

BRINGING THE IMAGINARY BACK INTO PLAY

ALISON GAZZARD

The term 'ludic' can be linked to many aspects of play and games, but what does it mean to be playful? Using examples of various augmented reality game, this paper will examine the role of mimicry in play as a way of understanding the ubiquity of ludic interfaces in light of our real world explorations. It will also highlight the importance of exploration and discovery in how we perceive, perform and create spaces of playful interaction.

"If there is one significant contribution of digital technology to gaming, it is to have reconciled competition and make-believe..." (Ryan 2007)

The term 'ludic' can be linked to many aspects of play and games, but what does it mean to be playful and where and how does this play occur? It can be seen that instead of being fixed experiences, digital games instead act as platforms for various experiences. Mobile phones, in particular the rise of what are commonly described as 'smartphones', have allowed for an increase in 'app' culture. Games are available for free through the various app stores (such as the Android market place or Apple's 'App Store') or for reasonably small amounts of money. Although handheld gaming has been around for decades, most notably through the various incarnations of Nintendo's Gameboy system, the ease of downloads and increasing integration of games with mobile phone devices has allowed these games to reach greater audiences without the need for separate, dedicated hardware.

In terms of hardware, smartphones also contain other inbuilt systems such as gps receivers, digital compasses, gyrometers, cameras, data connections and so on, once again allowing the game experience to change in different ways. Writing about non-digital games in the 1950s Roger Caillois distinguishes between 'ludus' or what is often seen as purely ruled play and the act of exploration, discovery and the pleasure of 'paidia', the notion of "...wild, free-from improvisational play..." It is not to say that these categories remain as fixed, binary oppositions, but instead work as a sliding scale of playfulness across a range of game playing experiences. Alongside his categories of "ludus" and "paidia", Caillois (1958) distinguishes between "agon, alea, mimicry and ilinx", equating to competition, chance, make-believe and vertigo. Although it is possible to understand these categories in light of non-digital games, what happens when real and the virtual start to combine, as in the case of augmented reality gaming? The growth and development of augmented reality (AR) applications through both videogames and smartphones now allows for the player's real world landscape, whether that be indoors or outdoors, to be transformed at the touch of a button. AR technology combines the world viewed through the camera screen with a layer of fictional objects allowing this technology to enhance and create different acts of play.

As it stands, augmented reality currently offers two main modes of delivery, either through markers, or through using location. The game *ARBasketball* released on the iPhone is one such example of using a marker-based system. Although it is played on a portable phone device, the user is required to print out a marker from the creators website before they can start playing. The marker then transforms into a basketball hoop once positioned in front of the camera (with the *ARBasketball* application running). Here, both the paper marker and the resultant image on screen link together as props to create the fictional and imaginary world, the notion of "mimicry" as discussed by Caillois. Wherever the real life

marker based prop is moved to, so to is the fictional basketball hoop, bridging the gap between the two realities and creating a portable game experience.

As Kendall Walton (1990) notes, "Props are generators of fictional truths, things which, by virtue of their nature or existence, make propositions fictional". In discussing the scenario of children playing a game of make-believe where tree stumps in the forest turn into imaginary bears, Walton discusses the underlying agreement of all players that stumps are part of the imaginary fictional world. In this instance we can see the applications of augmented reality acting as a toolbox of props that can be used to create different play experiences. Instead of having to imagine the world of stumps as bears, it is now possible for the technology to turn this into a displayed (virtual) reality. Although props can be present in other digital games, augmented reality is allowing for a layering of a prop, transforming a real world space into an extended playground of possibilities. The recently released *Ball Invasion iPad2* game is an example of this. The game relies on the difference in patterns within the real world space to layer an augmented gamespace over the top. In calibrating the application, players are then able to play various shooting games, bouncing virtual balls at different targets within different depth layers. The balls also interact with the surrounding real world landscape, animated to seemingly bounce off the walls of the real world space when the virtual targets are not hit. The world created is pure mimicry, an imaginary world created through the combination of technologies. In doing so this standard game of chance is combined with a space of imagination, a combination of categories seen to be 'forbidden' by Caillois, stating "simulation and chance are no more susceptible to mixing" (p. 73). This is true of any digital game, where the simulation is created by the technology as a platform for a different kind of playful experience as once imagined by Caillois. The same can be said of 'ilinx' or vertigo, and its forbidden relationship with competition and rules. The portable nature of the mobile phone combined with the locative aspects of augmented reality can see player's moving through periods of vertigo, spinning round playfully trying to find new fictional spaces to explore.

Applications such as *Layar* (an augmented reality browser) allow for the creation of these playful experiences, often recreating our childhood memories of fictional worlds, imaginary places and ideas surrounding new possibilities of play. Instead of relying on markers, *Layar* allows different augmented reality games to be played through using location-based data and the digital compass for direction. An example of this is the *Layar* titled *ScavengAR Hunt*. Much the same as a normal treasure hunt, players have to find the objects displayed on screen as they explore the area around them. Objects are marked such as octopuses and swords, creating a world full of props for our imaginations. These props can be used as the starting point for new play experiences as the portable playground of the mobile screen extends the world around them. Although the props may remain the same, the location of play changes, creating new meanings and experiences. The game functions in much the same way as the real world experience but can be updated with every re-load of the application refreshing what objects are shown and where they may be found. The turbulence or 'ilinx' combined with the mimicry of play return to these games with these various layers. Player's can now stand up, spin around and furiously attempt to shot the virtual spaceships appearing on screen, found all around the player. However, this play can be competitive, both between players and by individual players competing with themselves, allowing for the categories of ilinx and competitive ruled play to emerge through the possibilities of the platform.

This is the key distinction of playful digital media; it is now possible for players to use these applications as platforms. Players can create their own play experiences through extended layers of their own imaginary and much of this play comes through the initial exploration of each application's use. Augmented reality, in particular, allows for an exploration of both the real and virtual world spaces to see what they can offer on each play. AR creates the possibility of two layers of fiction intertwined with the real world,

that of the virtual depicted fiction and the extra fiction created by the player's own imagination. Together these allow for various types of play experiences to evolve out of the props on offer within the interface and the simplistic nature of many of their designs allow for different types of game and play scenario to emerge. As has been briefly outlined above, the platform(s) of play are now accessed through the mobile interface, the "space of possibility" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004) continues to be opened up to players as they seek to bring the imaginary back into play.

References and Notes:

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