Gentrification, The Story

A research-creation project by christian scott.

> "My love,
> *did I say we're writing over the city?*
>
> *Perhaps I forgot to stress how important it is that the city itself resists*
> *this process. That, where we talk of magic, there is simply an ugly*
> *dual-carriageway, that the streets themselves have their own stories,*
> *cultures, politics.*
> *There is no authority to what we do - it's all partial, provisional, and*
> *often simply wrong.*
>
> **—Tim Etchells, artistic director of Forced Entertainment.**[1]

1.—THE DESIGN PROBLEM.

Cities like Montreal are complex ecosystems that are currently undergoing rapid urban change and development led by social, cultural, political, and economic factors—namely Real Estate speculation—in a phenomena commonly referred to as *gentrification*, particularly in neighborhoods like Parc-Extension.

Parc-Extension (a.k.a. Parc-Ex) is an immigrant working class neighbourhood adjacent to the more affluent neighbourhoods of Mile-End and Marconi-Alexandria (a.k.a. Mile-Ex), and in which a new *Universite de Montreal* campus has recently been built, catalyzing condo-development and rent increases in the area, as well as social protest against it and for the need of social housing.[2]

Despite its complexity, a theme like gentrification is commonly portrayed and understood in a black & white narrative. The good tenant *versus* the evil landlord, the caring community against the greedy developers. And while these tropes hold some historical truth, the reality of things is way more granular and complex than that.

As architectural designers Dimitrios Makris and Maria Moira (2018) point out, urban environments have complex multi-layered socio-cultural characters in which numerous values and content are experienced (p. 16). Put differently, the city is a palimpsest in which the various cultural, political, social, economic, and aesthetic knowledges and (lived) experiences of urbanites are constantly being written, overwritten, and effaced.

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[1] Excerpt appearing on Nick Kaye's (2000) *Site-specific art: performance, place and documentation.*
[2] https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/rent-subsidies-and-social-housing-among-solutions-proposed-for-parc-ex

Municipal offices, non-profit and neighbourhood groups, as well as researchers are constantly trying to better understand what the city-dwellers within a particular urban area experience (diagnostics), and need and desire for the future (proposals and plans for implementation).

Currently, the methods and spaces for gathering such information leave a lot to desire. From online surveys that are exclusively *en francais* and poorly advertised, to co-design workshops that usually gather the white-educated middle class demographic during working hours. By design, these spaces exclude certain populations—consequently, certain stories—from the processes of sense-making and city-making.

My project, *Gentrification, The Story*, is driven by two main questions:
1) *How can we collectively make sense of a complex phenomenon like gentrification in an inclusive manner that centers diverse lived experiences?* and
2) *How can playful approaches to urban issues aid in the construction/strengthening of community networks and trust?*

2.—BACKGROUND RESEARCH.

In the past decade, applied games and playful interventions in urban contexts have increased in number, scope, and medium, involving city residents among themselves and with their urban environment (Schouten et al., 2017). Technology-based urban games allow for the possibility to revisit the city as a physical and digital arena for engagement, interaction, and connection.

Scholarship on game studies and urban play suggests play's potential to create social bonds among urbanites, to aid in the construction of a sense of place, and to improve liveability standards (Alfrink 2014, Fischer and Hornecker 2017, McGonigal, 2012).

Already, city planners, architects, designers, and community advocates utilize playful approaches to better understand—and tackle—urban issues. Games have become powerful tools that assist in processes of participatory planning (Shakeri, 2017), civic participation and empowerment (de Lange, 2015; Ferri et al., 2018), placemaking and neighbourhood-based storytelling (Stokes et al. 2017), and collective reflection on spatial issues (Devisch, Poppin, and Sofronie, 2016).

Moreover, game design can operate as a lens to better understand urban phenomena. Or, to put it in the words of Schouten et al. (2017), games act as *strong concepts* for making sense of urban dynamics and environments. Not only playing games can be a helpful tool to better understand urban dynamics and phenomena, but collectively designing and making games becomes a reflective practice (p. 28) in which city dwellers can make sense of their urban experience through the framework of game design and mechanics.

Of particular interest to this project, i looked at a couple of urban games and digital projects that explore urban issues related to urban development and gentrification, while paying attention to factors of social connection and identity to place.

For example, Mary Flanagan's 2008 *Massively Multiplayer Soba*[3] is an analog street-game that got a dozen of NYC residents talking with strangers on the streets (asking them to provide clues on locations where certain ingredients could be found, and translations of recipes/texts in foreign languages), exploring non-touristic neighbourhoods and places, and collaborating among each other in order to cook a massive soba soup.

A video game about gentrification, *Nova Alea* (2016, Molleindustria) departs from colour-blind SimCity and factors in class and race as city-shaping forces, as players take the role of a Real-Estate speculator.[4] Rent-control, grassroots mobilization, and market-bubble-bursts can occur, devastating the players fortune and plans for the future—as the city is continuously (re-)shaped by these processes.

Similarly, games like *City Hall* (2015, Skyless Game Studios) and *Play Oosterwold* (2012, Play the City) provide the scenarios and space for players to discuss urban issues from a multiplicity of angles—particularly exposing players to the complexities of city planning and decision making.[5]

In addition to games, other digital and hybrid initiatives provided inspiration and a point of departure for designing my solution.

PX80 is an online project that portrays the lives of Parc-Extension residents.[6] In this platform named after the popular 80 bus route that traverses the neighbourhood, the colombian artist Andres Salas presents a series of short-documentaries and photo-journals. Through these, he engages deeply with the oral histories of representative residents and business owners—reflecting the diverse migrant community of the neighbourhood—oftentimes discussing gentrification and urban change with them, and documenting their storefront signs, cultural items, and products they sell or manufacture.

A natural point of departure is the City of Montreal's Collaborative Mapping initiative for the Marconi-Alexandria (a.k.a. Mile-Ex) district.[7] As part of a series of events and public consultations on the future creation of a neighbourhood park this interactive map invites users-residents to submit text-based entries in three categories: historical facts, lived experiences, and open-ended writing.

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[3] https://www.valuesatplay.org/massively-multiplayer-soba
[4] http://molleindustria.org/nova-alea/
[5] These two games, as well as *Massively Multiplayer Soba*, are discussed in Ferri et al. (2018).
[6] http://px80.ca/
[7] https://www.realisonsmtl.ca/milmontreal/maps/racontez-nous-marconi-alexandra

Further, projects like the Bay Area's *Anti-Eviction Mapping Project*,[8] or Montreal-based *Find My Landlord*,[9] are digital platforms that use visual information, maps, and mapping practices to discuss gentrification, share resources, and support folks in challenging housing situations.

Finally, *The Shape of a Practice*,[10] provided the principal source of inspiration to give form to my design solution. This platform is a sort of gallery and repository of multimedia information around critical discussions of the Anthropocene. It is designed as an imaginary 8-bit world in which avatars move and uncover information housed in colourful squares, constantly shifting around the location of the information, and becoming actively entangled with it.

3.—THE SOLUTION.

In order to tackle the problem outlined above, and drawing from the theory and games/projects already discussed, i designed *Gentrification, The Story*.

Gentrification, The Story is a digital platform to collectively make sense of the rapid urban changes the Parc-Extension neighbourhood is currently undergoing—namely gentrification. It operates as a website-based space in which users-players can share their experiences around the subject through the creation of *stories*; and invite others to complete *missions* that Invite players to (physically) engage with the neighbourhood's people and places.

Stories and missions take the shape of colourful pink and yellow squares scattered in an 8-bit style imaginary Parc-Extension (actually a pixelated picture of the Parc Metro plaza). When clicked, stories and missions reveal their content. Users-players move throughout this imaginary world as system-generated avatars, and their location determines where the stories/missions they create will be 'dropped.'

Stories support multi-media expression and offer the reader the opportunity to reply. Potentially generating rich discussions around diverse topics related to urban change, and the chance to look at a particular theme or issue through several eyes. These stories, anonymously generated, populate the imaginary world that partially acts as an archive and repository of people's lived experiences.

The missions—for example, asking someone to document a family-owned business, interview a known local resident, or visit a place—create the potential conditions for trust and community networks to develop in the physical world. Missions allow *Gentrification, The Story* to spread to those residents that don't necessarily know about it nor have the means and abilities to access the internet.

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[8] https://antievictionmap.com/
[9] https://findmylandlord.netlify.app
[10] https://shape.anthropocene-curriculum.org/

Building on the idea that games act as *strong concepts* (Schouten et al., 2017), designing missions—like designing games and their mechanics—becomes also a 'reflective practice' that aids users-players to make sense of their urban realities and situated knowledge.

Thus, in a certain way, *Gentrification, The Story* becomes a platform that is simultaneously 1) a sense-making public forum, 2) an archive and repository of lived experiences, and 3) a game about gentrification in the Parc-Extension neighbourhood.

4.—DESIGN PRINCIPLES.
The design principles that guide the solution, and act as a foundation for this prototype are:

—Playfulness: Building on Bill Gaver's (2007) notion of *homo ludens*, play and playfulness can be modes of knowledge production. Play allows the users-players to engage and learn with the world, others, and themselves. *Gentrification, The Story* uses play to revisit urban phenomena (gentrification) with new eyes, making and holding the necessary (digital) space for exploration. It allows for play that is open and personally motivated—here everyone wins, playing is winning—inviting users-players to "[pursue] one's inner narratives in safe situations, through projective interpretation and action" (p. 13).

—Participatory Design & Co-design: Building on Vines et al. (2013), user participation within *Gentrification, the Story* is framed as "an interventionist practice where new ideas, processes, and lenses are introduced to provoke change" (p. 431).
Driven by the desire (and challenge) to make participation in urban processes more inclusive, diverse, and participatory—though bounded by limited resources and time—this prototype involved potential users (friends, neighbours, residents, and the *Parc-Ex Community Based Action Research Network* [11]) through consultation and testing.
The prototyping process—despite its limitations—attempted to create the conditions for users-players to become co-creators, recognizing the situated knowledge of people, blurring the boundaries between user, researcher, and designer (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). For example, by giving players complete freedom of their storytelling by supporting multimedia, and allowing players to guide the game (and other players) into new directions by the creation of missions,

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[11] The CBAR Network in Parc-Ex, composed by researchers from Concordia, McGill, and UQAM universities, as well as neighbours and community advocates, is committed to social equity, justice, and resident involvement in action-research projects taking place in Parc-Extension. For more info, visit: https://communityactionresearchparcex.ca/

—Feminism: As outlined by Bardzell (2010), feminism in HCI brings forward identity, equity, empowerment, and social justice when discussing design problems and solutions; as a principle, feminism in HCI foregrounds novel problem-solving approaches that are both critical and generative.

Through *Gentrification, The Story* i attempted to engage critically with the normative assumptions in urban design that reflect the power structures of larger social, economic, and political systems. Put differently, i was critical of the historical and current practices of urban planning which amplify the voices and interests of established caucasian males—and erase the undesirable/*Others*—through processes of "renewal" and "revitalization."

In parallel, the game is generative in the extent that it attempts to better understand a complex phenomenon by giving primacy to the lived experiences of diverse bodies and identities; foregrounding an integrative approach of collaboration.

—Replicability & Modularity: i am interested in how this prototype can easily be adapted to (and adopted by) other design scenarios that involve people and communities, sociocultural and political systems, and physical locations and infrastructure.

For example, this prototype could easily be adapted to other locations and thematics or populations (e.g., street harassment in downtown Montreal, accessibility within a university campus, the experience of kids with ADHD within a classroom, etc).

Similarly, features could be removed or added as needed. For example, a new version of the game could keep the stories, remove the missions, or add user-profile creation.

In order to achieve that, hypothetically, the code and digital assets of such a platform could be made accessible, open-source, and free to use.

—**Privacy/Safety:** As a way to make a platform as inviting as possible for people to share their true beliefs and opinions, no personal data is requested nor a registration/sign-up is expected. This principle also considers the safety and protection that undocumented residents would need if they were to participate.

Hypothetically, to reflect this in my prototype, cookies would not be stored.

—**Subversion**: *Gentrification, The Story* could become a tool to assist organized residents to build a different narrative on gentrification, than the one crafted and maintained by big actors in the area (e.g., the City, the *Universite de Montreal*, and Real-Estate developers) who are pushing for the institution of a dynamic/creative urban hub while ignoring issues related to housing and displacement.[12]

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[12] The City of Montreal, in line with the *2013 Plan for Urban, Economic, and Social Development* (PDUES, 2013) has created the MIL Project. For more info, visit:
http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=9517,123331598&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

5.—MAIN FEATURES.
The main features of *Gentrification, The Story* are the creation of stories/missions and the interaction that these generate through replies and completions. The other secondary features act as a medium to communicate ideas of how cities are experienced.

—Stories (Read/Reply and Create): One of the most important elements of the platform is the accessing and creation of stories, that is, the lived experiences of people around the topic of gentrification. These exist as very visible and clickable pink squares scattered on the platform's 'world.' The option to reply to them is clearly available, and the steps to do so are easy to follow and relatable. The *create story* button is prominently visible in the platform's main interface, inviting people to click it and follow the easy steps to create/share their own story.

—Missions (Read/Complete and Create): The other most important element of the platform is the accessing and creation of missions, that is, the physical-world challenges players create for others to complete. These exist as very visible and clickable yellow squares, and similarly to stories reading them, submitting their completion, and creating new ones (*create mission* button) is done through visible, clear, easy, and relatable steps.
As a *gamification* feature, missions are not based in point-earning and competition, but rather in the joy of participation and engagement.

—Multimedia Expression: *Gentrification, The Story* allows full expression by supporting multimedia in the creation and reply/completion of stories and missions. This feature can, in turn, make for an archive of sounds/images/videos of the neighbourhood, or for a public forum, that are rich and diverse—or at least richer than text-only platforms.

—Play Space/World: Compared to other mapping initiatives, my platform moves away from the 'representational map' and instead offers an abstract imaginary world—generated through the pixelation of the neighbourhood's most prominent public space. This decision tries to create the situations for players to share their general experiences, rather than intersection-specific commentary.
This world allows for stories/missions to be scattered without apparent order, purposefully reflecting the chaos of real life and the randomness of the life of public spaces and stranger sociality.

—Avatar Embodiment: In order to participate in the creation of stories/missions, users-players move through this world—and exist—as avatars. Once again playing with the idea of movement, randomness, and chaos of walking through a city grid. This feature attempts to convey to users-players the embeddedness and entanglement in which they always are

within a process of sense-making and being in a city.

—Language: While this prototype has been designed in English, considerations of what languages are spoken in the neighbourhood should also be reflected in the platform's welcome message, instructions, about section, and feature buttons. A very basic feature that has unfortunately not been incorporated in other projects and most existing public consultation platforms.

6.—PROTOTYPING PROCESS & REFLECTION.

Paradoxically, this project being so close to my interests (cities, play, people), posed a series of challenges to ground an idea that was simple, relatable, and achievable.

At first i experimented with physical playful artifacts that could connect people in public spaces while respecting Covid-measures—specifically, using the structure of public benches as an abacus-like interface—i dropped the idea as it became difficult to design the artifact, and to convey its functionality to a diverse population (culture/context-specificities!).

At the time this project began, i had just moved into Parc-Extension (a neighbourhood i knew well, but never as a resident), and was starting to experience first-hand a series of questions about gentrification, and challenges to the assumptions i had on the topic—as well as my role within that process and in relation to the local community (mostly immigrants from South Asia/Middle East/North Africa). Consequently, i decided to create a prototype that assisted me (a sort of research-creation heuristic project), and others in making-sense and making-community.

Thus, the process of designing *Gentrification, The Story* began. I had clarity about the principles i wanted to ground the design on (above mentioned in *Section 4*), and little by little developed an idea that was simple and fun.

As the process unfolded, i experimented and speculated with an interplay of narrative, community building, and urban play—through notions of story building, and the classic urban game idea of missions, as well as the aesthetics/mechanics of games

Eventually i ran into some technical challenges. I wanted to convey certain features, as well as to communicate a feel and flow similar to that of an 8-bit video game. This forced me to re-design the pathways in the FIGMA wireframe a couple of times, and to drop a central feature i originally envisioned. Specifically, a feature seen on *The Shape of a Practice*, in which users have to 'drop' the squares of information in a different location after reading them—a feature that would convey ideas of entanglement and interrelation among urbanites-players, and ever-shifting conditions in urban space.

Most of my test-users reacted positively to the wireframe testing. They liked the idea, quickly understood its function(s) and liked the mission feature. Curiously, many of them questioned or commented on the decision to use a pixelated abstract world rather than a google map interface. It was a purposeful decision to move away from other similar initiatives, and foreground general lived experiences that are entangled and exist in space.

In addition, i envisioned having a **chatbot** operate as a digital entity embedded in public space that could invite and inform residents (and potential users-players) of the existence of *Gentrification, The Story*—redirecting them to the prototype's hypothetical website.
A poster was designed with a mysterious feel to it: not much information is given, a couple of clues hint at the topic, and a big phone number is shown—hopefully awakening interest in the more curious phone-owners of my neighbourhood, who would see the poster in various public/central locations of Parc-Extension. When dialed, the chatbot would say:

> Hello, you are calling from Parc-Extension. This is *Gentrification, The Story*, a collective platform for making sense of the rapid urban changes taking place in this neighbourhood.
> Visit *gentrificationthestory.ca* and add your unique ideas, feelings, and experiences to the platform. And to access those of others.
> On top of that, there are missions waiting to be completed.
> Remember, *gentrificationthestory.ca.*
> Would you like me to repeat this message?

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