Book Review: Making Smart Cities More Playable: Exploring Playable Cities

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Review

In this fast-paced, data-driven world it can be challenging lifting our faces from our screens and taking in the world around us, let alone taking an active part in community building. Although smart technologies have attempted to make our cities more efficient and tackle big problems, *Making Smart Cities More Playable* argues that this is driven from the top, by organisations and governments, while missing the voice of your average citizen. To address this, the book suggests a more playful, bottom-up approach which engages citizens beyond consumption of technology, in co-creation and placemaking.

The book is made up of six sections with contributions from professionals around the world and from a range of disciplines including creative media, applied science, technology and sustainability. In the first and largest section, chapters consider the current climate for playable cities, taking a closer look at the problems with smart cities and how play can contribute and address this. The following sections evaluate specific examples and case studies from cities around the world, though it is clear from early in the book that there is a slight bias towards projects happening in the western world.

Views on Playable Cities

The first section focuses on theoretical approaches to playable cities, providing the reader with definitions and potential frameworks. The smart city in its current, traditional form is criticised for its focus on data collection, efficiency and productivity from a top down approach, conflicting with definitions of play or games which usually involve voluntary participation and unnecessary obstacles. Parallels are made between sustainable and playful cities as a means to engage citizens in problem solving by also including populations who are marginalised due to lack of access to technology. However it is highlighted that the value that organisations and local authorities have in making this approach work should not be dismissed. A 'middle-out' approach is suggested to foster a co-creative strategy which is accessible to a wider population.

Designing and Experimenting with Playfulness in Urban Environments

In section two we see three examples of projects seeking to reclaim what technology is good for by challenging the view that its sole purpose is for efficiency. Many of these projects sit at the intersection between technology and art, presenting physical installations with which the public can interact and providing opportunities for shared experience, increased dialogue and co-creation. The authors and project owners show a commitment to rethinking the role of citizens and their engagement with technology by bringing these installations into the public space, where those who are ordinarily left out of the digital world can also participate.

Nature, Playscapes and Landscapes

Section three takes a departure from the urban cityscape, focussing more on areas of natural space where there is currently a lack of research. The two chapters look closely at two contrasting projects, the first of which focuses on children's play in the outdoor space. It considers ways to integrate digital into the physical landscape, taking account of the existing physical layout while avoiding the use of screens, instead using sensors and outputs. The second example outlines a number of projects aimed at raising awareness of biodiversity preservation. In contrast, these examples make use of digital games and screens to explore the natural environment through the means of storytelling

Designing Location-Based Games

Location-based games have become a popular entertainment medium worldwide following the success of Pokémon GO. In this section similar technologies are considered for engaging people in cultural and sustainability challenges in their localities. These examples heavily rely on the use of smartphones to participate in the activities. It is mentioned, though not explored in depth, that this can become a distraction from the real world, potentially having a negative impact on the challenges they are trying to solve.

Nomadic and Traditional Games

The final section before the book concludes continues with a similar theme to section three, focusing on people playing outside. In this section we are introduced to two communities who may not always have access to technology. Therefore this section suggests two types of 'technology' that do not traditionally spring to mind: the human body, and the resources found in nature. In particular, this section considers the important skills built when playing traditional games such as relationship building, collaboration and empathy, and argues that these are vital to placemaking.

Who Controls Your City's Playability?

Finally, we return to a critical look at smart cities, how they are controlled and how this impacts playability, with a particular focus on commercialisation and privatisation through smart technologies and the organisations that own them. Gamification is also critiqued as a means of controlling behaviour while ignoring many features and definitions of games and play such as spontaneity, voluntary participation and meaningful inefficiency. A lack of knowledge and awareness from citizens can lead to the exploitation of data, highlighting that those who are designing and contributing to playable cities must carefully consider the technology they're using and the supporting organisations.

Although this book is critical of smart technologies, it is clear that the authors' aims are to ignite action in citizens to utilise what is already there for their own benefit and that of the locality and the world. It would have been interesting if there had been some examples of projects using augmented reality, however many of the examples tend to lean more towards utilising public space, community building and physical technologies in order to facilitate inclusion, co-creation and the redistribution of control traditionally kept locked away at the top. It is refreshing to read about projects which attempt to include those who are traditionally excluded from a technology dominated world, ensuring that their voices are lifted. Upon finishing the book, I feel thoroughly inspired to get involved with playful, community projects which address local and global challenges.