. In the next chapter, we will see further work in activist use of computer game systems. We will also look at ways in which some artists keep their messages on the screen to say what they need to say.