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## Welcome to gentrification, the game

A Toronto-based art collective has developed Gentrification: The Game!, a wild mix of live-action Monopoly and performance art.

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PHOTO COURTESY KATE RAYNES-GOLDIE

Participants take part in Gentrification: The Game!

By: Ryan Bigge Special to the Star, Published on Sun Jul 11 2010

In the past 10 years, the mechanics of gentrification have become so predictable and codified that the once-messy process of urban renewal is now as tidy and rule-based as a game of Risk or Mouse Trap.

Which helps explain why the Toronto-based artist collective Atmosphere Industries ([www.atmosphereindustries.com](http://www.atmosphereindustries.com)) debuted Gentrification: The Game! at the Come Out & Play Festival in Brooklyn, N.Y., last month.

The game, created by Internet researcher Kate Raynes-Goldie, game enthusiast David Fono, architect Alex Raynes-Goldie and educational technologist Luke Walker, pits teams of “developers” against “locals” in a competition designed to contrast corporate and community-based approaches to urban development.

Fono describes the game as a mixture of live-action Monopoly and performance art, with Kate Raynes-Goldie amending that tagline to include “random acts of kindness plus public space hacking.”

But Fono has an even simpler explanation: “We’re interested in hipsters. That’s it in a nutshell.”

“Specifically how they think,” adds Walker, laughing.

During the game, participating hipsters “purchase” properties by photographing them. These businesses are then “improved” through various tactics including “Slightly Creepy But Wise Neighbourhood Guy Gives Impassioned, Poetic Speech” (that would be a “locals” trick) or “Hired Goons” (that would be a “developer” trick).

Anyone wandering through Park Slope on the afternoon of June 5 would have seen 30 Brooklynites scrambling to hand out flowers and organize spontaneous parades (with banners that read “Happy Neighbour Day!”)

Gentrification is part of a larger trend in location-based entertainment that has been variously described as interactive theatre, transmedia and alternate reality/locative/pervasive gaming. But whatever label Gentrification is given, it’s a

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winner, receiving Best Use of Technology and Best in Fest at the recent Come Out & Play Festival. These accolades helped convince the Hide and Seek Festival to invite Atmosphere Industries to replay the game in London's South Bank neighbourhood today.

That the game has been successfully exported to other countries is proof not only of the universal nature of gentrification, but the fact that Gentrification's gameplay can be absorbed quickly and is geographically flexible. And it turns out that the most nerve-racking aspect of organizing the game is not finding participants but trying to cross the U.S. border with a bag full of bells, noisemakers and party hats, along with a dozen protest signs with slogans like "Down With Frowns."

Now the four are hoping that Toronto will serve as the next successful location for Gentrification, which will take place on July 25 as part of Pedestrian Sundays in Kensington Market.

While the group beta-tested Gentrification in Kensington Market in April of this year, the July event will mark its official Canadian debut. And just to be clear, Atmosphere Industries is not trying to scrub Kensington clean of its gritty, ramshackle charm. "We like it the way it is," says Kate Raynes-Goldie. "We don't want there to be a Starbucks there."

But Fono acknowledges that the future of Kensington is precarious, since "gentrification is always a looming spectre." That said, the group admits that Gentrification is designed to be fun, not preachy. "We didn't really take a stance on whether gentrification is good or bad," says Alex Raynes-Goldie. "We were pretty snarky toward both sides."

The four are also realistic enough to acknowledge that a single game isn't going to change the world. But convincing the public to make better use of their public spaces, and pushing people out of their comfort zones through games like Gentrification, can be good for both the city and the soul.

Or, as Fono puts it, "The larger philosophy behind these sorts of games is turning the everyday world into a playground and an adventure."

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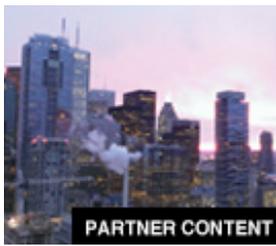
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