




VM503
AESTHETICS AND HISTORY
OF NEW MEDIA

WEEK 12 CLASS 2

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**Playing Life and Living Play:
How Hybrid Reality Games Reframe
Space, Play and the Ordinary**

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Play = Real Life

- Scholars emphasize the **artificiality** of the game space defined by the **magic circle** as a *constructed space* and a *closed system*.
- As long as we use the antitheses of **work_play**, **frivolity_seriousness**, we will never grasp the ontological meaning of play.
- Our claim is that **play is essentially part of life**, that is, that *playful activities belong to our everyday spaces of ordinary life*.
- Blast Theory integrates traditional playful spaces and the spaces of our daily lives by relating **digital_physical | represented_urban** spaces to one another.

Blast Theory | Mixed Reality Lab

- [Can You See Me Now?](#) (2001), a chase game played online and on the streets.
- [Uncle Roy All Around You](#) (2003), players searched through the streets for Uncle Roy using handheld computers and a virtual city.
- [I Like Frank](#) (2004), the world's first mixed reality game for 3G phones.
- [Day Of The Figurines](#) (2006), an SMS game for up to 1000 players set in a decaying English town occupied by an Arabic army.
- [Ulrike and Eamon Compliant](#) (2009) is an ambulatory work exploring subjectivity in the heart of the streets, squares and churches of Venice. It invites audiences to become participants and interlocutors with the artists.

I Like Frank (2004)

- First mixed reality game for 3G phones, players searched for Frank in the streets of Adelaide (Australia) + online at www.ilikefrank.com.
- **Street Players** (SP) in Adelaide and **Online Players** (OL) all over the world registered for for 60-minute segments to help one another find Frank.
- SPs navigated the city mobile phones displaying a 2D map.
- OPs navigated a digital 3D model of Adelaide which displayed the location of the SPs; they communicated via audio and text messages.

I Like Frank ...

- A **first person** HRG.
- Although Frank is a **fictional** character, his office has a **specific location in the city**, which is revealed to OPs in the 3D world in the form of postcards.
- SPs have to ask OPs for information in order to find Frank's location; they have to **collaborate** (trust) to complete the game.

Day of the Figurines (2006)

- Takes place over a period of **24 days**. Each day corresponds to one hour within the game narrative.
- **Up to 1,000 players** create and register their **avatars** (figurines) at the game board location.
- After their avatar is placed on the game board, the player leaves, and the game begins.
- Player's agency is mediated through SMS instructions to a **(3rd) person** who moves their avatar on the board.
- The physical game board is representative of an urban space, thus **merging urban space with the game board space**.

Day of the Figurines ...

- Plays on the **tension between the intimacy and anonymity** of text messages.
- SMSs can including “hugging” and “attacking.”
- The game unfolds as **social interactions** with other characters and the game space(s) occur, simulating much of our ordinary life experience.
- The **strength of these textual interactions** is what allows DOF to merge play and ordinary life.

Defining Hybrid Reality Games

1. **Mobility** (cell phones).
2. **Collaboration** (social).
3. Merging **physical** and **digital** spaces.

The ability to move through physical space:

- **Reconfigures the notion of play** (as merged with and inseparable from ordinary life)
- Highlights how **playful activities** can **influence how one moves through physical spaces and how one interacts with others** in the city.

Merging Play and Ordinary Life: Experiential and Spatial Aspects

- HRGs facilitate the liberation of play from a particular time or space; **commute time becomes play time**; the **bus space becomes play space**.
- The **relationships between people** (community) create playful spaces.*
- **Social Space** = layering of **(1)** material spaces **(2)** representations of space, and **(3)** spaces of representation (Lefebvre 1991). In an HRG:
 - (1) city streets, buildings, vehicles, etc.
 - (2) maps of the city + txt messages sent between players.
 - (3) fictional game world (the game narrative which blurs with the ordinary space of the city).

Experiential and Spatial Aspects ...

- As players move in and out of the game world, **the two spaces** (city space and game space) **become blurred and indistinguishable.**
- **Although players are not co-present, these spaces are interdependent;** OP's digital actions have very real, physical consequences.
- HRGs are characterized by a **community of players** that inhabits multiple spaces simultaneously. Thus, the players are **co-represented.**

Game Community: Trust and Rules

- In ILF, the players collaborate to find the postcard (and thus find “Frank”); the SPs have to answer a personal question on the back of the postcard, such as ‘Who do you think of when you feel alone?’; the OPs leave their postal address with the game designers to receive the postcard meant for them. **The sharing of personal information requires trust.**
- In DOF, the players can retain anonymity because their avatars represent them. Trusting is easier; **how can community emerge in an environment where trust comes cheaply but rules are nonexistent?**

Identity: Play with Anonymity and Surveillance

- In the **tension between anonymity and surveillance**, the player can find both the freedom to play with one's identity and safety in knowing that others are also observing.
- Because the game space is designed to mirror the actual cityspace, the experiential exploration of this question becomes even more immediate for players; they can import their game experiences into their ordinary lives and question (1) the positive side of surveillance (e.g., public cameras as a crime deterrent); (2) the questionable side (e.g., managers perusing Facebook).

A New Framework for Games, Game Spaces, and Ordinary Life?

- HRGs (1) transform the way people move through urban spaces; (2) **mix playful and ordinary spaces**, as well as **public and private spheres**.
- Have the potential to **free us from the possible drudgery of daily urban travels**.
- **Remind us how much there is to discover and experience in everyday life** (require players to physically experience less traveled areas; also allow OPs to experience the city from a distance).

Critique

- **Surveillance is normalized** through the game dynamics and less explicitly through the goals of the game.
- DOF and ILF not only appear to make this okay, fun, and normal, but also tell people how to become better surveyors of themselves and others.
- The creation of community through the normalization of a surveillance culture redefines how individuals relate to each other: you are “free” to be anonymous insofar as you are “free” to be surveyed. Alternately, you can survey others.
- This illustrates **Foucault’s conceptualizations of networks of power; that “power passes through individuals.”**

Conclusion

- While these games offer us the **potential to experience the playful aspects of life**, we must also be vigilant regarding the goals of the game we are playing and the life we are living.
- HRGs can **reconfigure** in unexpected ways our current **concepts of interaction, surveillance, community, and trust in city spaces**.