

Big Games and Hipsters: Cool Capital in Pervasive Gaming Festivals

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Abstract

Pervasive and street gamers are compared and contrasted with the infamous subculture known as hipsters, showing that although they are quite different social groups their aesthetics operate in similar ways. Specific attention is given to the emergent, socially relative nature of these aesthetics and the operation of 'cool' cultural capital. These findings are based on ethnographic field work carried out in 2010 at the *Come Out and Play* festival.

Pervasive games are new forms of playful experience that have emerged from the intersection between ubiquitous computing technologies and computer gaming. They are played in the physical world, away from desktop computers and gaming consoles; expanding game space into lived reality. However as an unstable, emergent or avant-garde field the labels are still in flux. Street gaming is a term that tends to be applied to an evolutionary subset of pervasive games that chart a trajectory away from obvious technology, but still sit in a milieu of childhood video gaming, smart phones, internet access and the ubiquity of the web. These games have followed a design evolution that has removed unnecessary technology and focused on appropriative, energetic and playful uses of the city.

This paper is intended to show that there is a close relationship between the cultural capital of those involved in street games and the aesthetic appreciation of the experience of these games. Using hipsters as a curiously interlinked subculture I point out that there are similarities between the way the two groups manipulate culture and meaning.

One reason for this approach is that formalist, or functional, interpretation of the rules, models and patterns of street games does not set them apart as they are often similar to traditional, large-scale, playground or wide games. However there are subtle layers of meaning that do create clear distinctions for those with the necessary cultural capital and make these street games mean much more to the players than just their mechanics.

In the July of 2010 I carried out an ethnographic study of the street gaming festival *Come Out and Play* in Brooklyn, New York. This was part of a longer investigation into pervasive gaming festivals that also occur in London, Berlin and Bristol. *Come Out and Play* is the longest running festival of its type in the world, established in 2006. An annual, weekend event, with game designers and players coming from across the world.

During *Come Out and Play* I closely followed *Gentrification: The Game*, a game that would eventually win the prize for “best use of technology” at the festival, and filmed a team of players for the full two hours of the game. *Gentrification* was designed and run by Atmosphere Industries a group from Toronto and is loosely based around *Monopoly*. In the game multiple teams of players, playing as besuited developers or local residents, are pitted against each other to fight for or against the forces of gentrification. Physically racing up and down streets to photograph themselves in front of properties - the mechanic to purchase locations - they would then go on to strategically build things such coffee shops or community centres. There is an obvious irony in the game as the name suggests, especially as the designers specifically play the game in neighbourhoods that are undergoing, or have undergone gentrification.

As these games are played in busy streets, in amongst everyday life and the players are performing unexpected actions, for example handing out flowers, singing, marching, making speeches, they are constantly asked what it is they are doing. For any street game this appears to be a difficult question. After a number of attempts at describing to various local residents, one *Gentrification* player, whilst interacting with a man outside a US veterans centre hastily shortened his description to “It’s a hipster game.”

Another, quite atypical, player was a local resident with a thick Brooklyn accent who had lived in the area all her life. She had brought her teenage son to play, as he liked acting and games, and ended up joining in this game herself. When I asked how playing this game made her feel, she described how all the other players were much younger and very different from herself and finally “It makes me feel like Williamsburg on a Saturday night.” Williamsburg being seen as the international locus of hipsterdom [1]. She said it made her feel highly uncomfortable.

Finally as even one of the designers says, in a newspaper interview about the game, “We’re interested in hipsters. That’s it in a nutshell” [2].

Although the designer’s quote appears to be flippant, between the three of them they have hit on something deeper about the relationship between who the players are and their enjoyment of the game. There is a deep and relevant parallel between hipsters and the players of street games.

Hipster - One who possesses tastes, social attitudes, and opinions deemed cool by the cool. The Hipster walks among the masses in daily life but is not a part of them and shuns or reduces to kitsch anything held dear by the mainstream. [3]

Defining the contemporary hipster is no easy feat for a subculture that prides itself on individuality and internet accelerated trends. The term itself is highly contested and in fact for hipsters, being called a ‘hipster’ is something of an insult [4]. The term Hipster first appeared as a reference to first black subcultural figures in the 1940s and then white subcultural figures in the 1950s [4]. Current hipsters emerge between 1999 and 2003 coming out of a post-punk, post-

grunge neo-bohemia that is driven by a late-capitalist milieu of the experience economy. Hipster seems to emerge out of a thwarted tradition of DIY, alternative youth subcultures that have been integrated, humiliated or destroyed. Leading to hipsters being anti-political and consumerist, ultimately deploying mockery and irony to communicate apathy and disgust around local and global issues. Paralleling Mailer's 'white negro hipster' which fetishized 1950s blackness, the 21st century hipster "fetishizes the violence, instinctiveness and rebelliousness of lower-middle-class suburbia and low-class country whites." [5] Some keywords that define this set of looks and interests are: "Trucker hats; undershirts called wifebeaters worn as outerwear; the aesthetic of basement rec-room pornography; flash-lit polaroids; fake wood paneling; Pabst Blue Ribbon; porno or pedophile moustaches; aviator glasses; Americana T-shirts for church socials, et cetera; tube socks; the late albums of Johnny Cash; and tattoos." [5] A final approach to definition is that the hipster culture appreciates and uses an aesthetic based on tensions, ironies and radical alterations between knowingness and naïveté, adulthood and childhood, pretentious complexity and foolishness.

Although both the book and event that are *What Was The Hipster* [6] devolve into denigration and hipster-hate it is one of the few serious attempts to analyse hipsters. Although the book is not especially academic in itself, as it is made up of reportage and press articles, Bourdieu emerges as the only serious academic reference that any of the authors resorts to. Repeatedly in the book's various chapters and cuttings hipster tastes and style are denigrated, and as Bourdieu points out, tastes and style are not purely aesthetic, but socially and politically determined [7]. Hipster-hate is a classic example of what he calls 'symbolic violence', the unconscious modes of domination within everyday social habits. This relation between aesthetics, class, education and cultural capital is seen to be crucial in analysing hipsters and is also crucial in understanding the emergence of street and urban games.

Combined with cultural capital, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is important in understanding both hipsters, and it is important in understanding why digital hipsters play pervasive games. There are parallels in their worlds that emerge in their different practices across different fields. Habitus is an unconscious set of predispositions, tendencies and inclinations, not so much rule bound, but playing within regularities [8]. And this is down to similarities in the structures of their habitus' and the way they both mobilise the logics of their cultural capital.

In her ethnography of Williamsburg hipsters Ingrid Tolstad describes how this subculture creates and manages the intangible quality of 'cool' [4], and equates it to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. The ability to amass 'cool' capital results from the hipster's middle class habitus, level of education - usually university level - and high level of disposable income - from jobs in the media and creative industries. As Tolstad says, 'cool' has value, but it is very contextually dependent and is constantly redefined by the members of the

subculture. Thus making it difficult for people outside the subculture to appear 'cool' or understand what makes someone or something 'cool'.

Although, as Greif pointed out, there are some common markers of hipsterdom [5], from within the community the logic of 'cool' and the signs of membership are highly nuanced. This concept of 'cool' is aesthetically presented through retro-referencing and intertextuality in fashion and design. Raiding the late 20th century, the ideal hipster will select a clothing style from one period, tattoos from another and follow obscure bands, resurrecting music from the past. Constructing a personal text to be interpreted by other hipsters, becoming both authentic and different at the same time [4]. The ability to both construct this individualised personal image and read the personal images of others is highly dependent on the individual's habitus and the level of cultural capital obtained through university level education. The hipster is a highly mobile and highly influential group of people, whose trajectory might well follow similar paths to the ones Bourdieu mapped for fashion houses in France [9].

Our native Brooklyn player considered herself out of place, she felt surrounded by different people and equated that sense of alienation with the same feeling as visiting the hipster areas of New York. None of the players or designers of these games truly think of themselves as hipsters, or belong to that subculture. In fact raising the idea with some designers has provoked the same kind of hipster-hate as that which appears in *What Was the Hipster* [6]. However there are parallels between these two groups that go beyond these comments. These groups share many structural and aesthetic similarities that make pervasive, street and urban gamers a form of digital, or gamer, hipster. They are certainly not typical hipsters, but many phenomena are typically hipster.

The classic hipster employment is in specialist retail and service jobs, or work in the advertising, media and content industries [4; 6]. Through my ethnography I have found that players in street gaming festivals tend to work in digital media, web design, game design and generally the more creative end of the ICT industry. There are however subtle, regional differences in the make up of the main street and pervasive gaming festivals. These reflect the social networks of the organisers and designers as well as the industry focus of the cities where they happen. For example, *Come Out and Play* in New York had a higher concentration of game designers and developers due to the large 'indie game' design community in and around the city which the organisers are heavily involved in. *Hide and Seek* in London is skewed towards the digital media industry, which would also appear to match up with the background of the organisers and the high concentration of digital media in London. *You Are Go* in Berlin seems to have drawn in many artists, again due to the organisers and the large population of art, especially media art in that city.

Players and designers of pervasive games share similar upbringings to hipsters. They are almost universally from middle class backgrounds and have achieved at least an undergraduate education. There is a surprisingly high level of post-

graduate education amongst players of street games, and also a high level of academic involvement.

So there are similarities in upbringing and education across these two groups, but obvious differences in the types of common employment. These groups are obviously not the same and there is certainly a split between hipsters and street game players. But even though there is local variation across the many different cities and countries there is a commonality of players of street games. Broadly speaking they all tend to be involved in what might be called the experience economy, the set of business that orchestrate memorable events for their customers. More specifically those that are based on the creative application of digital technologies. Although there are exceptions to this rule, there is a high degree of commonality.

There is also one key aspect of street game players upbringing that is very important. Again, almost universally, they all grew up playing video games and to a lesser extent tabletop, board and roleplaying games. There is an embodied capital in their access to the stories, symbolism, gameplay and shared experience of video games, especially what are now known as retro-games. Most of the players at these festivals range from the mid 20s to the late 30s, and the games they would have grown up with are from the early 80s to the early 90s. These eras of childhood gaming seem to hold a particular fondness for the players that goes beyond memories of childhood.

It is not just that they grew up gaming, as many from these generations did. Although not as distinct a concept as 'cool' for hipsters, street gamers also tend to attempt the same kind of authenticity, honesty and depth in their relationship to some other forms of gaming. Most of the players I encountered have a strong engagement with some form of non-mainstream gaming, for example the *Civilisation* series, Retro-gaming, *Minecraft*, or German board games. This creates high levels of very specific forms of embodied cultural capital. A form of capital which functionally fills a similar space to that which the 'cool' capital does for hipsters.

The games at *Come Out and Play* ran the gamut from playful punning, such as *CounterSquirt* - a water pistol game with victory mechanics from from the computer game *CounterStrike* - to loving attempts at live-action recreations of classic arcade games, such as a game of *Asteroids*, with 16 neon-tube wearing individuals acting as chaotic, bouncing, break-apart asteroids. These games are packed full of both visual symbolism, but also functional symbolism through their borrowed rules, interactions and back stories. These digital hipsters "get" street, urban and pervasive games through their gaming histories, and in the same way that Bourdieu describes habitus, they have a feel for the game. This differentiates them from those who casually encounter these games.

Just as hipsters have a set of tastes that comes from interpreting the aesthetics that emerge from manipulating 'cool' capital, and retro-referentiality, so do street game players. They create, and are the ones that can only truly appreciate, street games that are based on a deep level of referencing and reverence of games in

general, and especially those from their collective childhood. In the same way hipsters' mix the themes of child and adult, naivete and knowingness, street and pervasive games tend to also mix childhood with adulthood. Games from their collective childhood are referenced, reused and remixed. As one interviewee put it they are "children's games with something extra," referring to them being suitably challenging, complex and involving for adults

Returning to the game of *Gentrification* there are multiple layers of symbolism and ironies at work that extend beyond the game itself. There are oppositions and inversions between the child and the adult. It can be seen as a simplified, scaled up, child's game of monopoly to explore the very adult concerns of gentrification. It is simple enough to be played by those in the know but complex enough to alienate the locals. There are levels of irony, in that these digital hipsters are playing at symbolic gentrification in gentrified neighbourhoods, but instead only follows the resident and developers who are caught up in the eddies from previous waves of colonising artists and hipsters, both regular and digital. This is a hipster game on many levels.

Street games can be games that work within these inversions and contradictions because the community of players understand them. Not all games work with this and can be simplistic, but the best of them play off these properties and their tight network of reference to bring out experiences that are more than just the mechanics of the games. As both Lefebvre [10] and Debord [11] point out, these types of playful activity can engage in powerful dialectics with space and society.

1. Christopher Glazek, "South Side Story: Hasidim Vs. Hipsters," in *What Was the Hipster?*, ed. Mark Greif, et al., N+1 Research Branch Small Books Series (New York: n+1 Foundation, 2010).
2. Ryan Bigge, "The Domestication of Gentrification," *Toronto Star* (2010): IN3.
3. Robert Lanham, *The Hipster Handbook* (Anchor, 2003).
4. Ingrid M. Tolstad, "'Hey Hipster! You Are a Hipster!'" (The University of Oslo, 2006).
5. Mark Greif, "Positions," in *What Was the Hipster?*, ed. Mark Greif, et al., N+1 Research Branch Small Books Series (New York: n+1 Foundation, 2010).
6. Mark Greif, et al., *What Was the Hipster?*, N+1 Research Branch Small Books Series (New York: n+1 Foundation, 2010).
7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Routledge, 1986).

8. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Polity Press, 1992).
9. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, trans. R. Nice (London: Sage, 1993).
10. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (WileyBlackwell, 1991).
11. G Debord, and K Knabb, *Society of the Spectacle* (Rebel Pr, 1983).