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rethinking our future neighbourhoods

Katamari Kart: A Serious and Hilarious Sub/Urban Game for More Serendipitous, Playful and Friendly Public Art

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https://doi.org/10.34074/aslm.2023113

Abstract
The article presents the sub/urban game-method Katamari Kart, where people roam industrial and suburban areas collecting waste materials and progressively building a large and mobile public sculpture. This game-method departs from established concepts and practice in neighbourhood improvement as it tries to evade capital expenditure and embraces uncertainty and friction in bringing together various stakeholders, does not aim to look stylish or even be useful, decelerates daily life, promotes self-sufficiency in cultural life, and creates long-term wellbeing through play. That is, it is a degrowth approach to neighbourhood improvement. Rumen Rachev positions the Katamari Kart game-method as an expression of the 'Kiwi way' and discusses the role it can play in making our future neighbourhoods more serendipitous, playful and friendly, and a reflection of the diverse people and things that reside there – all without capital expenditure or the support of the authorities. Finally, Alex Bonham, author of the book *Play and the City: How to Create Places and Spaces to Help Us Thrive*, discusses the Katamari Kart game-method in the context of adult play, our settler history, keeping up appearances, the Be a Tidy Kiwi campaign, play and wellbeing, and conflicting responses to frugality.

Keywords: Sub/urban play, improvisation, collaboration, public art, serious games

Introduction
When people make 'stuff' outside of their houses, in the public and liminal spaces of their cities, it's as if they have taken up Paul Auster's advice to "pick one spot in the city and begin to think of it as yours. It doesn't matter where and it doesn't matter what."[1] Urban planner Kevin Lynch notes that "people play with things and find new uses for them,"[2] which can be understood as individually created, everyday expressions of the creativity of everyday people in all of its facets.[3]

Unauthorised residents' use and modification of their everyday environments leaves traces and fragments; remnants that layer up and decay over time. These traces are fine-grained evidence of life, human(e)-scale attachment, action and care, affection, love, pride and ordinary magic. They are the key to everyday environments where people can be well beings. They are scattered oases; tacitly accepted, actively protected, ignored, or begrudgingly left alone.

We thus view them as 'small spaces of anarchy,' an idea we modified from Mohammad Bamyeh's book *Anarchy as Order* (2009). These spaces are zones of human-

1 Paul Auster, *Collected Prose* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 285.
2 Kevin Lynch, *Good City Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 157.
3 Marieluise Jonas, "Private Use of Public Open Space in Tokyo. A Study of the Hybrid Landscape of Tokyo's Informal Gardens," *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 2, no. 2 (2007): 18–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/18626033.2007.9723385

scale action, attachment and care that have three key characteristics:

- They can replace state control with regards to an aspect of city life.
- They can take away that aspect from the need for majority rule.
- They promote unimposed order as a style of working.[4]

From the perspective of small spaces of anarchy, it is possible for people to generate their own environments, all rubbing up against each other and transforming each other's knowledge, and scattered all over the cities they live in. We learn about ourselves and each other through our making, doing and making-do, in the (s)low-key process of making stuff in our cities, and while it may not be efficient, easy, or always fun, the friction is what brings life, interest and pleasure to the everyday environment.

Perhaps the most interesting and useful way to improve sub/urban environments, then, is to devolve control to the residents; those that have the various stakes, knowledge and abilities to do so.

Negative Emissions and Waste Studies (NEWS) Programme

Under this understanding, Chris Berthelsen, Adam Ben-Dror and Rumen Rachev created the Negative Emissions and Waste Studies (NEWS) Programme in 2020 for investigating and promoting this view. The NEWS Programme is a free self-learning environment that runs on streets, parks, private homes, community centres, public art galleries, department stores, public schools, in the sea, and anywhere else. It uses only things that have been thrown away or can be found for free. We then play and experiment with them to make fun, pleasurable and (sometimes) useful objects, services, activities, etc., in domains including but not limited to electronics, sewing, ceramics, sound/music, micromobility, gaming, landscaping, food/drink, poetry and love.

A core game-method of the NEWS Programme is the Katamari Kart, a real-time prototyping exercise where people roam industrial and suburban areas collecting waste materials and progressively building a large and mobile public sculpture (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Iteratively building a mobile public sculpture of junk.

This game-method departs from established concepts and practice in neighbourhood improvement, as it tries to evade capital expenditure, embraces uncertainty and friction in bringing together various stakeholders, does not aim to look stylish or even be useful, decelerates daily life (embraces slowness), promotes self-sufficiency in cultural life (rather than participation in cultural consumption), and creates long-term wellbeing through play even though it (i) does not aim to and (ii) may often result in negative feelings or shock in the short-term. This can be viewed as a method within a wider agenda of a de-growth[5] approach to neighbourhood improvement. The aim of this game-method is not simply to oppose the dominant hierarchical structure for the sake of it (and getting pleasure out of the refusal). Rather, we believe in and try to introduce different modalities of active and not-so-active participation in the urban sphere, without the co-option of commercial flows of finance and bureaucracy. We try to do what we can without having or needing official permission to play in the Super City and without having or needing any 'proper' resources ready at hand.

Katamari Kart

Katamari (塊) is a Japanese word that means agglomeration or aggregation – a whole lot of stuff stuck together – and the Katamari Kart method resembles (but was not initially influenced by) the Playstation 2 game *Katamari Damacy* (literally 'Clump Spirit') by Namco, which involves (as Wikipedia tells us) "rolling a magical, highly adhesive ball called a katamari around various locations, collecting increasingly larger objects, ranging from thumbtacks to human beings to mountains, until the ball has grown large enough to become a star."[6]

The unwanted stuff of the city, in dumpsters, left on the side of the road, floating down the street, is perceived as a distributed resource centre and serendipity engine, where resources are not a stock that is administered by specific authorities or caretakers, but a flow that can be encountered and commandeered by anyone, according to their desires and abilities. What emerges in this game-method is not a permitted public sculpture that has been filtered by the authorities and been submitted to multiple health, safety, ethics and aesthetics checks.

The temporary sculpture is simply a whole lot of crap, brought together in a particular way, at a particular time, in a particular place, by particular (and often peculiar) people (Figure 2). We leave it, with a note of explanation and a contact number and intend to retrieve it "when

4 Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2009).
5 Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis, eds., *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).
6 "Katamari Damacy," Wikipedia, accessed November 4, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katamari_Damacy

Figure 2. Simply a whole lot of crap, brought together in a particular way, at a particular time, in a particular place, by particular (and often peculiar) people.

we feel like it" (which includes when someone rings us and asks us to move it) and repurpose it for future pleasure. What would be the point of throwing it out?

Like Claude Levi-Strauss' bricoleur, in playing this game people can learn how to make do with whatever is at hand to create a poetry that is not (only) about accomplishment and execution but is an expression of their lives and personalities through the choices they make with the resources that they happen to bump into. "The 'bricoleur' may not ever complete [her] purpose but she always puts something of [her] self into it."[7]

In the next section, co-maker of the Katamari Kart Rumen Rachev will interrogate the Katamari Kart game-method and discuss the role it can play in making our future neighbourhoods more serendipitous, playful and friendly, and a reflection of the diverse people and things that reside there – all without capital expenditure or the support of the authorities.

Katamari Kart as a Form of Hopeful Ludology and Ludic Hope-ology – Rumen Rachev

As an EU-raised urbanartiste living and researching future environments in Aotearoa I experience the Katamari Kart as a form of Hopeful Ludology and Ludic Hope-ology, a virtuous spiral where the more you play, the more hopeful you get, and the more hopeful you are, the more you play.

The Katamari Kart game-method is an expression of the 'Kiwi way,' the key aspect of which is the attitude of 'just go for it and do it!'. No budget, no expectations, just on the go as it goes. That is to say: enjoy the flow. After five years of research and practice in Aotearoa, I find that the proper 'Kiwi way' is to go with the flow and learn how to enjoy whatever happens. While this mantra has long been co-opted by the neoliberal market and start-up culture, with its focus on risk-taking (you gotta risk it for the biscuit!), the Katamari Kart and the Kiwi way show us how to participate in the cultural life of our neighbourhoods without contributing to the neoliberal market or producing anything of financial significance. Engaging hands-on with the Katamari Kart game-method is a chance to dive deep into the urban fabric without the fear that one has to be able to afford to consume and spend hard-earned dollars, in order to play in the Super City of Tāmaki Makaurau (the city previously known as Auckland) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Dive deep into the sub/urban fabric without financial resources.

The tactile engagement with the neighbourhood through the Katamari Kart provides an opportunity to become hopeful about our neighbourhoods through interacting with the material world and exploring the suburbs as a giant toolbox, full of surprises and encounters with the public body. Moreover, the Katamari Kart engages with the roots of the person building on the go, enabling residents to bring their own aesthetics and values to the neighbourhood, in my case by introducing critical Euro-aesthetics and providing some Euro-visuals (as the EU flag for example) (Figure 4).

Through collecting and reassembling discarded and unwanted materials, stripped of productive labour and cut from the circulation economy, the Katamari Kart game-method opens up a space to play and explore, and to dive into ludic hope-ology. It is not junk, but a hopeful message for activating differently perceived sub/urban aesthetics and relationships.

Through the Katamari Kart game-method it becomes apparent how the power structures of the mega city strictly divide the suburban regions into official zones of registered and formally recognised play activities at the appropriate play zones. It seems that unofficial or somewhat illegible play with physical elements cannot be tolerated in the plans of the Super City, and any differently looking play activities in the public sphere are likely to be immediately condemned and labelled as unwanted and undesirable junk, without the chance for friendly discussion and negotiation. Xin Cheng and Chris Berthelsen's experience during Auckland Artweek 2016, where "Auckland Council approve[d] art, then remove[d] it anyway" illustrates that even when one arm of the authorities tries to support such experiments, another arm is all too quick to tear it down.[8]

Take your junk home and do not disturb the neighbours. That is the proper way, but not the 'Kiwi way,' which gives me hope for the future of Kiwi neighbourhoods. Who wants to be a 'tidy Kiwi' when you can be a 'junk Kiwi'?

Finally, Alex Bonham, author of the book *Play and the City: How to Create Places and Spaces to Help Us Thrive* (2021), will discuss the Katamari Kart method in the context of play and wellbeing and draw out future directions for research and discussion.

Commentary – Alex Bonham

I observe the progress of the Katamari Kart through the suburbs of the North Shore, led by two normal-looking white blokes albeit with foreign-sounding names, and I find the work they do very open to the possibility of serendipitous discoveries and encounters, surprises and

7 Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 21.
8 Morgan Tait, "Auckland Council Approves Art, then Removes it Anyway," *Stuff*, October 12, 2016, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/auckland-council-approves-art-then-removes-it-anyway/X7VV2GGXLUE34JDS455IPPPKJQ/

Figure 4. Enabling residents to bring their own aesthetics and values to the neighbourhood.

laughter, so I wonder at the response they get as they play the city. If it were children pulling trolleys with junk, making things with what they have found, children with a bit of initiative and imagination, they would be commended for their creative efforts. Children are allowed to play with junk on the street, but adults? Chris and Rumen have noted that the response to them in the street has been mixed. Some have enjoyed their behaviour, which models the truth that we have permission to play, to be unexpected. Kiwis are generally friendly and tolerant, so why have Chris and Rumen triggered negative reactions as well as positive ones? Roger Caillois observes that you can understand a culture by the way it plays.[9] I wonder whether the responses tell us about another side of the Kiwi way, another aspect to 'having a go' or 'going with the flow. I am talking about conformism, and a certain kind of cultural aesthetics that I will consider through the lens of play.

It has been put to me that New Zealand's settler society was predominantly skilled working-class or lower-middle-class people with aspirations to create a better version of society back home (mainly Britain). That was a unionised, organised society in which there was a good deal of ability, resourcefulness and quiet pride, despite the fact that (or because) there may not have been much spare cash. This has been a society in which reciprocity is valued and necessary for society to cohere. Yes, you should have a go, and then you should keep practising until you get good at it, whatever it is. Preferably in private, so as to be skilled in public. Keeping up appearances – the front garden, the ready smile – is key, whatever is going on behind closed doors, perhaps in the shed. Augusto Boal says that in South America there are cops in the street, in the West there are cops in the head.[10] In New Zealand there are arguably cops in the head, but only when you are in the street.

Is the pushback to an abandoned cart a legacy of the Tidy Kiwi campaign, that has lasted nigh on fifty years? Another form of keeping up appearances but also a culture of reciprocity and care. And perhaps council contracts with park maintenance companies demand that the streets and sports fields are left tidy. The parks maintenance worker, perhaps on a zero-hours contract, without fluent English, is charged with removing stuff. Of course, they don't call the number that Chris and Rumen left on the cart: it's best to avoid conflict. Besides, what would happen if everyone left their stuff on the side of a park?

If the tidy, keeping-up-appearances stereotype is true, then perhaps there is a reaction against the outlier, the eccentric adult artist or intellectual. To fit in culturally as a Kiwi, I posit, it is best to be offering something that people understand and enjoy. Like music, sport, or fish and chips. Why would an adult create something with junk that has no purpose at all? It is absurd, hard to understand – Katamari Kart may have been beloved in Japan and by devoted gamers a decade ago, but it is not widely understood in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. By not being able to understand the cultural references as a game, perhaps the behaviour is oddly threatening, upsetting, like other kids speaking a made-up (or, God forbid, foreign! or Indigenous!) language during team sports. Maybe it is a status thing.

Perhaps those who are supportive will read Chris and Rumen's card and understand their intentions. For others, the self-declared work might be considered subversive. Johan Huizinga, in his seminal work on play, observes that spoilsports are held in the lowest esteem, lower than the cheat.[11] When Chris and Rumen challenge dominant culture in this gentle way, are they spoilsports? I would ask them if they would enjoy it as much without the subversive element. What response would Chris and Rumen get, I wonder, if the gathering and making was done more discreetly and the final piece of art more impressive? Deer heads of found metals go for a lot in the gallery at Helena Bay. On the other hand, there is something Kiwi about being rubbish at something and doing it anyway. It's funny. Laughing at one's self also goes a long way here. It would be less funny if there was no cultural tension. Which makes me wonder how much the stereotype of resourcefulness is perhaps an ideal rather than the norm.

Look at Chris and Rumen's practice through another lens, and it is an enjoyable sustainable, quirky, kind effort of collection and creativity. A conscientious objection to throw-away society and a modelling of a thrifty, creative ontology. That they should be considered threatening is silly. And, yet, perhaps thriftiness is troubling in its own way if it foreshadows a future of scrabbling for bits and pieces that, these days, we take for granted (though perhaps not so much at the moment, with supply-chain issues). Will we gather rubber bands and nails in old shoe boxes like they did in communist Eastern Europe? Is it a hint that our status is falling, that our future in the world is uncertain, that as private space gets smaller and more expensive, we rely on the public realm and crave order in it? There is a lot to admire in the past, as well as critique, even as it slips away. Of course, perhaps the memory is false. We identify as competent but actually we have always struggled. We have been forced to make clothes because there were no imports. Not unlike Eastern Europe at all.

It is a paradox – as the world changes we may need to play our way through it, to adapt, to lean into moments of serendipity to create new opportunities and friendships (Figure 5) – yet there is an understandable desire for order and to cling to what we have, or thought we had, and not be left behind. Who would have thought contemplating Katamari Kart might need a trigger warning?

9 Roger Callois, *Man, Play and Games* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
10 Augusto Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2006).
11 Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2014).

Figure 5. As the world changes we may need to play our way through it.

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Rumen Rachev holds an RMA in Media and Performance Studies from Utrecht University, the Netherlands, and is actively engaged in practice-led research in art and design (AUT), since 2017. As well, he is co-founder of the NEWS Programme (Negative Emissions and Waste Studies Programme) and is Creative Guest, Wairua Awhina (Helping Spirit) and Director of 希望学 (Hope-ology) at Activities and Research in Environments for Creativity Charitable Trust. Currently he holds the position of research assistant at the University of Auckland.

Dr Alex Bonham is an elected member of the Waitematā Local Board. Her position is that the council can deliver action on climate change and pollution by the choices it makes, and she stands for better transport choices and forward-thinking urban planning that leaves space for local business, parks and nature, libraries and community facilities where everyone is welcome. Alex supports enhancing our shared spaces and offering many opportunities to participate in exciting and diverse ways. Alex graduated from Cambridge with a degree in law then went into publishing. She left publishing in July 2010 to have two children and is currently working on a doctorate on the role of play, including sports, recreation and the arts in maintaining quality of life in Auckland.