

Playing For A New World

Urban Capture the Flag and Insurrection

Subcomandante Rufio

Theatre, as a term, is only meaningful insofar as it is defined against real life. This dichotomy is built upon unstable foundations; this article instead looks at Urban Capture the Flag (UCTF) as a ‘performative practice.’ The intention here is to reveal theoretical underpinnings to this young but growing trend in North America.

Capture the flag is a game in which a space is divided into two or more territories, and teams corresponding to each territory attempt to simultaneously guard flags in their territory and capture the flags of opponents without being tagged. UCTF is more than just a game, and can have profound psychological effects on participants. Urban Capture the Flag, when practiced with a particular ethic in mind, can deviate from its traditional role of reinforcing warlike nationalism, and play a part in the decolonization of space and liberation of minds. Variations of UCTF also have the potential to be practiced with a minimum of hierarchy if they shift from managed activities to community rituals, inherently reinforcing a grassroots and decentralized approach to social change.

I come from a particular position in writing this paper. I have been involved in organizing UCTF in Kingston, Ontario, and am interested in analyzing the potential of UCTF from an anarchist perspective. I look at three aspects of UCTF: *Reclaiming the Occupied Territories* looks at the processes of space reclamation, the temporary autonomous zone, and psychogeography; *Rehearsing Insurrection* discusses the (limited) contemporary anarchist literature on the topic and picks apart UCTF from a tactical perspective; and *Enabling Equals* discusses the importance of transforming the event into the ritual, to avoid vanguardism and centralization. All of the literature specifically addressing UCTF can be found in underground *zines*, news stories on the events, and on the internet.

Reclaiming the Occupied Territories

Anarchists and anti-authoritarians will often see space held and controlled by the state and capital much in the same way as a colonized group views a foreign occupation.¹ So goes the paradoxical maxim of the classical anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: *Property is theft.*² Given that the midsized town of Kingston, Ontario is home to nine prisons run by Corrections Canada, Royal Military College, a large Canadian Forces Base, as well as a public college and university, the presence of the Canadian state is particularly stark. Located within three hours of both the country’s capital (Ottawa) and two of the three major financial power centers (Toronto and Montreal), the growing city is a relevant node both of the corporate capitalist economy and the state structure.

The practice of Urban Capture the Flag is, first and foremost, an act of temporarily reclaiming space. The three sites included in this study include the cities of

¹ It is also important to keep in mind that the land that is called Kingston, Ontario is more than just *metaphorically* occupied territory, it is also *literally stolen land*, violently taken from indigenous groups in the area that never ceded it to the colonial government.

² Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph. *What Is Property?* (1970). New York: Dover Publications.

Kingston, Toronto, and Des Moines, Iowa. In Toronto, Newmindspace hosts games of urban capture the flag, public pillow fights, subway parties, bubbles battles, and more. The games are free to participants and considered to be “Interactive public art, creative cultural interventions and urban bliss dissemination.”³ The territories utilized for UCTF in the last two years are located in Toronto’s financial district and occur without permits. Newmindspace does not claim political affiliation, but co-founder Kevin Bracken admits that “Capture the Flag has a very clear reclaim-the-streets message.”⁴ A Global TV News story on the group’s annual Easter Egg hunt in Kensington Market reveals the influence of anarchist aesthetic theory: “They call what they do poetic terrorism, guerilla poetry and glamour bombing to describe their art.”⁵ Poetic terrorism is a term coined by the anarchist-situationist Hakim Bey in *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (2003). In it, he writes:

“[Poetic Terrorism] is an act in a Theater of Cruelty which has no stage, no rows of seats, no tickets & no walls. In order to work at all, PT must categorically be divorced from all conventional structures for art consumption... An exquisite seduction carried out not only in the cause of mutual satisfaction but also as a conscious act in a deliberately beautiful life— may be the ultimate PT.”⁶

Bey’s Poetic Terrorism is a tactical intervention that is intended to transform the consciousness of the viewer through the medium itself; *the medium is the message*.⁷ In the same book Bey writes about a related tactic he calls the ‘Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ).’ The TAZ, or ‘pirate utopia,’ is never explicitly defined but refers to a ‘free enclave’ that is ‘liberated’ and held for a short period of time; before repression (state or otherwise) is able to stamp it out, the agents pack up and move somewhere else.⁸ Bey argues that the project of total Revolution has failed, and the people who continue to wait for ‘The Revolution’ are demoralized and unable to see freedom anywhere. He proposes that the State is too strong to confront head-on in full scale war (both concretely and in our heads). Instead, the TAZ can be a way to experience moments of liberation while working towards an insurrectionary praxis that can lead to more and more TAZs.⁹ Urban Capture the Flag can be understood as a practical way to create a TAZ for a night. In an account from a game in Des Moines, Iowa, CrimethInc Agent M.80 writes:

Our city was coming to life in a way it never had before, and we were making it happen. This space, normally designated for dumpsters, automobiles, and consumers, was becoming liberated territory.¹⁰

³ Newmindspace website, <http://newmindspace.com>

⁴ National Post, January 21, 2006. My Toronto P.T05. “Reclaim the City, One Party at a Time.”

⁵ Global National, November 6, 2007. “New spin on an Easter egg hunt.”

⁶ Bey, Hakim. *The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (2003). New York: Autonomedia. Pp.5-6.

⁷ McLuhan, Marshall. *The Medium is the Massage* (1967). New York: Bantam Books.

⁸ TAZ p96.

⁹ TAZ pp. 97-100.

¹⁰ Agent M.80. “Capture the Flag and Street Tactics,” in *Rolling Thunder* (issue 2, winter 2006). Greensboro: Crimethinc. p95.

So the practice of UCTF is both a subversion of an area's *designated purpose* and a consciousness-changing activity for participants. In the 1950s, revolutionary artistic and political agitators came up with a theory of psychogeography, defined by Ewen Chardonnet as "The study of specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behaviour of individuals."¹¹ The aim of this study was to engage in practices that enable the participant to understand the relationships of power that define modern architecture and urban planning. The reason the city was taken as the object of investigation is that, as Situationist International member Constant argued, the design of the city has made real social relations 'impossible.'¹² In the search for the elusive flag, players of UCTF are forced to examine every nook and cranny of the given territories; this provides an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the power relations inherent in urban architecture and geography. Such moments help one to comprehend how UCTF can be a consciousness-changing practice.

Rehearsing Insurrection

BRACKEN: But now I think we're creating a culture. A group that is willing to assemble in large numbers.

KUFNER: I feel like they're our people. Like if we sent out a time and a place like 10 hours beforehand, people would be there.¹³

An important aspect of Urban Capture the Flag is that it opens up a space in which street tactics can be developed and practiced. It is a fun excuse to explore an urban territory down to the minute details, and given modern alienation from the urban landscape, players might be led to attain knowledge of an area that even succeeds that of local law enforcement agencies. These 'rehearsals' and 'reclamations' give players a sense of ownership over territory and comfort on the streets, and build a morale that can prove to be invaluable in situations such as protests, direct actions, or insurrections. The game fosters a relatively low-risk environment in which affinity groups can work together to accomplish objectives that build trust and group dynamics. Furthermore, as Agent M.80 points out, "Playing challenging, high energy games on a regular basis helps maintain momentum that can carry over into other activities."¹⁴ So there are also more pragmatic ends that playing UCTF can help to fulfill as a series of training exercises. It can contribute to building a critical mass of people willing to show up for an event. But would as many people show up the night the United States bombs Iran as the number that come out to play capture the flag? There is no definite answer to this question, but I am skeptical. The answer is proportional to the politicization of the cultural scene at the given time.

¹¹ Chardonnet, Ewen. "History of Unitary Urbanism and Psychogeography at the Turn of the Sixties" (May 2003). Social Fiction: http://www.socialfiction.org/psychogeography/unitary_urbanism.html

¹² Constant. "Another City for Another Life" in *Internationale Situationiste* #2 (December 1958). Available at: <http://notbored.org/another-city.html>. Constant would quarrel with other members of the Situationist International over whether social relations were extremely strained or entirely impossible, and his pessimism on the point would eventually lead to his expulsion from the group.

¹³ "Reclaim the City, One Party at a Time."

¹⁴ "Capture the Flag and Street Tactics," p93.

Enabling Equals

The most important question for the revolutionary is how to escape disciples and enable *equals*.¹⁵

If we are to take on an ethic that embraces the anti-authoritarian refusal of representation and management as one of its first principles, then we are interested in practices that produce moments of personal empowerment. As long as UCTF is organized and managed by a small internal elite, and players are not directly involved in the planning of games, the practice will perpetuate alienation. One of the most effective ways to surrender ownership of UCTF is by transforming it into a self-managed activity. This can be accomplished with a conceptual shift from *event* to *ritual*. Rituals, which I define as regularly practiced self-organized community activities, tend to minimize hierarchy much more effectively than events. This is still conditional on a sound architecture that supports the given ritual. In Des Moines, for example, UCTF is played every Friday at 2200hrs, and the rendezvous point is always the same.¹⁶ Territories are negotiated on the spot, and the teams are randomized. This example offers a good model for preventing the practice from becoming dependent on a few key organizers. Such a dependency not only implies a weak structure but, from an anarchist perspective, an ethically flawed social arrangement.

All this being said, UCTF is still only a mere tactic, and a limited tactic given that it excludes those people who are unwilling or unable to engage in high-energy running for extended periods of time. Furthermore, the exposure to police overreaction is intensified for people who occupy marginalized identities. While I could envision modifications to the game that could accommodate differently-abled bodies, and protection mechanisms that could minimize police repression of individuals, there is no doubt that it will not be suitable for everyone. Of course, that does not disqualify the practice entirely, but only ensures that it cannot be advanced as a totalizing strategy for social change. If we admit that, then we can in good conscience continue to assert the promise of Urban Capture the Flag in offering consciousness-changing experiences, tactical skills development, and empowerment of equals within a tightly woven community.

¹⁵ CrimethInc. Worker's Collective. "CrimethInc Worker Bulletins 47 & 74" (no date). Olympia: CrimethInc.

¹⁶ "Capture the Flag and Street Tactics," p93.