

# The Playable Campus: Game Design & Creative Placemaking for the “New Campus Urbanism”

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## INTRODUCTION

How could we promote a more “Playful Campus?” How about a giant slip n’ slide on Old Tuck Drive for the Sophomore summer experience. It also would be a great way to get students to the river – fast!  
– “Playable Campus?” (Dartmouth College Planning, 2014).

Universities are increasingly funding placemaking initiatives to “activate” their campus, enhance the “student experience” and invite members of surrounding communities to use and embrace the campus as a communal public space. Such initiatives range from elaborate student precincts that incorporate high-end restaurant chains and expansive open public spaces, to more temporary or semi-permanent interventions such as farmers’ markets, parklets, outdoor art trails and immersive augmented reality apps (see e.g. 64 Ways of Being n.d.; Arup n.d.; Murrup Barak n.d.). This reinvestment in place by universities is unfolding within the broader transformation of campus planning and design, following the rise of what Hebbert (2018, 892) terms “new campus urbanism,” which is seeing universities reconnect with the surrounding streets, businesses, public spaces and communities of the cities they’re embedded in. This reconnection is being driven by multiple, sometimes overlapping imperatives: the “entrepreneurial turn” in universities as they seek to attract revenue from government and industry through “triple helix” public-private-academic partnerships and innovation precincts within neoliberal policy settings (Marginson & Considine 2000); marketing strategies aimed at capturing the lucrative international student market (Fincher & Shaw 2011); attempts to encourage a “return to campus” following the shift to online learning models and the lingering impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic; and efforts at decolonising the campus and reconnecting with First Nations knowledge and culture through campus architecture and design and Indigenous knowledge and education centres (McNeill et al. 2022).

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While many of these placemaking initiatives can be playful and engaging, many are also generic, unimaginative, top-down, spectacle-driven and largely disconnected from place: bland, corporatised “precincts”; empty plazas to contrive “chance encounters”; a giant water slide in the middle of campus (see Dartmouth College Planning 2014; Tabet & Sundermann 2023; Way 2016). We propose the concept of the “playable campus” as an intervention into university placemaking within the context of new campus urbanism. The playable campus builds on the growing recognition of play across contemporary urbanism and public culture through initiatives like the “Playable City,” which recognises play as a catalyst for more inclusive, participatory and socially-connected urban design (Playable City n.d.; Nijholt 2019). But it also taps into a deeper history of playful practices, from First Nations ways of being in and mapping Country, to more contemporary manifestations of play as a mode of intervention into public life through movements like Dadaism, Gutai, Fluxus, Situationist International and New Games (Flanagan 2009). As play becomes increasingly attractive to high-level decision-makers and corporate strategists as much as independent game designers, researchers and artists, it is assuming a particularly significant role in the remaking of place in contemporary culture. But it also evokes questions around how meaningfully play is connected to the lived conditions of place, who has the “right to play” in the city, and whose interests - public or private, privileged or marginalised - this public play serves (Apperley 2016; Innocent & Leorke 2020). Universities’ growing embracement of play in campus planning and placemaking, we argue, is entangled within these debates.

The playable campus is a critical lens for exploring such concerns. It combines a creative placemaking approach - collaboration between universities, artists, students and academics (see Stevens et al. 2023) - with experimental, hybrid physical/digital game design in public space (see 64 Ways of Being, n.d.) to make university campuses more resilient, inclusive and inviting. It locates the growing prevalence and appetite for play on the university campus within the neoliberalisation of higher education and the university’s (re)turn to the city (Hebbert 2018). It positions the material spaces of the campus - its streets, infrastructure, buildings and inhabitants - as a site for experimentation under a different set of constraints than what urban public space affords, operating within a live social context including all of the challenges and opportunities this presents (Leorke & Harwood 2023). And, like the playable city, it presents a critical and creative model for working within funding bodies’ planning and marketing regimes without necessarily compromising the integrity of urban play as a mode of engaging with public space and culture (Innocent & Leorke 2020). Meanwhile, reflecting on DIGRAA’s 10th anniversary, we also argue that the playable campus invites a broader rethinking of game studies in the Australian context by considering university campuses as canvases for play, experimentation and connection with First Nations knowledge and culture through hybrid, place-based, and post-digital game design (see Cramer, 2014).

## BIOS

Dr Aramiha Harwood is a Māori Ngāpuhi writer, researcher and gamer who grew up in Country Victoria. He publishes Tabletop games (through Mana Press) with a focus on indigenous concepts of mana and narrative storytelling. His research has involved a diverse range of topics: identity theory and agency, cultural precincts, international education and student wellbeing, Māori diaspora, and the role of Place and Gaming in Indigenous knowledge/s. He is a Research Fellow at RMIT School of Design and Social Context, working on the “Play About Place” Linkage project.

Troy Innocent is an artist, academic, designer, coder, educator, and Senior Lecturer at RMIT University, where his creative practice research explores the city as platform for play through an inventive blend of live art, game design and public art. Over the past ten years he has explored the lived experience of cities through mixed realities. He is currently the Director of the Future Play Lab, which works across speculative design, creative placemaking and urban play to explore new ways of being in the world; and Chief Investigator of “Play About Place”, an Australian Research Council Linkage-funded project.

Dale Leorke is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Sydney on the ARC Discovery-funded project “The University and the City.” His work examines the intersections between digital technologies, public space and public institutions. His work has been published in *Convergence*, *Media Theory*, *American Journal of Play* and *Journal of Urban Design*, among others. His books include *Location-based Gaming* (2018), *Public Libraries in the Smart City* (2018), *Games and Play in the Creative, Smart and Ecological City* (2020), *Openness in Practice* (2021) and *The Library as Playground* (2022). His most recent work can be found at: [www.dleorke.net](http://www.dleorke.net).

Danielle Wyatt is a cultural researcher in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. She writes and researches about the public life of culture, as expressed within cultural institutions, cultural policy, in the design of public spaces, and through everyday practices. Her books include *Public Libraries in the Smart City* and *The Library as Playground*. Other research has been published in the journals *New Media and Society*, *City, Culture and Society*, and the *International Journal of Cultural Policy*.

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