Games of Being Mobile: Australian Research Council Discovery Project Report
RMIT University
November 2019

Report Authors:
Distinguished Professor Larissa Hjorth, Professor Ingrid Richardson, Dr. William Balmford and Dr. Hugh Davies.

This research was supported by the Australian Research Council’s Discovery Project funding scheme. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Research Council.


Acknowledgements: Olivia Efthimiou (research assistance).

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/

Acknowledgement of country
RMIT University acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations as the traditional owners of the land on which the University stands. RMIT University respectfully recognises Elders both past and present. We also acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands across Australia where we conduct business, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures and heritage.

Published by:
RMIT Design & Creative Practice ECP, RMIT University, City campus, Building 9, Level 4, 124 La Trobe Street, Melbourne, 3000.

Layout & Design: Adelina Onicas.
# Contents Page

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive summary</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few voices from the field</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Outcomes: Toolkits, Apps, Exhibitions</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes: Publications</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

In 2018 worldwide game revenue reached $138 billion, and mobile game revenue now accounts for nearly $70 billion of this—that is, over half—and this market share is predicted to grow. The bulk of this mobile game revenue—80% or $55 billion—comes from smartphone related apps. Today, almost 2.4 billion people play mobile games, with the Asia-Pacific region making up over half of the Global Games Market. Some studies suggest that mobile gamers are most often the primary decision makers in the home. The mobile augmented reality (AR) game Pokémon GO highlights the increasing popularity of mobile games; the game’s total revenue is over $1 billion, and it generates around $4 million daily. While the popularity of Pokémon GO might be in decline, the game has now taken on new uses—like being played by elderly people to ameliorate against social isolation and a sedentary lifestyle. The power of mobile games as not just billion dollar economic drivers, but as vehicles for intergenerational connection, enhanced literacies and digital health cannot be underestimated, as evidenced by our study.


Our study aimed to contextualize mobile games as part of broader practices of play, both in the home and extending out into neighborhoods, urban public spaces and online networks. We explored domestic and public contexts over time. We observed play in and around platforms and devices. We listened to stories across the generations to understand multiple forms of literacy and social connection.

This study sought to take mobile games seriously as they expand across different public and private settings in ways that are social, ecological and even political. As mobile games move across different genres, platforms, practices and contexts, they become ever-present in our everyday lives, and for many of us, an important means of experiencing and navigating a digitally saturated world. They are also, significantly, conduits of what we call ambient play—a term that conveys how games and playful media practices have come to pervade much of our social and communicative terrain, both domestic and urban.

Figure 1: Understanding haptic (touch) screens and mobile games.
EMERGENT FUTURES FOR MOBILE GAMING RESEARCH

We see a number of emerging fields for the future of mobile gaming research, particularly in terms of the changing demographics of players. With global population shifts and a dramatic increase in ageing societies, for example, who plays becomes a key issue. As mobile games become increasingly haptic (touch-based) and multisensorial, they simultaneously become more accessible as playful interfaces for diverse and vulnerable agencies, including older adults and players with disabilities.

In our fieldwork we have also seen time and again how mobile gaming is embedded within the history of mobile media use as a fundamentally social practice—even when playing alone we often do so in response to a particular social context. This suggests that when we consider the future potential of mobile play, we embrace the divergent forms of sociality that it enables. Play is about creativity and innovation, a key skill for future workforces. Social play is at the core of the past, present and future of mobile games.

In our fieldwork over three years, we witnessed several emergent areas for mobile gaming research. Mobile games are:

1. A key mode of social play (both networked and co-located)
2. Allowing for different learning styles and neurodiversity
3. A vehicle for play across generations
4. At the intersection of playful human-animal relations
5. Recalibrating urban spaces (and our experience of them)
6. Reconfiguring domestic space (and our being-with-others at home)
7. Attuning future workforce skills around play and creativity

Understanding the complexity of this phenomenon cannot be done by Big Data and quantitative methods. Indeed, addressing these soft skills (i.e. creativity and play being key workforce attributes for the futures) requires deploying human-centred, ethnographic and co-design techniques that provide situated and nuanced understandings of mobile games in practice across different platforms, contexts, spaces and relations. As gamification (game-like techniques applied to non-game contexts) and serious games (games for educational, health and social care contexts) become more prevalent, mobile games will play a powerful role in development, literacy, accessibility and implementation.
Play is about creativity and innovation, a key skill for future workforces. Social play is at the core of the past, present and future of mobile games.
Introduction

Accounting for half of the $138 billion Global Game Market, mobile games are now serious drivers in not only economic realms.¹ Indeed their social and cultural impact cannot be underestimated. And yet, to date there has been no longitudinal cross-generational studies that take mobile games seriously in everyday life. This study seeks to address this oversight by conducting the first national survey of mobile games in Australian households. 


Our study aimed to contextualize mobile games as part of broader practices of play, sociality and contemporary media literacy, both in the home and extending out into neighbourhoods, urban public spaces and online networks. We explored domestic and public contexts over time. We explored play in and around platforms and devices. We listened to stories across the generations to understand multiple forms of literacy and social connection. This report summaries some key findings.

Using ethnography allowed us deep insights into motivations, practices and perceptions.
Background

With the increasing ubiquity of web-capable smartphones and tablets, app-based ecologies and trends towards gamification—that is, the use of games and playful apps to boost consumption of products and services—mobile games are now an intrinsic part of twenty-first century popular culture.

In 2018 worldwide game revenue reached just under $138 billion, and the Asia-Pacific comprises almost half of this market; China makes up around 25% of the total market spend, and Chinese technology companies such as Tencent have been key players in this revenue space. Mobile game revenue now accounts for $70 billion of global game revenue—that is, over half—and this market share is predicted to grow. Nearly 2.4 billion people play mobile games, and seventy-three percent of all mobile app revenue from iOS and Android devices is specific to games.¹

The mobile augmented reality (AR) game Pokémon GO highlights this trend; with 5 million DAU (daily active users), the game has been downloaded 650 million times, and in the US it’s on over 10% of Apple and Android devices. In its first month, Pokémon GO generated more revenue than any other mobile game to date ($207 million), and at its peak in late 2016 was played by over 45 million people. As of mid-2019, it is still the top-grossing iPhone app, capturing an 84% market share of all location-based games (measured by downloads).² The game has amassed $1 billion in total revenue and still generates $4 million daily; it has reportedly been the subject of Facebook and Instagram posts, comments or shares over 1 billion times; over 110 million friend connections have been made through the game.³

Not all mobile games have enjoyed the success of Pokémon GO or Angry Birds, yet mobile gaming has provided many designers and programmers—and, consequently, players—with more flexibility and innovation around game genres, gameplay, and the aesthetics and affordances of game environments. Across the expanding variety of platforms, media, contexts, and modes of presence, mobile games are being played by a growing number of people in a range of contexts: young and old, male and female, individuals, families, and social groups, at home, on the move, at work. Our project considered mobile gaming across all manifestations—from discrete offline casual games to location-based, mixed reality, cross-platform, and urban games, and more recently, the array of downloadable playful and social applications for the touch screen smartphone and handheld tablet or iPad.

¹ https://influencermarketinghub.com/mobile-gaming-statistics/
The method [tactile digital ethnography] explores what people’s tactile, haptic and often tacit gestures can tell us about their playful mobile media practices.
Methods

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS: UNDERSTANDING GAMES IN CONTEXT

Conducting an ethnography of mobile games and play means visiting homes and public contexts with participants numerous times in order to grasp mobile media practices as part of the dynamic process of living. In particular, we used a method known as “tactile digital ethnography” which begins by focusing on and recording people’s gestural movements as they reenact and talk through their mobile media use. The method explores what people’s tactile, haptic and often tacit gestures can tell us about their playful mobile media practices. How do people perceive their mobile game use, how do they explain their sensory experiences, and what does the body “remember” and habitualize?

We also used video re-enactments and media “walkthroughs” as a way of capturing participants’ experience of mobile media and gameplay. Video re-enactment involves in situ observation and audiovisual recording of “go-alongs” (following participants as they re-enact and narrate their media use). In this process, participants “perform” and reflect upon a habitual activity; in our case, they were asked to open frequently used games and apps, and play or use them where and how they would usually do so (e.g. in their bedroom or family room), while responding to questions or providing ongoing commentary of their activity. Like tactile digital ethnography, this mode of observation and recording enabled us to elicit tacit body memories and routines as participants deliberately reflect upon their activities and movements. Technology or media “walkthroughs” required participants to take us on a guided tour of their household media, explaining where devices are commonly placed in the home, and why, and whether they are for shared or individual use (and in each case, when, where and how).

Over three years we gathered visual and textual data from our households, following our participants in 60 domiciles across five of Australia’s capital cities, tracking changes in their media habits and attitudes. We intentionally recruited households that engaged in diverse kinds and patterns of mobile gaming—from prolific use to limited or no use. Covering this broad spectrum of practice and attitudes allowed us to trace some of the complex ways mobile games have become integral to forms of intimacy, communication and social interaction. Some of our findings surprised us, such as the active involvement of pets in household media play.

Our ethnographic approach, while foundationally informed by materialist and sensory analyses of everyday media use, also emerged as a particular “take” on digital ethnography, or the study of situated digital, mobile, and networked media use in everyday life. As advocates of this approach argue, there is no one technique, but rather the methodology is innovative or “mixed”, transdisciplinary, empirical, contextual, and cross-cultural.

Typically, digital ethnography focuses on how our engagement with digital media and technological interfaces shapes how we think, act and communicate in daily life. As we suggest along with other researchers, it need not always be media-centric in its analysis of the way digital interfaces inform—and are often informed by—everyday practices. This is particularly true of mobile media use and mobile gaming, as such activities often occur in the gaps or resting points, as we go about our daily routines. In many ways, our haptic-based research deliberately counters the dominance of audiovisual approaches in the study of contemporary media.

Ethnographers of digital media have also argued that we need to adapt to and explore their “ontological diversity”, which for us meant acknowledging the many digital and material effects of mobile media use. Such an approach makes no distinction between online and offline engagement, recognizing that sensory, material and digital “stuff” are interwoven in the often messy construction and experience of space, place, knowing, and being in the contemporary world. In this view, ethnographies of online, mobile and digital media cannot focus solely on the online and the digital, but must also capture the material, social, and embodied experiences within and alongside them.

Ethnographic research seeks deep interpretations of everyday practices, and insists that researchers must be empirically and contextually informed. That is, the often unintentional, creative, ad-hoc usage of media can only be gleaned from the critical observation of actual practices. Through careful observation and critical interpretation of body habits, gestures, and participant narratives, we can “reveal” our ways of being-with-media. Often, the observation and interpretation of mobile media use is a kind of “researching through the hands”, as the way users touch and handle their mobile devices is intrinsic to their affective or emotional experience of the interface and the way it functions.

As others have noted, media ethnographers have usefully turned to phenomenology and James J. Gibson’s concept of affordance to unravel “the constraining and enabling material possibilities of media.” Gibson’s ecological notion of affordance describes the intricate relationship between bodies and the environment as a kind of partnership, inviting us to consider how our media use is folded into this relationship, and how we experience the world not through but with media interfaces. Recent applications of body phenomenology—an approach that maintains the fundamental importance of sensory perception and embodied knowledge—have provided rich analyses of body-media routines as they differ across cultures and contexts. In this way, we can see how our sensory experiences are “continually shifting and culturally variable”, shaped by the intersection of social mores and collective habits, technological mediation and the built environment.

In our ethnographic work, we apply these insights to the interpretation of mobile media in specific life-contexts. We ask: How are the routines of bodily movement and social interaction within the home modified by mobile media user-practices? How do mobile interfaces and ambient play affect the experience of “being in touch”— of immediacy, proximity, distance and togetherness within domestic space and in public? And how do haptic screens provide different experiences of the body to be highlighted? As part of our ethnographic work, the role of haptic play became crucial as we developed our methods to capture these often tacit forms of the knowing body.

---

1. See Pink et al., Digital Ethnography.
2. Evans, Locative Social Media; Hand, “Persistent traces,” 1–18; Hine, Ethnography for the Internet.
3. Pink et al., Tactile digital ethnography.
“...“hanging out” in Minecraft can make “hanging out” physically more playful, creative and social.”
A few voices from the field

As the **first national survey of mobile games in Australia**, *Games of Being Mobile* sought to put mobile games into context: socially, intergenerationally and culturally. We deployed ethnographic methods over three years to allow us to glean deep insights into motivations, practices and perceptions.

Here are a few findings and stories from the field....

**AMBIENT PLAY**

*As spaces become increasingly mediated by various screens, understanding the ambient ways players move in and out of screen and non-digital worlds is crucial for gaining insight into household practices and perceptions.*

Like many homes around the world, the Madison’s household in Melbourne (Australia) is playful in many different ways. Some areas of the household are hubs for social activity and media use, while other spaces are more quiet and contemplative. The emotional fabric of the household follows certain rhythms of play across the spatial organisation of the lounge, computer room and bedrooms.

In the communal space of the lounge room, the play texture across a range of different devices—Wii, PlayStation, iPads and iPhones—and practices can be found. 13 year old daughter Trish and her cat Bonnie are playing Cat Fishing on the iPad together; Trish’s attention moves from the screen, to Bonnie, to a conversation with her parents and back to the screen. Her focus oscillates between engagement and distraction, with sociality - both human and non-human - at the centre of all the activity.

This is a typical scene of mobile game play—it is an intergenerational and more-than-human kind of sociality and play that moves ambiently across different modes of engagement, screen and non-screen. The Madison household contains many stories of play and playfulness. While some of the play activities are more specifically associated with games, other practices are more subtly playful. All involve forms of ambient play, as they are dispersed across contexts, spaces and interfaces.
CREATIVE WORLD-BUILDING: PLAYFUL, COLLABORATIVE AND SOCIAL SKILLS

As discussion around automation takes centre stage in workforces of the future, skills like digital literacy, creativity and play will be key drivers.

In our fieldwork in homes, we found “old” mobile games like Minecraft being used to foster intergenerational and creative world-building. On a typical Saturday afternoon in an Australian suburban home we find two sisters, Eileen (age 8) and Chloe (10) with a neighborhood friend, Amy (aged 10), sitting on the lounge talking and playing Minecraft together. Across the haptic iPad screens, multisensorial engagements emerge that involve a range of lived experiences, skillsets and tactile ways of knowing. The sisters chat about school, friends and their gameplay; here, as at other junctures of their domestic life, Minecraft moves ambiently from the foreground to background and back again, weaving through the rhythms and routines of everyday life practices as the girls traverse digital, sensorial and material worlds.

As the girls commented, “hanging out” in Minecraft can make “hanging out” physically more playful, creative and social. They often enact a kind of reflexive narrativization of their gameplay, constructing, co-curating and performing their own stories around the game. As they work through creative solutions, their banter often involves elements of co-design and emergent storytelling as a form of social play. Their talk mimics a Let’s Play video on YouTube, a new form of media entertainment where gamers record and narrate their gameplay. Many LP YouTube channels featuring Minecraft, enabling new ways of sharing, performing and narrating the spectacle of play.
INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTION

As we move towards increasingly ageing populations, the importance of intergenerational connection and play for sustainable futures will become pivotal.

In our study, mobile games provided a playful, innovative and creative way for the generations to bond and socialise. Let’s take, for example, the Brown family in Sydney. The Brown family consisted of a grandmother (Amanda), adult daughter (Sophie) and her child (Amy). Five year old Amy loved playing on her iPad with her mother and grandmother. She especially loved drawing apps that made drawing “more fun” with the use of sound and colours. 60 year old Amanda loves the “brain training” apps on her iPad—especially Scrabble, Lumosity, Elevate and Wordscapes.

Amanda and Sophie used to play Scrabble when Sophie was growing up and sometimes at night they will play on the iPad in the lounge room. They play “easy” when Amy is around to encourage her to start spelling words. Then, when Amy goes to sleep around 6.30pm they go onto normal Scrabble play. They find it relaxing and great way to socialize in a playful way.
As we move towards increasingly ageing populations, the importance of intergenerational connection and play for sustainable futures will become pivotal.
Conclusions

Mobile games are played by (almost) everyone, (almost) everywhere. To effectively understand and interpret these practices we need transdisciplinary approaches that coalesce games, media and mobile communication studies, affect theory, geography, urban studies, philosophy and phenomenology—the list goes on. The diverse agencies of mobile media users and players, and the multiple modalities of play, cut across equally diverse fields of inquiry. As we face a challenging future, it is our hope that the power of mobile games and playful practices can fuel innovative forms of care, mindful engagement and ethical sociality. In the often-over-hyped convergence of technology with future imaginaries, we might instead refashion some of our more familiar and habitual forms of mobile play as possible strategies for understanding and creating better ways of being in the world.

Mobile games and mobile play oscillate ambiently from background to foreground, and this experience often involves a heightened and more palpable spectrum of feeling—our engagement is intimate, both haptically and affectively. We touch others through the interface, connecting through networks and experiencing a sense of social proprioception; the mobile interface is an extension of our eyes, ears, hands and our social and emotional selves. Understanding and articulating the many feelings associated with mobile media use and mobile play requires complex methods to unpack these experiences—and more work is needed in this area.

Mobile gaming presents a convergence of locative, social, and mobile media; it is a lens through which we can see the changing nature of mobility, play, and communication as it moves through broader sociocultural, technological, and economic dynamics. Within the various assemblages of mobile gaming, we see new types of intimacy and communicative practice emerging around gameplay, new ways in which co-present forms of play and place-making are enacted while on the move, and the dynamic and ongoing transformation of the mobile screen as a portal that seamlessly insinuates games and cultural play into our everyday lives.

Mobile games afford both ambient and located social connection, and so can be used to counteract the emotional and physical isolation experienced by many people—young and old—in playful and innovative ways. They can facilitate connections between younger and older generations through an interface that has mutual significance and enjoyment for both, creating the possibility for social change. They move across public and private spaces in ways that can usefully link informal and formal systems and routines of care, especially as we move towards ageing societies. Mobile games also provide us with ways to understand the complex relationality between humans and our companion species, as we form intimate bonds through playful interaction, and share sensory and affective modes of perception and proprioception. In an age of Big Data and gamification, and an associated focus on the quantitative and utilitarian aspects of technology, the sensory intimacy and ambient sociality of mobile games and playful apps force us to attend to the complex tapestry of media use, and the corresponding ethnographic and interpretive adaptability required of researchers.

Mobile games and mobile play oscillate ambiently from background to foreground, and this experience often involves a heightened and more palpable spectrum of feeling—our engagement is intimate, both haptically and affectively.
Creative Outcomes: Toolkits, Apps, Exhibitions

SOCIALLY-ENGAGED ART PLAY: 
THE ART OF PLAY EXHIBITION 
AND WORKSHOPS

As part of knowledge dissemination and also engaging new audiences, we made a socially-engaged exhibition entitled The Art of Play (2016) at CCP (Melbourne) that coalesced game and play techniques through an installation combining Lego and Minecraft.

Audience members were invited to create their own “encounter”—that is, play with the Lego and make their own thing. They were then asked to photograph it and upload to Instagram with #theartofplay. The encounters were then printed out and pinned onto the wall. Over the time of the exhibition the encounters filled the wall—transforming audience into player into artist.

Figure 3: An encounter at The Art of Play participatory exhibition (2016).

SOCIAL PLAY: WORKSHOPS 
AND TOOLKITS

Along with the socially-engaged art play in the exhibition space, we also ran a series of workshops that sought to engage education groups to codesign their own social play toolkits. In particular, the workshops and toolkits sought to ask people to reflect on their digital play and how it connected to non-digital play. We set the workshops up in three different contexts—the gallery, urban public space, and classroom—to reflect on the various forms of performative spaces and play.

The development of the Social Play Toolkit—first developed for the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre in 2017 and then later in 2018 for more general pedagogical contexts—sought to reconcile the different vocabularies and practices around conceptualising play creatively in both digital and nondigital worlds for social change.
THE SOCIAL PLAY TOOLKIT

Play is a source of culture, a form of expression, and a creative way of engaging with the world. It is a crucial human ability for adaptation and expression.

In collaboration with our research partners and young people, we have developed a Social Play Tool Kit that encourages social play and game literacies in the classroom. Exploring socially-engaged gameplay and creativity across digital and material contexts, these tools are freely downloadable PDF’s for use in a variety of Primary School age learning environments.


DESIGN & PLAY: EXHIBITION, WORKSHOP, SPECIAL ISSUE


The exhibition was visited by over 3000 people over two weeks and featured in an article in The Saturday Age by Ray Edgar. We ran a workshop on haptic play with key international scholars during the exhibition which then became a special issue of Convergence journal (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1354856518815275)

Figure 4: Design & Play, exhibition view, Design Hub 2016. Photo: Tobias Titz and Marc Morel.
TIMeR is an in-development Augmented Reality audio-walk set on the RMIT Campus. Exploring the multiple, multisensorial and contested modes of making place, TIMeR features stories of land, river and sky with Boonwurrung elder N’Arweet Carolyn Briggs. Participants will be transformed into wayfarers as they move across the RMIT campus to uncover alternate cartographies, bringing new insights to familiar routes.

TIMeR is produced by DCP post-doc Hugh Davies, in collaboration with Associate Professor Olivia Guntarik, Boonwurrung elder N’Arweet Carolyn Briggs and VC Research Fellow Dr Troy Innocent. The project is developed with collaboration from Prof Mark McMillan (DPVC, Indigenous Engagement and Education), and the Ngarara Willim Centre, Elders in Residence.

The TIMeR prototype is available to download and play from: www.rmittimer.net

Figure 5: The TIMeR app.
Outcomes: Publications

We deployed ethnographic and creative practice methods and modes of knowledge exchange to engage different audiences from academic to general public. Outcomes included 5 co-authored books (i.e. MIT and Sage), 9 book chapters, 12 journal articles, 2 PhD completions and various non-traditional outputs like a social play toolkit with Young & Well CRC, 3 exhibitions at key national venues (Centre for Contemporary Photography, RMIT Design Hub and RMIT Gallery), an indigenous game and press articles in *The Age* and *The Conversation*.

TRADITIONAL OUTPUTS

**PhD COMPLETIONS**


**BOOKS**


**ANTHOLOGIES**


**BOOK CHAPTERS**


**REFEREED JOURNAL ARTICLES**


**PUBLISHED (OTHER)**


**KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS**

• Hjorth, L. (2018) Haptic Play: Understanding Hybrid Play and Mobile Games, *Hybrid Play symposium*, NC State University, USA.


**CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**


**JOURNAL SPECIAL ISSUES**

