

Locally Played: Real-World Games for Stronger Places and Communities [Book Review]

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Locally Played: Real-World Games for Stronger Places and Communities by Benjamin Stokes is a necessary title for all games scholars, one that illuminates the complications of integrating social games into various localities in order to drive community outreach and engagement. One vital addition it makes to gaming scholarship in the 21st century is the application of design principles and systems to existing urban infrastructures, linking various neighborhoods through the power of play. Networks can be strengthened through play, and Stokes points out how understanding the network in the first place can be used to create the game. The relationship between play and space is illustrated here.

The book succeeds at taking video games and applying principles of game design to various urban community campaigns, with clear examples including *Macon Money* in Macon, Georgia; *Reality Ends Here* in Los Angeles; and *Pokémon GO*, which remains a touchpoint of scholarship. There are different goals listed for each game, including getting a certain number of people involved in playing the game together and meeting up in real life. No matter the design, Stokes points out that the game must recognize the needs of the community. This crucial lesson forms the main thrust of the book, meaning that the game cannot be successful if it is designed to be played outside of the region. It must also allow players to take control of the outcomes, which is different from games that are designed to be controlled by a dungeon master or developer.

What Stokes is discussing here are *local community games*, which he defines as “game-based systems that involve real-world actions and are used to strengthen a place-based community.” (p. 7) Elsewhere he describes progress within the game as “congruent with affecting the world. These are games that collapse the frames of ‘training’ and ‘doing.’” (p. 7) This is reminiscent of James Carey’s examination of the telegraph as impactful on the community and the nation (Carey, 1985), though it is much more focused on smaller locations and is situated distinctly within the present day.

Local communities can directly benefit from gaming, but they are complex entities and require multiple perspectives to understand. Stokes highlights that “cognitive diversity” is necessary to understand the problem via multiple ways, and acknowledging the world operates through multiple different manners (Page, 2008). Stokes then defines games that fulfill their goals as having “local fit” in chapter 3, considering game actions as mechanics that can be used to better understand the communities involved. There are three dimensions to local fit that Stokes offers, and these are written to be legible for educators and organizers, and each dimension represents a distinct way to link the “how” of games to the way communities function (Stokes, p. 62).

The first dimension is social mixing, where player actions in the game (and game mechanics) are linked to creating social ties via network science and the public space. The next dimension is group identity and narrative, where the game’s narrative and the roles performed by the players are linked to group beliefs, social movements, and ultimately empowerment of the collective. How well does the game link to the community identity? Finally, the last dimension is focused on how communication flows, meaning how the game uses communication channels and digital media, including circulating stories of gameplay and recruiting new players. Stokes aligns this to the needs of the community by emphasizing the platforms and organizations that circulate local news, civic data, and stories of group life. This focus on the neighborhood ecosystem allows strong groups to tell their own stories and to stay informed on local interests.

Stokes explores how local fit plays out through case studies within multiple cities in *Locally Played*. Two games in particular illustrate how specific communities are impacted by the mechanics and overall goals of local projects. *Macon Money* was a game built to encourage interactions between persons separated by socioeconomic lines, as well as to teach expansionary monetary policy. The results of the game were promising, particularly for the goals the community had laid out. Residents who played the game

tried new businesses during play, and multiple residents returned to those businesses after the game had completed. This strengthening of community bonds via economics illustrates one mode of potential for the creators of games.

Team-based play also formed the backbone of *Reality Ends Here*, which was used on college campuses and within smaller communities to structure social interaction. For example, college students – especially those in film production – found unique ways to bolster ties through creative production. Stokes found that meaningful choices and production were crucial to putting players into situations where they could better interact with others. This focus on meaningful choice also resulted in stronger goal alignment, which illustrates the need for game designers to create situations where player choice could go beyond the initial boundaries of the game. This is a unique step away from multiple tenets of game design, much of which have stricter rules to provide greater power for the developer. Here, the rules tended to be looser, which allowed the players greater choice in achieving their goals. Stokes later illustrates how these models of distribution and design risk being locked into global molds that could be unchanged, which takes the local fit out of the equation. Adaptability for designers means that players are more likely to achieve stated goals, and players will ultimately gain the power to make meaningful choices.

History is placed into context here, as the ideas of design are placed within local histories. Stokes points out that fit isn't just limited to urban environments. In one example, he points out how students of different majors are parts of different communities, even on campus. The film students at the University of Southern California were better at engaging in the activities of the game, while the more professionally-minded communications students were less likely to participate. Again, Stokes highlights the incentives, benefits, and downfalls of the game, showing that audiences are geographically, culturally, and historically determined. The film students tapped into the stronger local histories of the institution, crafting creative works through the lens of the mythologies of the area. *Locally Played* emphasizes that designers understand their potential audiences and focus the game characteristics, goals, and challenges around their needs and desires, but it also asks that designers consider how the residents of the area look at their culture and how it shapes the neighborhoods and communities. *Reality Ends Here* was much more successful in certain cases due to the utilization of those histories.

This success isn't an easy thing to achieve, and Stokes is sure to emphasize poorly implemented games for local players throughout

the text. There are multiple highlights and lowlights within the games played. One example of an initially unsuccessful game integration was a Boston-based game focused around *Pokémon GO* that emphasized low-income neighborhood engagement. This attempt was less successful at understanding its player base, and thus was unable to effectively transmit the goals. Stokes writes “to improve local alignment, Boston organizers renamed the program and fundamentally shifted the model. They decided to focus even more locally (rather than citywide) and to embed participation in trusted neighborhood groups. In their pivot, the coalition discovered a different way to frame participation: it’s not about whether you like the game; it’s about having a massive audience for your writing...many were excited at the prospect of telling a different story of their neighborhood to the public.” (Stokes, p. 187) Again, by providing a clearer form of input that also fixated on individual contributions to communities, the designers were able to pivot to a stronger and deeper level of engagement.

Stokes knows that there is no one way to approach gaming, and the writing reflects that. The chapters are aimed at multiple audiences, with specific groups highlighted for certain reads. Game designers are selected for certain chapters, while historians are marked for others, and urban studies are selected for multiple sections. Stokes incorporates urban studies into game studies and vice versa, and this is a fascinating cross of text because it links game space and city geographic and political studies together. By implementing multiple disciplines, Stokes has provided gateways into different disciplines, making the book useful for a variety of educators and professionals.

Furthermore, as the isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us, social connections matter to the general public, and Stokes presents evidence that networking science through gaming can provide community stickiness. When analyzing *Reality Ends Here* in Los Angeles, Stokes found that newcomers and loners were better able to integrate with the game being played due to the joint nature of the project, which featured hidden facilitators, trading cards, and focused on emergent crowd behavior. “For organizers and educators, this games demonstrates the value of using real-time network feedback to bridge groups and build network cohesion.” (Stokes, 2020)

Ultimately, what makes Stokes’s text valuable is the variety that it brings to scholarship. Game studies is often focused on systemic issues, and Stokes highlights a need for versatility. Breaking out of tradition is often difficult for designers that are working within more

intuitive systems, and *Locally Played* is a great example of how to tailor games to specific individuals and cities. This book is a necessary read for games scholars everywhere.

It also deeply benefits scholars of local government, city management, and even library studies and informatics. One concern that is often brought up through these studies is a worry about funding, which is usually minimal. Since cities are usually operating within shoestring budgets, Stokes highlights the flexibility and DIY nature of specific games that operate with volunteers. Some enthusiasm is needed, which is not often the case. However, this is a refreshing change from usual games scholarship that is aimed at high-cost integration of technologies. Stokes explains that local games cannot be expected to be successful because of the amount of money thrown at the campaign, or through various technologies and newer media that are used. Again, the design and function of those technologies must also take into account the specific population of players, and the goals of the cities involved. If game designers want to make sure that their local games succeed, they must accede control to players and let the outcomes be in doubt. This level of interactivity may create new lessons for all involved, and Stokes wisely points out that others should not run away from those lessons.

The biggest contribution this book makes to scholarship is the integration of gaming into urban studies, and vice versa. By highlighting how necessary it is to understand the space where a game takes place, Stokes integrates the work of Shaw, Sotomaa, and other luminaries into a space where research had yet to break out, and illustrates a path forward for future projects as they are crafted. Stokes ends the book with a simple yet powerful maxim: to better understand how games fit within neighborhoods, we need to look beyond how they change people and focus on how they change places (Stokes, 2020). It was a unique read that provided this reader with a solid understanding of the properties of this unique medium. Highly recommended for multiple audiences, educators and community organizers alike.

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