

Placemaking



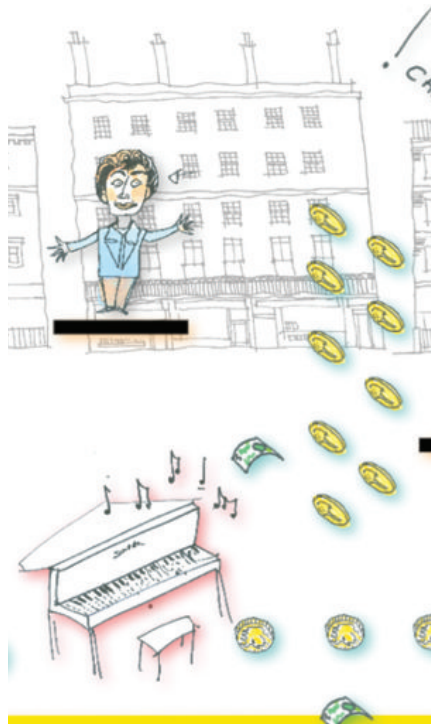
Play Your Place

Ruth Catlow and Mary Flanagan

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*Play South Westminster at South West Fest Gala Day.
Credit: Katherine McNeil.*



Game screens (clockwise): Play Southend - One Stan Army; from Play South Westminster - Grab the Cash; Dog Snog; It's on Fire, Oh No!

Play Your Place

Southend, Essex,
Finsbury Park,
London,
South Westminster,
London,
Online.

Contributors

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Digital Tools Used

Javascript,
PHP,
MySQL,
Box2D,
GNU,
General Public
Licence,
Github.

Play Your Place is a framework of playful, social drawing events and simple online game-building tools through which people draw, make and play games to develop a collective vision of their future locality.

About

Play Your Place is an open art framework for people to get involved with civic and urban planning in their local area, through drawing and building games socially. People taking part can express their aspirations for their local area in public events via a free, online and mobile game-building website.

Inspired by knowledge and experience of their neighbourhood, participants can draw and upload images of settings, obstacles, prizes and protagonists. They build computer-platform game-levels to recreate and transform local challenges and rewards. Anyone can then go online to play, remix and share these free games about their neighbourhood, and to rank them for the quality of their change idea, local flavour, fun and artistry.

Developed and piloted in 2013 in Southend-on-Sea on the Thames Estuary, Play Your Place springs from a collaboration between Ruth Catlow (Furtherfield, UK) and Dr Mary Flanagan (Tiltfactor, US). It is supported by Metal, and funded by Arts Council England East and Southend Borough Council. Ruth is an artist, co-founder and co-director of Furtherfield, which provides platforms and spaces in London, and online for people to encounter and establish experimental arts and technologies on their own terms. In this way, more and more diverse people strengthen the expressive and democratic potential of our shared techno-social landscape—locally, nationally and internationally.

Play Southend is ongoing. It currently comprises over 100 games and its public programmes have already engaged over 1,000 local people. In July 2014 a new programme for residents of South Westminster was co-commissioned by Tate Britain and Peabody Housing Trust.

Five new games were created and exhibited alongside the British Folk Art Exhibition. All games can be played by people all over the world.

What is the impact of the project?

Play Your Place aims to develop the context for fuller participation by people (especially young people) in the formation of their communities. It aims to involve more and more diverse people in the formation of civic life and the shaping of public spaces, creating a richer flow of ideas (wild and sensible), insights, knowledge and power between people, communities, institutions and agencies that shape places.

How did digital tools make a difference?

Play Your Place is built around open source software, and the platform, developed with Soda (soda.co.uk) has been published to Github as a free and open source game platform under a GNU Affero General Public Licence in October 2013. This means that others are free to build on and modify the work.

What next?

The next major iteration is planned in North London's Finsbury Park, where Furtherfield Gallery and Commons are located. Working with Dr Harriet Hawkins, Cultural Geographer, Royal Holloway University of London (funded through the Culture Capital Exchange Creative Voucher Scheme), this will explore how diverse, hard-to-reach individuals and groups might create persuasive ideas for planners and developers, and so impact on the thoughts and decisions around planning the places where they live. This, in turn will underpin a process of digital business modelling to develop the project's sustainability: building partnerships with other arts and community organisations as future hosts, and identifying appropriate exploitation opportunities in public and commercial sectors.

What others can learn

Involving people in the software design

Participants understood and enjoyed the fact that they were shaping the game-building framework for future players. Through using an iterative design process, which integrated participants' reflection and evaluation into its development, we maintained an open conversation about co-creation of shared infrastructure.

Thinking evil

A fun way to think about risk. In the early stages of the project we ran a joint programme of staged software development and community events. A combination of complex unforeseen difficulties placed a lot of pressure on facilitators who were forced to improvise in order to avoid participants becoming disappointed or frustrated. In planning for events at South Westminster, we thought about what it would look like if everything went spectacularly wrong, and then flipped it (thanks Paul Tyler). Thinking evil is fun, and it enabled us to be more imaginative and to make better plans. We discovered that this approach also unlocked better game-building experiences for people.

Rich vs easy engagement

We are still working on the balance between participant investment (of time and effort) and reward (creative expression, social kudos and empowerment). High quality games inspire people to get involved. By commissioning experienced artists and game designers to seed the platform with a few high quality games we demonstrate what is possible, provide templates for remixing and model some fun games. There is still work to be done on making the online game-building experience as rewarding as the events that take place in public space.