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# Irina Shklovski & Adriana de Souza e Silva

## AN URBAN ENCOUNTER

### Realizing online connectedness through local urban play

*Computing research has long been interested in location-aware mobile games, such as hybrid reality games, location-based games and urban games. With an increasingly pervasive IT infrastructure and comparatively affordable mobile devices, such games are becoming part of everyday play around the world. A study of an urban night-game called Encounter widely played in the Former Soviet Union and the Russian-speaking Diaspora is presented. The ways in which IT enables a complex interaction between the local experience of play in the urban environment and the geographically distributed nature of the player community are considered. The findings illustrate how this form of location-aware mobile game-play pulled together local engagement and global player communities into socio-technical assemblages, showing the interplay between local attachments, distant connections and the location-based communication in daily experience. The most important outcome of these games then was not the direct individual engagement with the urban environment through technology or the collaboration with strangers in the course of play (although these were the necessary prerequisites), but the social relationships that, while gained in-game, could be leveraged for civic engagement, belonging and mutual support. While the local, physical experience of the everyday and the game was important, the connections to the distributed community resulted in expanded horizons and changed the nature of the local experience as players felt they could belong to something larger than the locales they physically inhabited.*

**Keywords** urban games; location-awareness; mobility; play; social relationships; community

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## Introduction

Computing research has long been interested in location-aware mobile games. Intrigued by the possibilities that mobile and location-based technologies offer, researchers have designed location-aware games as spaces for application and testing of ubiquitous computing concepts (Barkhuus *et al.* 2005; Bell *et al.* 2006; Chang & Goodman 2006), while theorists engaged these games to explore notions of play, mobility in urban spaces and the implications of using the city as the game board (Chang & Goodman 2006; de Souza e Silva & Hjorth 2009; Montola *et al.* 2009). Initially, location-aware urban games were deployed, tested and studied for relatively brief periods of time, with few users and little iteration (Barkhuus *et al.* 2005; Bell *et al.* 2006). Researchers closely observed play dynamics, technology use and new forms of engagement with urban environments as well as the social dynamics of collaboration and competition of co-located and distant players (Tolmie *et al.* 2008; Nova & Girardin 2009). Although players often developed affinity for other players, brief deployments could not support the development of enduring play-communities that have been studied in online games such as MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) (Taylor 2006).

With increasingly pervasive IT infrastructures and affordable mobile devices, location-aware urban games are expanding into the commercial world and engaging massive numbers of users for extended periods of time (O'Hara 2008; Lund *et al.* 2010). In this article, we explore the interrelationship between physical play in local urban environments and interactions with the geographically distributed player-community, as these are intimately connected through the IT infrastructure. We present a case study of an online gaming network called Encounter, with thousands of players in the Former Soviet Union and across the Russian-speaking Diaspora. To analyze local and remote configurations of game-play, we investigate the socio-technical environment in which Encounter is played, considering the complex interaction between the local experience of play in the urban environment and both local and geographically distributed player communities. Our analysis is grounded in current research on location-aware mobile games (McGonigal 2007; de Souza e Silva & Hjorth 2009; Montola *et al.* 2009) and extends existing theoretical frameworks (de Souza e Silva & Sutko 2008) to consider how players construct the locally salient meaning of online connections gained through the social and material practice of urban game-play.

## Theoretical considerations

Urban games are part of a broader umbrella of location-aware mobile games, which includes pervasive, location-based and hybrid reality games (de Souza e

Silva & Hjorth 2009). de Souza e Silva and Hjorth (2009) suggest that location-aware urban games have three main characteristics: (1) they use the city space as the game board, (2) they are multiplayer games, involving only co-present, or both co-present and remote players and (3) they subvert and transform everyday modes of mobility and immobility through the use of technology. As a result, engagement in location-aware urban games can influence players' patterns of mobility in the city, perceptions of urban spatiality and sociability (Bell *et al.* 2006; Lund *et al.* 2010). Players can develop different perceptions of the urban space in which they live because they are forced to find new routes through the familiar locales or to become more aware of its physical characteristics (Lantz 2007; de Souza e Silva & Hjorth 2009). Although scholars have proposed many definitions of games that mix technology and urban space (Nieuwdorp 2005; Lantz 2007; McGonigal 2007; Montola *et al.* 2009), we use the term urban games as defined by de Souza e Silva and Hjorth (2009) because it emphasizes the use of the city space as the game board, and as the primary play space.

Urban games are mission-based and often have a focus on play as a kind of public performance (McGonigal 2007; Hjorth 2008). McGonigal emphasizes that 'players are directed via clues to show up at a real-world location' (McGonigal 2007). As missions involve the regular urban environment, Hjorth (2008) suggests that such games can 'provide a platform for different types of public performativity whereby participants could "practice" the everyday/familiar urban space in a new way'. While completing missions by performing tasks in public spaces, players have to contend with each other, competing, collaborating, encouraging game performance and often sharing in the potential of public embarrassment (Hjorth 2008). Yet, few urban games have achieved longevity and broad adoption. One of the reasons for their ultimate failure was heavy reliance on a single puppet-master (McGonigal 2007) or a group of designers responsible for generating game episodes (Taylor & Kolko 2003). More recent research suggests that incorporating player creativity in all aspects of game-play and game-design is key to the success of location-aware games (O'Hara 2008; Lund *et al.* 2010).

When location-aware urban games are enacted 'in the wild', that is, when they become large-scale and involve many players, over a large span of time, their effects on player mobility, perceptions of urban space and sociability must be redefined. Scholars have begun to address this through the study of a popular location-aware practice of Geocaching (Neustaedter *et al.* 2010). O'Hara (2008) proposed that Geocaching as a location-based practice is intimately connected to participation in the distributed online community. We argue that broadly adopted urban games that are held together by some form of an online community may support a different kind of location-aware mobile game-play. While urban game-play typically engages the *in situ* physical environment, when such game-play becomes supported by a distributed online community, players not only encounter each other physically and virtually but also at

times encounter physical locations through the eyes of local players, building connections not only to people but also to places through play. To consider this, we reframe the three dimensions for analysis of location-aware games developed by de Souza e Silva and Sutko (2008): (1) how games connect play and ordinary life, (2) how they create trust through play dynamics and (3) how they support a long-lasting community.

### *Dimensions of location-aware games*

de Souza e Silva and Sutko (2008) assert that the connection between play and ordinary life happens experientially and spatially. Ordinary spaces can transform into playful spaces and vice-versa (Lehtonen & Mänpää 1997; Tolmie *et al.* 2008) when a regular commute to work becomes a mission and a trip downtown turns into a chase for a specific object. Although most games played in physical spaces use elements of everyday life, location-aware mobile games have eased the process of broadening ‘the game world to include elements of everyday life’ (Nieuwdorp 2005). Yet, in large-scale urban games that are played for extended periods of time, the connection between play and ordinary life is likely to be stronger, its consequences more far-reaching and long lasting.

Trust in location-aware games is built on the foundation of reciprocal monitoring. It is generally ‘safer’ to trust strangers in these games because they are also game-players, and therefore share something in common. The tendency to trust strangers is not only derived from the play experience but is an essential characteristic of urban sociability (de Souza e Silva & Sutko 2008). We traverse urban environments despite people’s anonymity, because we trust that others will behave like we do (Simmel 1971) and because all of us share unspoken expectations of behavior socially shaped in part by the urban environment. Urban games are embedded into this dynamic of urban sociality observed in city spaces.

Location-aware games support the organization of social mobile networks in physical spaces (de Souza e Silva & Frith 2010). However, when location-aware mobile games are deployed ‘in the wild’, the dimensions of the social networks can grow significantly, leading to an online community of players that extrapolates the limits of the game. Although the relevance of community was emphasized in online gaming (Taylor 2006) and hybrid reality games (de Souza e Silva & Sutko 2008), large-scale urban games have the potential to create game communities that can go beyond the game, supporting the development of personal relationships and exchanges of support while remaining strongly tied to physical urban environments where local player-groups reside.

### *Remoteness and location-awareness*

Concepts such as ‘remote’ and ‘location-aware’ are central to discussions of location-aware mobile games where ‘remote players’ most often denotes

players at distant computers who guide street players on their missions. We theorize that in broadly adopted games that have developed consistent communities of players, 'remoteness' now increasingly relates to the ability to connect to the online player community, rather than simply a distant personal computer that could well be in a nearby apartment. Similarly, the 'location-awareness' of these urban games goes beyond having the appropriate technologies to play the game but is increasingly related to the potential of being aware of a remote locality, through the sharing of local knowledge (Gordon & de Souza e Silva 2011). It is not that technology is no longer important; yet, as mobile IT devices become ubiquitous, we argue that it is more productive to reframe the notions of remoteness and location-awareness to include the social relationships that emerge through social interaction around game-play.

In what follows, we elaborate on the cultural context of our research and present a detailed description of the Encounter gaming network and the urban game *Combat*. We then use the three criteria proposed by de Souza e Silva and Sutko (2008) to frame our discussion of the main themes: the role of Encounter in players' daily lives, the importance of social relationships gained through play and player involvement with the Encounter community. Finally, we discuss whether and how membership in online communities might manifest in daily life.

## Research context

Encounter is a privately owned commercial project that relies in part on fees paid by local player-groups. As of June 2012, the main Encounter site (<http://en.cx>), reported over 500,000 registered players in 25 countries. Approximately 1,000–2,000 registered players visit the site daily. Players in the network have played over 30,000 games since the company's inception in 2004.<sup>1</sup> Although Encounter boasts international participation, over 90% of the players come from the countries of the Former Soviet Union such as Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine or Kazakhstan. Here, we briefly summarize the socio-cultural context of the region that may, in part, be responsible for the format of the game and its popularity.

For location-aware urban games to be possible, access to the Internet is crucial and Internet adoption rates in the countries of the Former Soviet Union are rapidly increasing. For example, 51 percent of the Russian population (FOM 2012) and 49.5 percent of the population in Kazakhstan (Statistics Agency of Kazakhstan 2012) report having used the Internet at least once within the last month. Mobile phones have become the constant companions of nearly 90 percent of the population in both countries. Despite these technological developments, the physical infrastructure of many cities has fallen into disrepair, with multi-million dollar mansions and urban decay existing side by side. The combination of urban decay and proliferation of IT is perhaps responsible for

the popularity of nighttime urban games across the Former Soviet Union. Encounter is currently the largest of these ventures.<sup>2</sup>

## Method

This research is part of a project investigating how people in Russia and Kazakhstan are adopting and integrating the Internet and other communication technologies into everyday practices. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews, focus groups and many hours of informal conversations and observations in three cities in Kazakhstan and five cities in Russia over the course of 4 months in 2010.

Interview participants were recruited using snowball sampling in Russia and Kazakhstan. We also used the Encounter website to contact players. We collected seven interviews from players and game-designers (five men and two women, aged between 20 and 30). The first author participated as an observer in one Combat game and attended several post-game parties in different cities. We also conducted online data collection for 3 months by following activities in locales where in-person contact had already been established and monitoring discussions on the main forum.

### *Data analysis*

We developed a coding scheme based on open coding of transcripts, memos and field notes (Emerson *et al.* 1995): attitudes toward the local urban environment, the practice of play and engagement with player communities around the game, and what role Encounter had in participants' everyday lives. Main themes emerged inductively from an analysis based on the principles of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss 2008). All quotes were translated by the first author, who is bi-lingual. We indicate initials (changed for anonymity), gender and age but not locations of our respondents because revealing locations would violate the confidentiality of participants.

### *Encounter player characteristics*

Our qualitative investigation suggests that the game tends to attract people with at least some college education, from late teens to late 40s. To assess the gender ratio among players, we selected a random sample of 500 player profiles from the Encounter site. Gender is a required variable in these profiles and we hand-counted the self-reports. There was a gender disparity in participation in Encounter, with women making up approximately a third of the players. Due to the importance of technology enabling participation in the game and in the community, players also tended to be relatively technically savvy. As one sub-domain owner

described players in his city: ‘The majority are of course IT-people: those who work with information technologies, those who are somehow tied in with the Internet, creative – artists and such, or students’ (NA, male, 27).

## An urban Encounter

The Encounter gaming network encompasses a range of game formats supported by an extensive IT gaming engine accessible through the website. Most of these are location-aware urban games such as Combat (skhvatka) that require some form of direct engagement with the local urban environment.<sup>3</sup> Player-groups that reside in urban areas, such as the cities of Moscow, Irkutsk or Astana, form the basis of this gaming network. Each player-group pays a one-time fee to obtain a third-level sub-domain, for example, gorod.en.cx in Kazakhstan or msk.en.cx in Moscow. This is their own site, complete with news, game announcements, photo galleries, a discussion forum and access to local games. Sub-domains are owned and run by individuals who are responsible for managing the site, organizing play and ensuring that local players and game-designers abide by the global Encounter rules.<sup>4</sup> All sub-domains are publicly accessible and players also have access to the global forum on the main site.<sup>5</sup>

Encounter is dependant on an ever-growing membership of active players. In most cases, individual Encounter players championed the involvement in the network as they enticed their friends:

So the system is like this – a person wants to do Encounter in his town. He writes, or goes on the [main] site, applies, pays [some money] and gets a local site. Then he gets people in the city excited to play.

(NA, male, 27)

Many players took on responsibilities of sub-domain ownership when they relocated for school or jobs, using the game to engage their new urban environments and to meet like-minded people. Although people in our study played different kinds of games through the Encounter site, all referred to themselves as Encounter players and described all forms of play as ‘doing Encounter’. Here, we focus on Combat specifically as the most commonly played Encounter game and most often described by our participants during fieldwork. As a player noted in an informal conversation, it would be simpler to think that there are many ways to ‘do Encounter’ and Combat is simply one.

### *Combat game-play*

Combat (skhvatka) is a location-aware urban nighttime team game where the main goal is completion of a series of missions faster than other teams.





**FIGURE 1** A player locating an Encounter code.

Participants use a website to get puzzles where the right solution results in instructions for physically navigating an urban environment to designated locations where they must complete a mission in order to find game-codes – an alphanumeric string that functions as a key to open the next set of instructions on the site. The game-codes are either encoded in puzzles or written directly on surfaces in the urban environment such as walls, pipes, doors, etc. (see Figure 1). The winning team must solve all of the puzzles, complete all of the missions and locate all of the codes in the shortest amount of time. Games usually begin in the evening and last on average about 5–7 hours (Figure 2).

For example, players read a scenario online where the answer to a series of riddles was ‘boiling water’. There is a café in the city with such a name and they find a line chalked on the sidewalk in front of the entrance with the words ‘EN<sup>6</sup> – birds-eye view’. They find their way to the roof of the building and locate a box with a code-lock and ‘EN – 5!’ painted on the top. Upon entering ‘120’ on the lock they discover a string of numbers and letters written inside – the game-code that has to be entered on the site to get the next set of instructions.



**FIGURE 2** A team of field players solving a puzzle.

*Play requirements*

The game rules and necessary equipment vary from game to game and depend on local game-designers who are responsible for organizing the game-field, creating



**FIGURE 3** A typical scene at HQs.

the puzzles, placing or writing game-codes in the urban environment and then ensuring that general game rules are followed. Teams are usually composed of one carload of field players and between 2 and 10 headquarters (HQs) players. An average Combat game can include about 7–10 teams operating in the same urban environment.

Field players in our study were usually equipped with a car, headlamps or torches and a range of digital location-based technologies as well as their analog counterparts. Whereas most players used global positioning systems (GPS) devices, paper maps of the area were still important because the GPS could be wrong and the map provided a kind of birds-eye view that the GPS device could not. The most important use of mobile communication technologies was for communication with the HQs players camped out in someone's apartment through the night (Figure 3).

HQ players typically stayed in a location with good Internet access solving puzzles and figuring out where field players had to go to retrieve game-codes. Although playing Combat primarily involved teams of players co-located in a specific urban environment, it could also include remote participation. Remote players could join in with local HQ players via Skype or ICQ, adding their energies to solving puzzles and completing online tasks: 'for headquarters you can play from any city. So people from other cities, they search out games themselves. Before a game they come to the [local] forum and write "will provide good cheer and atmosphere for HQ"' (AS, male, 30).

Remote players were especially welcomed by smaller teams that could use the additional brainpower and social company. Yet HQ could never consist entirely of remote players because local Combat game-designers relied upon and challenged players' local knowledge:

We were playing HQ for a team in [remote city], and of course for example guessing a street is really difficult. I still remember that there – we were solving a puzzle and we get something like 'KV8.' That means nothing to us, but they have a bus-stop there that is called that.

(TM, male, 24)

### *Designing local games*

The content for all of Encounter games, including Combat, is player-generated. As new players became more involved, some eventually tried game-design, choosing to become puppet-masters (McGonigal 2007) for a night. The Encounter community had developed a guide for Combat game-design available on the main site to help newly minted designers, but players acknowledged that it was not enough to just follow instructions: 'There is a guide on organizing the game. It has examples of puzzles and assignments, etc. Still that's really common, general information and you need to work directly with the location, with all its specificities' (NA, male, 27). This focus on physical locations and the open reliance on player creativity was likely responsible for the enduring popularity of Encounter.

Players relied on their friends and more-experienced players to develop new games and concepts. Despite the local focus, ideas and creative approaches could be gained from remote resources as well: 'So today an organizer from [city 340 km away] wrote to me . . . "Suggest something fun and cool and interesting, some original mission for finding a code"' (AS, male, 30). Such requests came from friends as well as from strangers as game-designers browsed other local domains and asked for advice from designers whose games they liked. Local games developed their own unique flavor as they were tailored to the requirements of the local landscape and the creativity of the players, but this did not stop game-designers from occasional distributed collaborative endeavors:

Sometimes you have people from different teams writing the games together . . . becomes such a smorgasbord. So, for example, I was writing plus from [remote city 1] or from [remote city 2] someone will join in, from [remote city 3] people help out sometimes.

(AN, female, 28)

In this way, Combat players built connections online even as they directly engaged a decidedly local physical environment.

### *Playing Combat in the city*

Combat shares many characteristics with other urban games. It uses the city space as the game board, and it influenced patterns of mobility, perceptions of urban spatiality and sociability in the city. Players re-claimed public spaces through the appropriation of abandoned urban spaces. The games they designed were in part a response to the urban decline after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Old buildings, deserted parking lots and other detritus of urban decline became locations of unpredictable adventures, transformed at night into parts of imaginary scenarios. In a way, playing Combat attributed meanings to locations that had been previously deprived of meaning or purpose. First, these spaces became the locus of social activity through players' gatherings. Second, play fostered development of new kinds of local knowledge and a shift in social expectations of accepted behavior, where scaling walls or crawling through ruins was the mode of engagement. In the course of fieldwork, we heard many players comment on how they 'saw the city differently' as abandoned and downtrodden corners of their locale were infused with new meaning, memories and potential.

### *Going beyond play: social relationships in game and out*

Sharing the experience of crawling through mud or scaling dilapidated structures generated a sense of camaraderie among the players, at times resulting in strong relational bonds. Although prior studies have noted that collaboration and competition are essential elements of urban game-play (Hjorth 2008), in Combat sociability went beyond in-game interaction:

Combat – it's a very local thing. That is, you play in your own city, you hang out and make friends there, with other teams, you are friendly with some not so much with others, and so on, but it gives you a connection.

(NA, male, 27)

Though there were plenty of complaints about various players' conduct, arguments over contested puzzle solutions, and general bickering, these interactions, nevertheless seemed to create a sense of connectedness and local community: 'People make friends, interact. We have like a good collective (*kollektiv*) here, a kind of hangout (*tusovka*) formed' (AS, male, 30).

Engagement in the local Encounter community often extended well beyond playing the games, reconfiguring player's local personal networks: 'I have a completely different circle of friends now ... Everyone is somehow connected to this' (AS, male, 30). Meeting people through play could result in resources and support unrelated to the game: 'Sometimes it happens that you get together and you see someone [at the game] and you go: oh yeah, I know you are a lawyer,

right? I need advice, can you help?’ (OT, female, 26). Perhaps such a social pattern was unsurprising in a place where people rely on personal connections to provide the means of social welfare, build on reciprocity and derive practical value from broad networks of acquaintances. Yet through the interviews and observations, it was clear that despite the practical usefulness of many ties, playing with the goal of gaining useful ties was antithetical to the game. Often, players remained anonymous to each other despite frequent interaction online and even despite playing against each other in the same Combat game in the same city. Help was available if necessary, but these connections first developed emotional significance. Membership in the Encounter network became a part of player identity and they gravitated toward each other outside of play because they felt they shared something special.

Created with a local orientation and played locally, involvement in Combat games and in the Encounter gaming network more generally also resulted in feelings of belonging to a community that reached beyond the boundaries of the local urban environment: ‘Literally, you register on the site and you end up becoming part of this community, . . . and this community, it isn’t limited by a city or a country’ (TM, male, 24). Repeated game-play and engagement with the online forums resulted in a broad and distributed community that came to function outside the hierarchies and concerns of regular life:

I can be lecturing someone on the forums for some serious blunder . . . and then I find out that he is some 40-year-old man, who is the director of some large enterprise, and . . . he accepts the criticism, agrees he was wrong. And I am a 27-year-old boy who in regular life obviously would have never dared to raise his voice at such a person.

(NA, male, 27)

Participation in Encounter often became a marker of difference that was all-important when meeting new people: ‘I know that if a person is into Encounter, that’s it. They will likely be interesting to me’ (AN, female, 28). Many players confided that really they were all crazy and being a part of Encounter was simply a way to identify a shared kind of madness.

### *The importance of the online player community*

Encounter players formed a complex social ecology – an active and at times benevolent community where individual players supported not only friends or acquaintances, but also engaged in charity actions to help unknown players in need. Playing Combat and navigating urban locations in the dark could at times result in accidents where players got severely hurt. In response, the global player community often stepped in to help a hurt player regardless of their location:

So in Novosibirsk [city in Russia], there was this bad accident and some people got really hurt, and it all gets discussed on forums and like administrators write up something and post on the main forum. So we collect money to help.

(TM, male, 24)

In this story, it was the local administrators of the sub-domain that requested help for one of their local players, thus providing implicit validation for the reality of expressed needs.

The feeling of belonging to an online community often translated into real instances of support that went well beyond needs and problems related to the game. The forums on the Encounter site had actively discussed threads with topics ranging from requests for financial support for medical treatment for children of the players to reports from charity games or support actions at local orphanages. The Encounter player community organized donations for players who resided in Georgia during and after the recent Russia-Georgia armed conflict. In this way, Encounter at times functioned as an additional social safety net for people whose own support structures turned out to be insufficient and encouraged civic engagement and pro-social community activities: ‘So it’s like you are an EN-player, we will help you. Because whatever your race or nationality, those differences they don’t matter. If something bad happened to you, we get together and we help’ (NA, male, 27). From in-game accidents to wars, the Encounter community acted as a global network available to players in need.

## Considerations of play and its outcomes

As a game Combat is not unique – after all it is based on well-known pre-digital versions of scavenger hunts and orienteering. Combat game-design and mechanics are not much different from other urban games (Lantz 2007; McGonigal 2007; Hjorth 2008). However, because it is a part of the bigger online Encounter network, and because players are also game-designers in a manner reminiscent of Geocaching (O’Hara 2008) though more involved, Encounter players become part of a durable online community.

### *The connection between play and ordinary life*

Playing Encounter became connected with feelings of belonging, aspects of identity and creative expression, effects that have been repeatedly observed among serious MMORPG players (Taylor 2006). Yet here the technology made possible the experience, but it was never the focus – the experience of play itself was about the social experience, the mental challenge and the direct engagement with the urban environment in new ways. Games that were part of Encounter became socio-technical systems that illustrated the

interplay between local attachments, distant connections and the location-based communication in the course of play. Players used *Combat* to engage the rapidly changing urban environment in which they lived as a way of parsing and understanding the confusion of modern life, similar to other urban games (Chang & Goodman 2006). The community that developed around repeated play resulted in social connections helpful in real life outside the game.

We observed suspension of social inequalities among *Encounter* players during play or interaction online, similar to those observed in online fandom, gaming or crowdsourcing efforts such as Wikipedia (Bryant *et al.* 2005; Itō *et al.* 2012). However, the demand to suspend the normative expectations of 'regular life' that *Combat* placed on players, when, for example, a mission, required that adults race children's tricycles across a public square or bungee jump off a bridge in the middle of the night, at times extended to social interaction outside the game precisely because the game shared the physical environment of daily life. As a result, the experience of game-play spilled outside the game, coloring daily experience and expectations for the future. The ability to connect to each other via the *Encounter* network allowed players to accomplish goals beyond regular game missions, such as solving personal problems, creating online support networks or even contributing to charities. The most important outcome of these games then was not direct individual engagement with the urban environment through technology or collaboration with strangers in the course of play as was evident in earlier urban game studies (although these were the necessary prerequisites), but the combination of physically proximal and online social relationships that, while gained in-game, could be leveraged for civic engagement and mutual support (Barckhuus *et al.* 2005; Hjorth 2008).

### *Play dynamics, identity and trust*

Attachment to physical places and membership in social groups are both crucial to individual conceptions of self (Proshansky *et al.* 1983; Rupert 2000) and can influence the kinds of allegiances people rely upon when interacting with a distributed group. Membership in the distributed group (such as being part of an online community) can in turn become an identity marker when interacting with people who are not part of this online community. These two aspects of the self can work in tandem to create people who are connected locally and online. In the case of *Encounter*, being part of an online community of the initiated resulted in a broad network of ties that could and often did provide tangible support to virtual strangers tied together simply by membership. Players trusted each other to help with in-game missions, for boosts of creativity in game-design and even for a free place to stay when they traveled outside their own urban locations. Playing *Encounter* then not only affected experiences of urban spaces – where a trip to a new town became more entertaining if the



sightseeing included abandoned buildings along with important cultural sites. For players, many new cities were no longer full of strangers; they were now peppered throughout with friendly Encounter players who ‘understood’ without having met before.

### *The relevance of the play community*

In Encounter, play and ordinary life really merged through the development of play-communities (de Souza e Silva & Sutko 2008). Through these communities, the games of Encounter did not only happen during missions at night. It was an ongoing involvement that permeated all aspects of the player’s lives, through leisure get-togethers, support for accidents, professional help and charity. It was in the requests for help from the online community where the intersection of local player-groups and online connections became clear. When help was needed, it was the local player-community that requested help for the players in need along with, and sometimes even instead of, the players themselves. In this way, the online community had immediate validation for requests for help, and as a result rarely questioned the necessity of support. From in-game accidents to wars, the Encounter community at times even became an alternative support network for players in need.

The experience of belonging to an online (and yet physically grounded) play community served to broaden individual horizons of possibility, strengthen the bonds to the physical locales, encourage seeking out broader experiences and enable travel and support. In the course of its existence, the players making up the Encounter gaming network generated a network of ties grounded in community membership by drawing on the facilities and resources that came from memberships and social stature outside that community. The Encounter gaming network is, as an example of a socio-technical system, based around the gaming engine as well as the social relationships generated from the game experience and community membership. Regardless of their initial level of social and economic capital, players discovered other like minds in the course of play and were able to rely on these connections outside of the game.

### *Rethinking remoteness and location-awareness*

For all its online connectedness Encounter is fundamentally anchored in physical places and impossible to imagine without the local expressions of nighttime urban game-play. As communication technologies expand our reach, where our interlocutors are located becomes less of an issue because communicating with someone who is in the next apartment or halfway across the world is equally simple. This fact brings to the fore arguments about the role of physical distance in a networked world (Olson & Olson 2000; Cairncross 2001).

We argue that it is not that physical distance does not matter, because it certainly does, but it is that distance in itself has a different meaning. While remote presence is still no match for embodied experience in a physical environment, the experience of remote presence as an extra HQs player on a team in a different city in *Combat*, for example, can result in sharing of local knowledge and urban secrets. Though physical places remain remote, they can become familiar through the banter, complaints and conversation between HQ and their field players during the game. The notions of remote and contiguous, along with the very idea of location-awareness, are then defined less by the technology employed, and related more to the social relationships developed within and around the game.

### *Online community membership and everyday life*

How does participation in an online community manifest as part of the local experience? Our data illustrate the interweaving of local concerns and a feeling of belonging to an online community of players that highlights the fact that all human experiences are to some extent part of changing and growth of the self. The sense of belonging to a physical locale and to the online community of players manifested as different facets of identity that were brought to the fore depending on the context. This suggests that belonging to an online community of players together with the silent camaraderie of local players comprised an important process for constructing the locally salient meaning of online connections. These connections are locally salient not only when they can be drawn upon in times of need, but also when imagining possibilities for the future. In this sense, belonging to something beyond the physical locale results in the kind of broadening of horizons for people who would have otherwise had little opportunity for such.

de Souza e Silva and Sutko (2008) argue that playful and leisure experiences have always been at the core of our ordinary lives. Here, we go further and suggest that these experiences can change how we navigate the mundane practice of living. Encounter players not only looked to each other for support and entertainment, but also measured the people they met in their daily lives against the metrics of Encounter game-play. No matter the context, the judgment of whether a person would be likely to crawl through mud and stinky water in order to find a nonsensical alphanumeric string might change decisions completely unrelated to such an activity. Engagement in the online gaming network combined with the physical experience of game-play did not simply bridge online and offline communities of players, but could change perceptions of people outside these communities as well.

## **Conclusions**

Technology can play a profound role in fostering a subculture that supports a deep local involvement with physical locations that is ultimately encouraged

and underscored by a broader online community. We found that there was a deeply interdependent relationship between the *in situ* experience of Combat as a location-aware urban game and engagements during and outside these moments of play within the broader Encounter network. Our study illustrates how membership in something larger than the immediate local space could change personal visions of possibilities. The local, physical experience of the everyday and the game was, of course, important, but the connections to the distributed community resulted in expanded horizons and changed the nature of the local experience as players felt they could belong to something larger than the locales they physically inhabited. While the mundane demands of regular life did not change, the approach to fulfilling these demands at times altered, not only because players could draw on a broader range of social resources, but also because they saw possibilities beyond their local station.

Decades ago, Wellman argued that it is more productive to define communities socially rather than spatially, shifting from a geographically bounded notion of a community to conceptualizing personal communities consisting of personal networks of social relationships (Wellman 1979). While close ties are likely to be sparsely knit and spatially dispersed, our data suggest that networks of personal ties can be productively defined both spatially and socially and that the two interact in important ways. The notions offline and online are never separate because connection to an online community can substantially change the nature of local experience and in this, it has an impact well beyond the online interaction. At the same time, being part of a local community influences the nature of connection to an online community and frames the kinds of relationships people form online.

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## Notes

- 1 The latest statistics for Encounter games can be located at: <http://world.en.cx/Statistics.aspx>. The 2011 annual report of the number of games played per type can be located in the following thread on the world.en.cx forum (in Russian): <http://world.en.cx/Guestbook/Messages.aspx?topic=150173>

- 2 For a detailed listing of former and current urban night-games projects in the countries of the Former Soviet Union, please see the Russian Wikipedia page on the topic (in Russian): <http://goo.gl/RPd48>
- 3 For a detailed description of all Encounter game types in English, please refer to: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encounter\\_\(game\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encounter_(game))
- 4 Global Encounter rules include ensuring player safety in game design as well as restrictions on alcohol consumption and exceeding speed limits while driving during game play.
- 5 The main site of the network is <http://en.cx>. The owners of the Encounter project also have an <http://world.en.cx> sub-domain where they maintain a global forum, post announcements and occasionally run online games available to all players worldwide.
- 6 Game designers often use 'EN' for 'Encounter' to mark objects and markings placed in the urban environment that are part of the game. The same markings can also be spray-painted in abandoned buildings to signal to players that they are in the correct location.

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