

## **Playful Spaces between Fantasy and Real**

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### **Introduction**

Theories on play have not only been interrelated with the notion of everyday practice, but also with child development, fate, power, identity, imagination, game play, and art (Sutton-Smith). Recently, it has been suggested that creative production is an integral and active part of play activities (Pearce), particularly when play connects individuals through collaboration with others who are normally outside of one's own social network (Nardi and Harris). Studies on virtual role-playing games have shown that playing can become a daily activity, a way of socializing through the formation of "familiar-stranger" relationships, where players enjoy the presence of others in a game but do not necessarily interact with them – something like a person reading by herself in a crowded coffee house (Duchenaud et al.). While play provides the possibility to create spaces that are imaginative and escape certain limitations that one might encounter in the constraints imposed by a pre-constructed environment (Sutton-Smith, Turkle), I do not consider play as separate from these limitations and constraints, but rather as an integral part providing the possibility to challenge physical or cognitive constraints through crossing the boundaries between tangible and imaginative spaces (e.g. a physical and a virtual world).

I wish discuss play as un-intrusive but emotionally rich form of spatial practice within everyday life. I want to explore how play can be incorporated within daily settings to mediate between various spaces, is it virtual – physical, mobile – loss of mobility, creator – user. Can play be considered an everyday practice that provides room for reflection upon the self, for telling stories and reconstructing stories of spaces as well as room for familiar-stranger relationships conveying a sense of presence? How can we design for an everyday playfulness that pushes boundaries of traditional game concepts and spatial representations, such as the physical and the virtual? Conceptual analysis, presentation of previous and current work shall give insight into the approaches I took to explore impact of emotive and playful spaces.

### **Play, Space and other Everyday Stories**

Through everyday practice people create their own meaning for spaces, individually and collectively in the specific ways in which they move through those spaces and put them to use (Dourish). Games as "enunciative" acts of everyday practice within these spaces represent not only an embodied appropriation of the spatial environment useful for

analysis of everyday practices but constitute this very specific integral part of everyday life while being performed in and simultaneously constructing a space outside of daily competition. According to de Certeau, tales, games and travel tell everyday stories, while representing treatments of space and demarcating the boundaries of what is possible within a given place (de Certeau). These spatial stories describe not only the space and movements through and within it, but rather link to spaces outside.

In Nippert-Eng's analysis of boundary play for example, everyday practices, such as individuals' behaviors and conversations, or design and manipulation of objects, provide amusing clues for a space that mediates between the physical and the cognitive and create play experiences that are both intellectually stimulating and felt. "Players" explore traditional boundaries or new interpretations of pre-established boundaries between animal-person, artificial-natural, masculine-feminine, figure-ground, mean-funny, physical-virtual, private-public (Nippert-Eng).

Similar attributes have been ascribed to recent developments in the field of ubiquitous computing technologies, in particular to approaches that use locative media<sup>1</sup> and metaphors of ambient awareness to establish an embodied space of shared emotions and presence over distance. In social authoring projects such as *(area)code*<sup>2</sup> and *[murmur]*<sup>3</sup> people tell stories or anecdotes of the spaces they inhabit or move through. Bell et al. on the other hand presents a mobile application, a location-based game named "Feeding Yoshi", where play becomes interwoven with everyday life and variation in location of the players is used as a play element. Similarly, Lin et al. demonstrate how boundaries between the physical and virtual world create a playful environment that can motivate behavioral change. Virtual creatures as mediators between an imaginary world and daily routines are embedded into everyday practices such as exercise habits and socializing.

### **Storymixer – an audiovisual collaborative storytelling game**

In the workshop, I want to present Storymixer, an audiovisual collaborative storytelling game that was exhibited at the Telic Arts Exchange<sup>4</sup>, in Los Angeles, in December 2006. I will reflect on conceptual and design ideas and on my experiences during an informal on-site observation of the game exhibition. Inspired by John Cage's *Ars Combinatoria* and Mozart's dice game, our team created a game experience where players themselves are part of a combinatorial art piece, collaboratively telling stories and simultaneously mixing a sound-collage. 5 players interact with the game in a public setting of an art exhibition. Requirement for the exhibition was the incorporation of 5 joysticks as input devices. Our team used this constraint to explore boundaries between traditional game concepts and new forms of play experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> very often understood to include bodily, technological and cultural components, combining cultural practices and the embodiment of the user, with various 'media' and location sensing technologies such as GPS (Hemment), the term was coined by Karlis Kalnins (Canada) in 2003

<sup>2</sup> (area) code by Jen Southern and centrifugalforces, <http://www.areacode.org.uk> (in Hemment).

<sup>3</sup> [murmur], <http://murmurtoronto.ca/> (in Hemment).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.telic.info/>



Fig.1 Game design, exhibition at Telic Arts Exchange and visitors playing the game

The STORYmixer constitutes an interface for playful collaborative art creation that combines literary and audio elements. By providing artifacts from stories and various sound elements as input for the game, the player need not have an understanding about writing or sound mixing. Art and collaboration are the main game elements. In applying these elements the player is involved in an interactive process to create an artistic piece. John Cage talked about “the togetherness of differences” (Perloff et al.) when he combined texts from Wittgenstein, Thoreau, Emerson, McLuhan, newspapers, and his own writings or when he created galleries in constant motion such as the museum exhibition *Rolywholyover A Circus*. In Mozart’s dice game (“Musikalisches Würfelspiel”) the usually passive audience could recombine a number of musical elements through the random function of throwing dice to select the elements (Zweig). In both examples randomness “calculated” by machines (computer and dice) contributed to the outcome of the creation. In the STORYmixer this randomness comes from individual choice and the willingness (or lack of willingness) of each player to collaborate. The amount of collaboration, and the speed and interactivity during the game is up to the player. While the experience of the game is centered on the two levels of interactive play, the story and the sound-collage, the outcome is highly dependent on the collaborative decision. This may take players into a negotiated space of dialogue outside of the game. The outcome of the game is up to the players; they can choose to focus on constructing a story, or a music piece, or both. The final creation may be absurd, inharmonious, dreamy, mysterious, or a coherent sound and story space.

Besides pushing the boundaries of traditional game concepts and transforming players into creators of a media space, the spatial environment of the game itself became constituent part of the play experience. The game was both, part of an interactive art exhibition and part of a spatial experience. Within the space of the game exhibition, artifacts and activities in and around the space became part of a playful experience. For example, one of the visitors was locked inside the bathroom during one of the game sessions. His “release” caused cheerful reactions and received “a nomination for funniest game”. Most of the visitors incorporated the visit of the exhibition into a whole evening of relaxation, such as arrangements for dinner after the visit and for meeting friends at the gallery. The playful character of the exhibition space was perceived as opportunity for social interaction with friends and strangers. Boundaries between player, visitor and audience intermingled.

## Conclusion

On the border between virtual and real, dream world and physical encounter, play has the ability to make these borders visible through engagement in un-intrusive everyday practices that create a space of its own inhabited by stories that leave room for self-reflection and reciprocal understanding between people as well as between players and technology that might be hidden behind a tangible surface of the surrounding world. Instead of motivating players to take actions for improvement or more efficient and productive behavior, play can provide artistic environments in everyday life that builds a sense of collaborative awareness and connectedness between players. Only then, spectators can be transformed into actors, players into creators and competition into playful communication and interaction. Games, art, and interactive experiences intermingle to create un-intrusive but richer emotional encounters.

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