



Nine Questions About Play in Particular Places

Matheson Marcault

Who's asking the questions?

Sophie Sampson is a writer and creative producer, working mainly in the field of play for public spaces as one half of Matheson Marcault. She has a particular interest in the physicality of play and projects deeply rooted in place, history and archives.

She also produces Now Play This, an annual festival of experimental games at Somerset House, and writes on history, culture & game design.

<http://mathesonmarcault.com>

Playing in public is hard. People will play together gloriously without language or nationality when they feel safe and invited to do so. In order to truly relax into it, people must feel equal to the eyes watching them; clear on the parameters of engagement; and have enough sense of safety to go outside their regular rules of engagement with strangers. Play is only one of many ways of engaging with the city, and it has to co-exist with what urbanists call the street ballet.

I started a residency with a question about how places where play is welcomed and appropriate are indicated in Tokyo. How can we strengthen that invitation? Can we make more people feel it applies to them? And as I broke down the interactions I was seeing on the streets, the same questions kept recurring that come up in London or Singapore or Skegness.

So, as a manual and a provocation for those of you who commission or are interested in making playful work in public spaces, here are some of the questions I keep asking. I'm interested to know which ones you're wrestling with and how you're answering them.

1.

If you're putting a piece that requires play on in public rather than a dedicated space, what changes?



The nature of the attention your players can or will give you changes enormously depending on their surroundings. I asked Akira Takayama of Port B about this, a theatre director who has spent much of his career making work that takes audiences out into the streets, both in Tokyo and internationally. He said:

"In reality, enclosed spaces such as theatres are much freer and more open than many modern urban spaces. There are of course still various restrictions but, compared with being out in the open urban environment, there is much more freedom to do whatever you wish. ... I will be taking my audience out into the city. There, the inevitable obstructions, the noise and risk of accidents will sometimes interfere with the creative experience. The challenge is likely to prove to be greater than in a theatre."

But we often feel like a 'lost child' in cities (in the sense that our natural state has been disturbed), and the experience of being in a state of limbo as we see the city constantly transform itself from day to day teaches us that cities are not static objects or things."

2.

What would you like people to commit to the piece?

Over our years of designing play for public spaces Matheson Marcault has developed a vocabulary to describe the different levels of engagement one can design for in a street setting.

1. Noticing
2. Thinking about
3. Trying out
4. Crossing threshold into deep play
5. Repeated play

'Noticing' is the simplest, billboard-style engagement. 'Thinking about' is for when your player is considering 'how would I interact with this?', 'if I did where would it take me?' without being moved to act. 'Trying out' is engaging with a simple interaction and seeing what happens.

It's not bad if you're not trying to go all the way to five! Thinking about can be a subtle and engaging act in itself. And for many pieces in public spaces, 'trying out' is all they ask of their players - a contained interaction with particular feedback does not ask too much of players, and it's clear when the fun has been had

and it's time to move on. You get broad reach rather than deep engagement.

Crossing the threshold into deep play requires a level of comfort in the space that is only partly under your control as a maker. It requires people to be in a space they feel is for them, that there will not be consequences for doing things outside the regular social contract. That is much easier in enclosed spaces, because the enclosure sets the boundaries of where the transgression is acceptable. Players engaged in deep play tend to forget that time is passing, and need to be looked after physically while absorbed in the game.

And repeated play requires a depth and richness that the others do not, either from the game-object itself or from other players. The decision to play as an adult is partly an intellectual decision that something interesting will happen if you do. What will pique that interest?

3.

In your piece, do players' actions resemble art or protest?

What's the status of that in this place?

Play looks ambiguous to passers by. It can read as joyful or angry, theatre or disturbance. It can involve groups gathering, shouting, running about, and moving in ways that, if the context wasn't play, would look like a threat. Whether the context is clear to observers depends very much on expectations of what's normal in this place, and who is playing.

Amani Naseem, a game designer, academic and curator originally from the Maldives described this context slippage while running a games festival in Malé, the capital (in an interview with Holly Gramazio first published in the Now Play This 2018 brochure)

"... At one point [during the festival] the military came and stood right in the middle of where we were playing, and of course a lot of people had been beaten up the week before by policemen while demonstrating, so everyone was getting

angry and there was almost a confrontation. ... Maldives has this huge tradition of public festivals, especially the Eid festivals, but Malé, the capital where we were running the event, doesn't share the tradition. All the spaces there are very political and whatever you do is very politicised.

In the islands though, we have these community festivals where there are traditional games played between the men and women; everyone makes fun of people in power, there's satire and parades and dress up, everybody gets drenched with water. People go from island to island to play on each other's islands. But because of where we were, the short time span, and charged atmosphere it was very hectic. If we'd done something on the islands, and more long term, we could have been much more collaborative and connected to the playful festival culture locally."

4.

Does your piece resemble advertising or commerce? Will that help its takeup or hinder it?

People always want to know what they're getting into, and they rely on their existing mental models to evaluate that. Their estimation of why something is there will form a big part of their calculation of whether it is for them.

For example, as part of our work with Matheson Marcault we spent time travelling round the UK, testing a game prototype in different types of spaces - a beach, a park, a shopping centre - looking for insights into how people respond differently in those different spaces.

There were huge differences in takeup, particularly because of the difference in how much freedom kids had to decide they wanted to stop and play rather than be hurried along by their parents. Play is an optional activity which has to compete with many other tasks.

At the shopping centre one simple thing dramatically increased the number of players. Parents - not unreasonably in that commercial space - assumed that we were enticing their children to play as part of a commercial transaction. The thing that families needed to feel safe to stop and play in that place were large signs saying FREE.

Whereas in a park everyone just assumed it would be free as it was next to other freely available activities, and takeup was largely determined by how far parents would have to walk to supervise their children.

5.

What's the history of the public space you're in? The city you're in?



New buildings paper over old spaces, and in a city like Tokyo this is happening constantly. But the folk memory doesn't go away so fast, or the meanings that spaces have held.

Flying into Tokyo Haneda airport, for example, is a more charged experience when you've read about the site's history as a locus of protest, both before the airport was built, and as one of the focuses of anti-ANPO protests.

Once you start asking questions about a place's past, forgetting starts to feel like an expensive choice. Amani Naseem again on putting on work in Australia:

"When I've been playing or making public play outside Europe, those are the times when I have been most aware of territories. Playing in occupied land like Australia, or even Malé. I remember walking all over Melbourne with the artist and game designer Lee Shang Lun looking for sites for a game and it was the first time I had to think about areas that were sacred but not visibly marked as sacred."

6.

Who was welcome in the space before you arrived?

Are you looking to change that, or simply make something for the people who are already going to be there?

In the UK, groups seen as inherently threatening, like teenagers, carry maps in their heads of where they will be able to spend time. They're different from the maps of those who look more acceptable to the gatekeepers of a space, and they're less able to relax into deep play even if they want to.

Spaces which are explicitly welcoming to those groups or which make their behaviour legible can transform their place in the community. This is from an interview by Matheson Marcault with Ashvin de Vos, an architect with a particular interest in public space:

"There was a playground surrounded by buildings and the biggest problem everyone reported was the youths, the youths, the youths! So what the practice [Erect Architects] did was to say: let's build a shelter with a roof, and let's put a table tennis table under it. So the youths could have a space.

And then they stopped being youths - they became a group of children who were playing table tennis. So long as they're having fun and they're laughing you see that they're not bored - they don't seem like a threat."



7.

Who will be barred from participating?

We tend to feel that when we site a play-object in public space it is, by its nature, open to all. But let me share the moment when I realised my designs were not truly open and would need some big changes to be so.

It started with a feeling of pride, looking round at a large installation of games framed as a fairground. People were crowding round each game, which I had designed to the best of my ability so that everyone could play together. We had even had a wheelchair user through earlier who had navigated the games with ease and I was feeling pretty good about it all.

But, it turns out, children's wheelchairs are smaller than adult's wheelchairs, and there was a kid stretching up to try and see over the edge of a game table to where the rest of her family were playing. She could see the fascinating balls whirling round and round but would never be able to take part. I think of that as my very worst moment as a game designer.

Once you start digging, you realise that that kind of moment is rare, and not because we're all great at universal design. Unless you're explicit about the provisions you've made for people who find it difficult to be out in crowded spaces, whether it's because they're visually impaired, in a wheelchair or something else, they simply won't come. You have to make the provisions first and then be explicit that you've done so so that the people affected will know that your event is even possible for them. Provide a contact so that they can check in about their access needs and know that they're not going to end up stuck outside a back entrance trying to get in while no one hears their knock.

Being open to all brings so much extra social richness, but remember to ask yourself who your definition of all includes.

8.

Are your players subjects or authors?

As a maker or a commissioner, how much control are you willing to give away? Are you open to players making new things within the framework you set up? Is it possible to play wrong? Because that's something that players worry about all the time.

Giving people authorship and ownership of their engagement is one of the most generous things you can do with play. There is a peculiar form of plausible deniability about things you do in a game that makes people willing to draw, or write, or make up new ways to play, who never normally would. The things they make are real, but made without the old shame of 'I can't draw' or 'I'm no good'.

But all kinds of details can catapult people out of that state, and without extensive playtesting right from the start, you won't know what it is until it's too late. So please do test things with the audience they are for, before all the details have been decided. It feels terribly vulnerable, but pays enormous dividends in the success of interactive work and helps you answer a bunch of the questions I've just asked with first-hand knowledge.



9.

**Does your thing make the
world a slightly kinder place?**

**What is play for,
if not for that?**