

# Easing into Play: Creating invitations for urban play and games

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## INTRODUCTION

Urban play and games are increasingly being explored for their capacity to encourage social and community inclusion (Innocent, 2021; Chisik et al. 2022), foster connections to place (Sheahan et al. 2021, Innocent 2018) and as catalysts for cultivating the civic and cultural identities of cities and neighbourhoods (Innocent & Riley, 2022; Swanson, 2020). However urban play is a complex and often transgressive phenomena and encouraging people to step out of their customary behaviour to engage in public play-based interventions and games remains a significant challenge. How can game makers and designers evoke interest from passersby to prompt spontaneous and unplanned play?

Although a number of urban play game experiences rely on spectacle or overly channelled modes of engagement, this paper outlines an alternate approach which involves an 'ease into play'. We define this experience as an incremental process of discovery that aims to facilitate player-led curiosity and exploration through an open invitation to play. The paper outlines three urban play projects designed by the authors and collaborators in Melbourne, Australia; *YomeciBand* (2021 - ongoing), *Yomeci Hole* (2022) and *Yomeci Orchestra* (2023 - ongoing) and presents these as case studies for analysing 'easing into play' in practice.

Initially developed with Dr Troy Innocent for a series of activations connected to an open-access and community-driven public parklet, *YomeciBand* invites passersby to walk and play with musical chalk creatures drawn on the footpath. A percussive beat is played which subtly prompts people to take their initial steps on these colourful and abstract entities. Resembling a hopscotch game or obstacle course, the design, shape and position of these drawings suggest physical actions to the player; hopping, leaping, twisting, running etc. Audio compositions and tunes are activated live by an inconspicuous performer playing a portable OP-1 synthesiser who observes the players movements across the pavement drawings from afar. These sounds are played through concealed speakers positioned along the length of the

pavement giving a sense that the sound ‘follows’ people’s traversal and movement. The technology of *YomeciBand* is deliberately unobtrusive and embedded in the surrounding urban infrastructure, inviting people into a serendipitous ‘other worldly’ experience within a city street.

*Yomeci Hole* is an experimental outdoor arcade game commissioned by the Future Play Lab for the Clarendon Street Arcade (2021) and Play Capitol Arcade (2022) which both explored how to reconnect people to public life post-pandemic through arcade gaming trails. In *Yomeci Hole* the player stands above a virtual hole in the ground using their feet to activate ground buttons (pressing, jumping, tapping etc), and encountering various inventive objects, creatures and entities as they go down. Resembling a grassy hill growing up from the footpath and fitted with lights and coloured foot-buttons, the design and infrastructure of *Yomeci Hole* invites people into a park-like recreational world, offering a respite within a busy urban locale. Some residents ‘tended to the hole’, picking up litter left on it and caring for it like a garden or reserve (Leoke et al. 2022).

*Yomeci Orchestra* is an analog urban game where players invite each other into play. Commissioned for a public art game event, Urban Play School (RMIT) during Melbourne International Games Week 2023, the game explores bodily and musical improvised collaboration as a form of social play. *Yomeci Orchestra*’s play space has two sides: ‘The Floor’ - a confetti of colourful tapes on the footpath, and ‘The Band’ - a range of musical toys laid out on the ground. Players of the two sides engage in an improvised and non-verbal exchange using their body or the instruments to correspond to each other. With no goals other than making each other feel heard using two seemingly mismatched languages of expression, players come up with their own game and constantly renew and adapt it in order to play with, to and for each other.

Empirical field research conducted by the authors and the Future Play Lab indicated community engagement with the works was predominantly positive (Stevens et al. 2022). Catching people ‘in the flow’ was a paramount consideration, each work responding to the existing spatial, material and social characteristics of the thoroughfares they were situated in. As such, people playfully engaged with the works for short or extended periods, and resumed their daily activities. Events and performances did not require tickets or special access, encouraging this integration within everyday life. However, as urban play is situated in the dynamic and unpredictable context of public space, levels of participation varied depending on the context and site of each work. Further research is needed on the study of the behaviour and experience of how people ‘ease into play’ that builds on this preliminary investigation.

This creative practice research acts as a guide for further iterations of these works and for developing future projects. The paper intends to contribute to our understanding of enacting invitations to play in public space and, in doing so, highlight the value of inclusive and open forms of urban play and games.

## BIO

Uyen Nguyen is an animator, designer and lecturer at RMIT University who develops sound-based works, public art, animation, interactive installations, experimental games and urban play. As a PhD candidate Nguyen is researching the role and potential of sound in urban play. Collaborating with leading artists, game makers, creative producers, research partners and cultural organisations, her gallery-based and site-specific works have been shared in national and international venues, events and exhibitions including Experimenta, Tarra Warra Museum of Art, DiGRA, Freeplay and ACMI. With Matthew Riley and Max Piantoni, she is a co-founder of the experimental play collective YomeciPlay. Nguyen is a creative practice researcher at the Future Play Lab at RMIT.

Dr Matthew Riley is a Senior Lecturer at RMIT University whose practice and scholarship in experimental design, art practice and critical forms of play have been recognised in exhibitions and conferences across Japan, United Kingdom, Portugal, France, United Arab Emirates, Austria, Finland and Hong Kong. Riley's creative practice has been shared in venues, organisations and events including Playable City, Tarra Warra Museum of Art, ACMI, Freeplay, Monash University Museum of Art and Experimenta. With Uyen Nguyen and Max Piantoni, he is a co-founder of the experimental play collective YomeciPlay. Riley is a creative practice researcher at the Future Play Lab at RMIT.

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