EasyChair Preprint

№ 5031

Playful Explorations of Indigenous Cartography

Hugh Davies, Olivia Guntarik and Troy Innocent

February 25, 2021

Playful Exploration of Indigenous Cartography

Hugh Davies*
RMIT University
Melbourne, Australia
hugh.davies@rmit.edu.au

Olivia Guntarik*
RMIT University
Melbourne, Australia
olivia.guntarik@rmit.edu.au

Troy Innocent*
RMIT University
Melbourne, Australia
troy.innocent@rmit.edu.au

*The authors are listed in alphabetical order but share first author status on this publication.

Keywords
Pervasive games, Indigenous place, Boonwurrung, locative media, cultural walking tours, situated storytelling

ABSTRACT
With the rise of pervasive games in the past two decades, peaking with *Pokémon Go* (Niantic, 2016), questions surrounding the perceptions, use and ownership of public space have rapidly emerged (de Souza e & Hjorth, 2009; Nijholt, 2017; Apperley & Leorke, 2013). Beyond commercial and public uses of city spaces, how are such experiences attentive to local, regional, ancient and persistent notions of place? How can locative and pervasive experiences respond to local and Indigenous understandings of place? Perhaps most decisively, what is the compatibility of ancient and Indigenous stories of sustainability set within rapidly obsolete frameworks of the latest mobile devices? Through this process, the game asks the question how can space itself be understood as a platform carrying media?

Presented at RMIT in February 2019, the Augmented Reality audio-game TIMeR explores the multiple, multisensorial and contested modes of making place. Featuring stories of land, river and sky with Boonwurrung elder N'Arweet Carolyn Briggs, players of TIMeR are transformed into wayfarers as they move across the university campus to uncover alternate cartographies bringing new insights to familiar routes. TIMeR is the first in a series of playful projects exploring stories of place from multiple positions grounded in Indigenous knowledge, developed with collaboration from the Ngarara Willim Centre, Elders in Residence. Acknowledging the importance of cross-cultural dialogue, this project recognises the unceded ancestral and traditional places of the Eastern Kulin Nations.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019

There is an emerging and growing practice of games-based projects that engages Indigenous knowledges of place. While many of these initiatives have centred on First Nations communities in Canada (Lewis 2014; Lameman, Aileen & Lewis 2011), there have been notable projects in Australia such as Digital Songlines (Wyeld et al 2007), Nyungar Place Stories (Irving & Hoffman 2014) and an increasing number of Welcome to Country mobile apps (Bessant 2014). These initiatives build on themes concerned at a broad level with the relationship between the 'spatial' and 'platial'. They echo understandings from previous studies on the meaning and value of Indigenous cultural heritage and digital archives (Fforde et al 2013), and the role of new media in immersive storytelling for cultural heritage (Cameron & Kenderdine 2016). Research questions are often organised around how to digitally 'map' places of historical significance and sensitivities, such as contested spaces of frontier genocides, massacre sites and custodial boundaries (Dwyer & Ryan 2016).

The emergence and popularity of pervasive games means that issues of Indigenous place have become increasingly significant and urgent. These issues are invariably entangled with questions of belonging and exclusion, as well as how everyday mobile technologies are used to create and politicise interactive experiences. Such studies alert us to questions of historical scale, including how we remember stories of the past and bring them into the present in ways meaningful for current generations. Complex questions have arisen about who owns this knowledge and how this knowledge is shared, sustainably archived, and expressed through how we act towards the other. At the heart of the matter is the very real and continuing threat of ongoing forms of colonial violence; how *not* to re-colonise digital spaces pertaining to Indigenous materiality and in forms that do not re-inscribe previous histories of encounter.

Pervasive games emerged largely as a response to opportunities afforded by the availability of ubiquitous computing to artists and designers interested in exploring urban environments and the potential to make these playable (Montola, Stenros & Waern 2009). The original vision of ubiquitous computing (Weiser 1991) has been expanded to include the role of culture in shaping place and how this may also in turn influence the design of technologies (Bell & Dourish 2011). Pervasive games hold the potential to radically alter understandings of place – what can we learn from indigenous ways of knowing, being and connecting to place that can inform pervasive game design? By framing creative practice in this way, we are not only representing indigenous stories of place but also translating them into a contemporary context – a platform that also has the potential of situating players in new relationships to place leading them into embodied experiences of indigenous ways of being.

This goal for pervasive games – to radically alter our understandings of place – is equally ambitious. The TIMeR project is explored via the potential of pervasive game design to expand the space of play spatially, temporally and socially (Montola, Stenros & Waern 2009). Spatially, indigenous pervasive games may draw upon a rich pre-digital culture connecting story and place, including design solutions that use music, voice, and visual language in sophisticated mappings of space in which the activation of meaning is embedded in the landscape itself. Shifts also occur temporally, as the stories of land, river and sky are situated in a tradition of oral storytelling that is often circular shifting between past, present and future as the narrative context shifts. Socially, the player is situated in relation to place, community, story – and other players – driven by the cultural logic of the design.

To know place, and to situate the self in place, is to engage with the familiar and with the local. But 'knowing' place also invites a perspective, a way of knowing and being,

as well as a response and an engagement with the histories of place and their cultural context. As traditional owner N'Arweet Carolyn Briggs states these histories are complex and deserve 'great attention then to be consumed in the generalist approach that always portrays us as innocent victims who had no control over our destiny…I caution you to take care and responsibility in engaging in representing our culture and history' (Briggs 2019). For engaging responsibly is not simply about representing place but bringing the past in dialogue with the present in ways that invite us to act on that history *symbolically*, *politically*, and *relationally*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TIMeR was funded through RMIT's Design and Creative Practice Enabling Capability Platform and was supported by Professor Mark McMillan and Distinguished Professor Larissa Hjorth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Apperley, T., Leorke, D. (2013). From the cybercafé to the street: The right to play in the city. *First Monday,* Volume 18, Number 11 – 4 https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4964/3794 doi: 10.5210/fm.v18i11.4964.

Bell, G. & Dourish, P. (2011). *Divining a Digital Future: Mess and Mythology in Ubiquitous Computing.* USA, The MIT Press.

Bessant, J. (2014). The Digital, Indigenous Art and Politics. In *Democracy Bytes* (pp. 229-260). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Briggs, C. (N'Arweet). (2019), 'Yuiendj Boon Wurrung (Boon Wurrung knowledge): a journey of old knowledge and innovative forms for assisting Indigenous youth to engage with contemporary Indigenous cultures and knowledge,' PhD diss., RMIT University School of Media and Communication, Melbourne.

Cameron, F., & Kenderdine, S. (2016). *Theorizing digital cultural heritage for a complex, turbulent and entangled world*, MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

Dwyer, P.G., & Ryan, L. (2016). 'On Genocide and Settler-Colonial Violence: Australia in Comparative Perspective', *The United Nations and Genocide*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 32-53.

Fforde, C., Bamblett, L., Lovett, R., Gorringe, S., & Fogarty, W. (2013). 'Discourse, deficit and identity: Aboriginality, the race paradigm and the language of representation in contemporary Australia', *Media International Australia*, 149:162-173.

Irving, L., & Hoffman, J. (2014). Nyungar Place Stories Pilot: Using augmented reality for Indigenous cultural sustainability, Proceedings of ASCILITE 2014 - Annual Conference of the Australian Society for Computers in Tertiary Education, pp. 367-377.

Lameman, Beth Aileen and Jason E. Lewis. "Skins: Designing Games with First Nations Youth." Journal of Game Design and Development Education. Winter 2011, vol. 1, no. 1. pp. 63 – 75.

Lewis, J. (2014). "A Better Dance and Better Prayers: Systems, Structures, and the Future Imaginary in Aboriginal New Media," in Coded Territories: Tracing

Indigenous Pathways in New Media, ed. Steve Loft and Kerry Swanson, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 48–77.

Montola, M., Stenros, J., Waern, A. (2009). *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design.* USA, Morgan Kaufmann.

Nijholt, A. (2017). *Playable Cities: The City as a Digital Playground*, Springer.

Souza e, A. de, & Hjorth, L. (2009). Playful Urban Spaces: A Historical Approach to Mobile Games. *Simulation & Gaming*, 40(5), 602–625. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878109333723

Wyeld, T. G., Leavy, B., Carroll, J., Gibbons, C., Ledwich, B., & Hills, J. (2007). The Ethics of Indigenous Storytelling: using the Torque Game Engine to Support Australian Aboriginal Cultural Heritage. In *DiGRA Conference*.

Hugh Davies

Hugh Davies is an artist and researcher exploring the city as game-board. As a postdoctoral fellow at RMIT University, he researches Asia-Pacific game cultures. Hugh has recently returned from fellowships at Tokyo Art and Space in Japan and at M+ and the Hong Kong Design Trust in Hong Kong.

https://au.linkedin.com/in/huedavies

Olivia Guntarik

Based at RMIT's School of Media and Communication, Olivia Guntarik has a passion for the history of our cities. Her digital work unearths stories of the past through the natural, built and cultural heritage. Her expertise is in location-based augmented reality designs and downloadable audio walks.

https://www.linkedin.com/in/olivia-guntarik-30058410b/

Troy Innocent

Innocent is a Senior Research Fellow at RMIT University situated in the School of Design. His public art practice blends street art, pervasive games, augmented reality, and urban design to investigate play as strategy for reimagining and co-creating cities.

https://www.linkedin.com/in/troy-innocent-02bb03/