Pervasive Presence: Blast Theory's Day Of The Figurines

by Matt Adams, Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi

Day Of The Figurines is a massively multiplayer board-game for up to a thousand participants which players can interact with remotely via SMS messages through their mobile phones from anywhere in the world. The piece was developed by Blast Theory in collaboration with Nottingham University's Mixed Reality Lab as part of a larger research project, IPerG, funded by the European Commission's IST Programme. IPerG includes Swedish Institute of Computer Science (SICS), HUMLE and ICE Laboratories, the Interactive Institute, Play Studio & Zero Game Studio, the University of Tampere, Hypermedia Laboratory, Nokia Research, Fraunhofer Institute, FIT, Sony NetServices and Gotland University. The team's scientific coordinator is Steve Benford from Nottingham University's Mixed Reality Lab. The coordinator is Annika Waern from SICS.

IPerG's principal research objective is the investigation of pervasive games, i.e., games that 'are no longer confined to the virtual domain of the computer, but integrate the physical and social aspects of the real world' (Magerkurth et al, 2005: 2). Pervasive games, which operate by 'interweaving digital media with our everyday experience' (Capra et al, 2005: 89), 're-mediate', to borrow Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin's term (2000), aspects of situationism and flâneurism, as well as performance and game, role play and theatricality, activism and 'smart mobbing' (Rheingold, 2002). As in the case of Donna Haraway's seminal reading of cyborg (1991), the pervasive game operates as excess, a contamination of social reality with fiction, everyday life with technological augmentation, the 'real' with representation.

The IPerG project itself considers pervasive games as extending conventional computer games in one or more of three dimensions: spatially, typically through location-based experiences that respond to players' positions and movements and may be designed to fit a specific site; socially, in terms of building on the primarily social use of personal devices, especially mobile phones, as well as by establishing new relationships between players and non players, principally spectators in public settings; and temporally, more finely interweaving the experience of the game with the patterns of daily life, once again building on the characteristics of devices such as mobile phones that enable us to communicate with others at many times and in many places (Montola, 2006).

Previous works by Blast Theory have explored the themes of spatial expansion, most notably in Can You See Me Now? (2003-5), winner of the Golden Nica (2003) at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, which utilized the Global Positioning System (GPS) to track performers' movements through the city and then map these onto the movements of their avatar through a corresponding virtual model of this city as part of a game of chase with online players (Flintham, 2003), and temporal expansions, particularly in Uncle Roy All Around You (2003) which explored the boundaries between the fictional world of a game and the physical reality of a city, implicating bystanders on the city the streets in the narrative of the game (Benford, Crabtree et al, 2006). In contrast, Day Of The Figurines sets out to explore the theme of the temporal expansion of pervasive games.

Matt Adams asks Steve Benford

How does Day Of The Figurines fit the debates within the practice of Human Computer Interaction (HCI)?

Our studies of Day of the Figurines shed light on several contemporary issues in HCI. First, we are concerned with understanding how players interweave the experience with the patterns of their daily lives. It appears from their feedback and also from an analysis of log files of messages sent to and from the game, that the majority of players exhibit an episodic style of play, sometimes playing intensively and sometimes not playing at all for several days before returning again. This raises new challenges for Human Computer Interaction. When and how should the game interrupt players? How can it avoid flooding players with too many messages, especially while they are disengaged? Such questions resonate with ongoing research into context-aware computing in which computer systems try to adapt to the situation of the user. Day of the Figurines promises to deepen our understanding of context including when and where people prefer to engage with a mobile experience.

A second issue concerns the ways in which people interact with and through the medium of texting. Previous studies of text messaging in HCI have either focused on improving the efficiency of text input, comparing various text input techniques, or have explored the social use of text messaging, for example revealing how texting among teenagers involves elements of gift giving behaviours. In contrast, Day of the Figurines will provide us with the opportunity to explore how people experience and engage in a narrative that is delivered and constructed through text messaging. Here, for example, we will be exploring new techniques for making maximum use of the limited bandwidth of each text message by aggregating information about several events into a single SMS message.

A final issue concerns the role and design of the augmented game board in Day of the Figurines. As computers increasingly find their way into public settings such as museums, galleries, theatres and even the city streets, so interaction designers are becoming more aware of the need to design interaction for spectators as well as for the direct users of an interface. The augmented game board in Day of the Figurines has been explicitly designed to be a spectator interface, intended to attract new players, to reveal aspects of the game that would normally be hidden,

and to frame the introduction to the game. Studying the design and actual experience of the game board should help in deepening our understanding of designing spectator interfaces.

Day Of The Figurines was publicly tested three times in 2005, including a twenty-four-day test of an early version at the Laban Centre in London in September 2005, and a short public test of a second substantially revised version in June 2006 at the Sonar festival in Barcelona. The world premiere took place in Berlin at Hebbel am Ufer, as part of Trampoline, from 28 September to 21 October 2006. On this occasion, the game was run for twenty-four days for 165 players. This article represents an attempt to address the ephemerality, hybridity, and inter-mediality of this piece. Its authors – Matt Adams, who, together with Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj, is a founding member of Blast Theory, Steve Benford, Professor of Collaborative Computing at the University of Nottingham, who has been working jointly with Blast Theory since Desert Rain (1999), and Gabriella Giannachi, Senior Lecturer in Performance and New Media at Exeter University who, through the AHRC funded Performing Presence Project has been documenting the piece from June 2006 – here interrogate the research processes, aesthetics and documentation of Day Of The Figurines by asking each other a series of distinct but inter-related questions.

A player choosing a figurine at Sonar, Barcelona. Photo: Mauricio Capra.

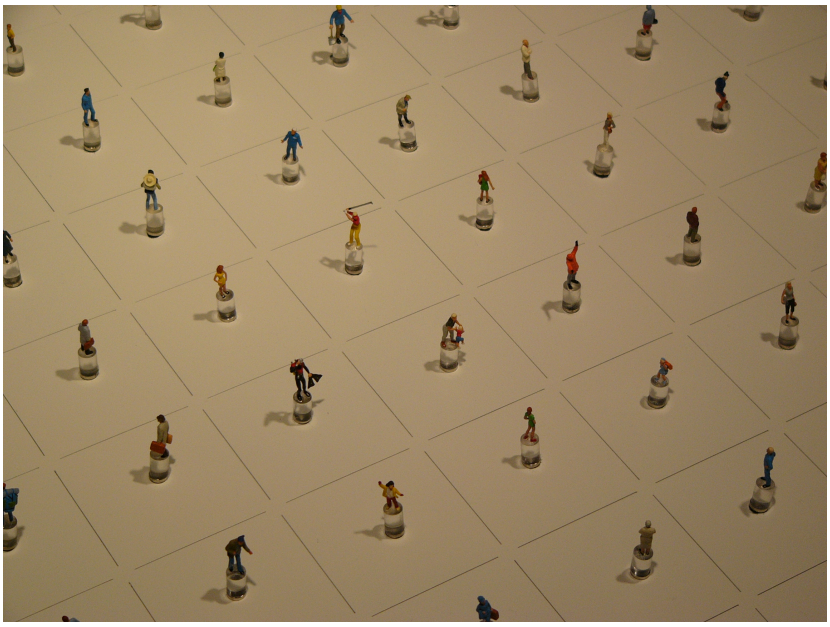
To participate in Day Of The Figurines, players visit a physical space, which could be a museum, gallery, art centre, or, as in the case of the Berlin premiere, a theatre foyer. Here, they find a large-scale white metal model of an imaginary town at table height. On the board there are fifty cut-up destinations, based on a typical British town including, for instance, a 24 Hour Garage, Big Chef, the Blue Cross, a Boarded up Shop, a Hospital, an Internet Café, a Level Crossing, an Underpass, but also The Nuclear Bunker, the Rat Research Institute, and The Locarno. Each of the destinations in the town is cut out of the surface and bent up vertically to form a white silhouette with a bare metal shadow revealed behind it. Two video projectors beneath the surface of the board shine through holes in the table and reflect off mirrors mounted horizontally above it enabling the surface of the table to be augmented with projections of live information from the game. This augmentation system is turned off periodically (typically once an hour) to show the game operators where to move each figurine as they update the physical game board. For each figurine in turn, the augmentation system projects a line from the figurine's current position on the board to its new position as a result its recent play. This interface is intended to support the task of the operators, but also to enhance the public spectacle of the board.

Matt Adams asks Steve Benford

Does Day Of The Figurines use both real and virtual space, in your opinion?

At the heart of Day of the Figurines lies a virtual space, a fictional town that exists in the minds of the players, that is framed by the game board, and that is brought to life through the text messages that they exchange. In contrast to location-based pervasive games that are based on positioning technologies such as GPS, Day of the Figurines does not attempt to establish any explicit mapping between this virtual space and the real spaces of its players. In particular, players are not required to move to particular locations in the real world in order to access locations in the virtual. However, this is not to say that Day of the Figurines does not make interesting use of physical space. The game board provides a powerful physical manifestation of the virtual city, showing the movements of the players through its various destinations. There is a sense in which Day of the Figurines inverts previous location-based games in that a physical space is constructed as a display, as an output device in human interaction terms rather than as an input. Beyond this, it is interesting to consider the potential impact of a player's physical location on their experience of the game and on their interactions with it. Players may receive messages from the game and frame their responses within different physical locations, which may influence their actions, in terms of their mood, connections they may make between their current physical and virtual space, not least the input of others

who are present and who may share and comment on the messages.



The figurines at Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin. Photo: Gabriella Giannachi

To enter the game, players select a figurine from a display of one hundred figurines neatly arranged on a second, smaller square table. Assisted by an operator, they give their figurine a name, or identity, answer a few questions about him or her and then watch as it is placed on the edge of town. Players could stay in this space as long as they wished and although there is no need for them to return to this particular setting, they could come back on a subsequent day. Before leaving the space, players are given some basic instructions about the game, which explain how to move, speak, pickup and use objects, find other players, receive help, or even leave the game. From the moment of registration, the game contacts the player through SMS messages. The first message is received soon after registering with the game. At this stage the game asks for directions. If the player chooses a destination, the figurine is moved towards it. Once the new destination is reached, the player may encounter other players with whom they could exchange, in real time, SMS messages. The player may also encounter objects, and be presented with dilemmas and missions in the form of multiple-choice questions and open questions, some formulated in real time by the game operators. The board, its cut up destinations, the

figurines, the operators and the audience of the piece, however, after the audience has left the space, will only live on as traces, flickering fragments of each player's game memory.

Gabriella Giannachi asks Matt Adams

How would you describe what happens around the destinations table both as a real space and a trace in players' memories?

As with several previous Blast Theory projects (such as Kidnap and Desert Rain) our approach – somewhat ironically – is to create a high threshold to participation. Here, players must visit the board to join the game even though there is no practical need for them to do so. The induction of players into the game is a journey towards the board and the picking of a partner, namely their figurine to accompany on the first part of their journey. The figurines are the size of a thumbprint, made of plastic and brightly coloured. The need to get close to them in order to see them properly (especially their facial characteristics) pulls potential players down to the table on which the figurines stand in serried ranks of a hundred waiting to be chosen. Visitors take great pleasure in choosing their figurine and regularly take portraits of themselves with the figurine once they have selected one. The figurine acts like a cartoon: it is crude and symbolic and thus permits a deeper level of identification than a more realistic portrayal. As an operator places your figurine onto the board, complete with hand written nametag, these two elements, which are both verging on blankness and simultaneously aesthetically very rich, act in two ways. They provide a firm characterisation of the town and of the player/figurine's place within it. And they provide enough scope for the player to interpret the town highly subjectively. Together these two experiences are designed to inform the rest of the game, even if the player never visits the board again. They establish the game in three spaces: on the board, in the player's head and on the phone. These three fields of play are in different physical locations, process time differently and construct experience differently. Day Of The Figurines invites players to move between them.

As time goes by, with each day corresponding to one hour of game time, the town undergoes a series of subtle changes – 'pubs open, shops close, the car park gets deserted' – and the players' health deteriorates – 'temples are grazed, ankles get twisted, armpits start to smell' (Adams, 2005). Special events unfold, a fete, an eclipse, an explosion, the overbearing presence of an army that affect the health and mood of its inhabitants. Players soon learn that by eating and drinking certain foods, or advising others on how to do so, their health can be restored or even improved. They also discover that objects have more than one function. And, to survive, they learn to share objects as well as knowledge. Day Of The Figurines is not only pervasive in that it interweaves with the players' everyday lives but also in that it mirrors and fictionalises this everydayness through its own intertextual narratives.

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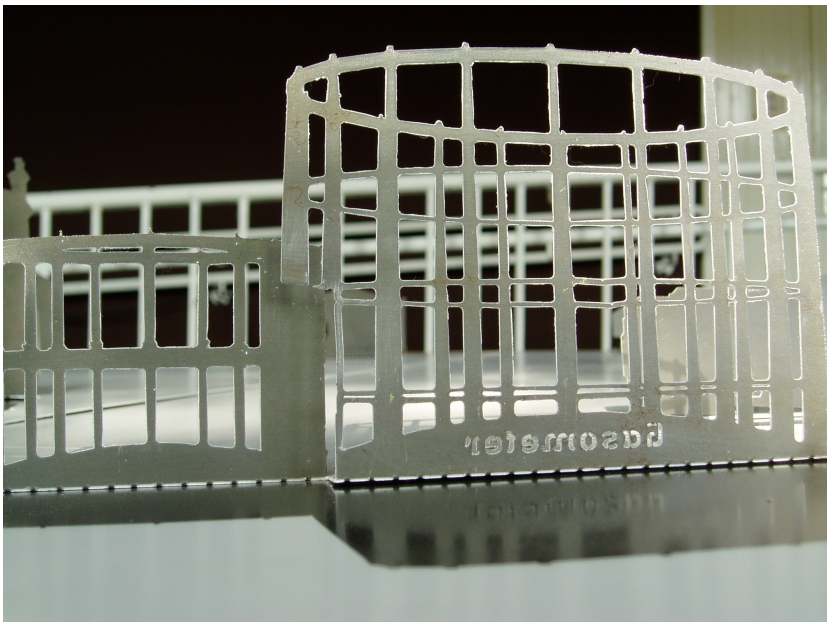

The Gasometer at Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin. Photo: Gabriella Giannachi

Steve Benford asks Gabriella Giannachi

How did documenting your experience through photography and writing, which appeared on your daily blog, affect the way in which you played Day Of The Figurines?

To record my game of Day Of The Figurines I set myself a simple task: each time I received and read a SMS message from the game I would take a photograph of the location in which I was in my real life and make a note of the intersection between the game and my life. This was to see how your ideas about the pervasiveness of this piece would relate to my own experience of the game, and also to explore new forms of documentation that would reflect the subjective nature of this kind of work. Writing about the game from the perspective of presence research while playing it, unquestionably situated me in a complex (task-oriented), though not necessarily privileged (omniscient-narrator-like), position. Sometimes I felt like an explorer, describing places that had never been written about before. Sometimes, I felt like a journalist looking for news to break. Sometimes I felt like a cyborg, carrying my phone, the game's instructions, my camera, the computer, tons of cables, wherever I went, writing furiously, at all times, and photographing all sorts of unusual locations, events and people. Most of the time, however, I felt like curious a mixed reality flâneur, traveling from one site to another, one object to the next, looking for players, meanings, missions, events to explore. Perhaps also because I started playing in Berlin, the city of Walter Benjamin, and, architecturally, Daniel Libeskind and Peter Eisenman's Holocaust memorials, which are both about the structural relationship of the German capital with its literary and historical past, I continuously perceived the unresolved dialectical tensions between my life and the game. This for me was the

most interesting aspect of Day Of The Figurines – the displacement, or Verfremdung (estrangement), of my life through the game, and my game through my life.

In Day Of The Figurines, everything operates at the level of the sign, in the 'tautology of the signifier' (Baudrillard, 1998: 124). Players explore the 'different sign elements and the relationship between them' (ibid.: 120), and in doing so, shift from one, seemingly dichotomous, linguistic system and space-time continuum to another, constantly translating between their life and the game, the 'real' and representation. For some players, the team notes, 'their figurine's behaviour reflected their own actions and mood in the real world' (Benford, 2006: 40) so much so that 'aspects of players' personalities, real world activities and situations' have the tendency of 'bleeding through' into the world of the game (ibid.: 43). This 'bleeding through', producing a contamination between life and game, art and technology, real and representation, is a fundamental pervasive mechanism of Day Of The Figurines.

Gabriella Giannachi asks Matt Adams

How did using SMS messages affect the aesthetic of the piece?

Day Of The Figurines is a tension between a lack of information and a surfeit of information. The core of the work is the sending and receiving of messages that cannot exceed 160 characters in length. Not only is each message very short but it is also relatively expensive. Every message must fully warrant the cost of its transmission. This formal constraint inhibits the richness of the game world in many respects: as designers we can include very little information about each individual player (typically less than 20 characters), about places that are visited and objects found. In particular our ability to inform players about their context is very restricted. For example, if you are at a destination there may be as many as 10 players near you. If we send each player a message every time another player arrives and leaves, this results in an overwhelming number of messages all of which are relatively trivial. Therefore the game does not send information about players arriving and leaving and each player has only a hazy awareness of their social circle. Our aesthetic focus then has been to turn these constraints into core parts of the experience.

Day Of The Figurines is a game about not knowing, about being in the dark. This then forms a thread throughout the narrative. Players are not told what the town is called or why they are there. The goal of the game is 'to help other players' but this is a moral direction rather than a concrete game goal. It is not clear how to help people nor is there a visible metric that measures players' progress within this framework. Even the geography of the town is slippery: Cartesian space has been replaced by a virtual topography in which every destination is equidistant from the others. Non-sequiturs and unconnected fragments predominate in the events that players experience. And the asynchronous, time delayed nature of SMS means that by the time a player hears about anything it has happened several minutes previously. The work is the diametric opposition of the high speed, adrenaline fuelled world of 'twitch' console games in which time is measured in 60ths of a second.

The spatio-temporal construction of the piece has crucial aesthetic implications. A feature of Day Of The Figurines, 'is that it is a slow pervasive game that unfolds over a month through the exchange of just a few text messages each day.' (Benford 2006: 1). This focus on the slow pace of the game allowed for an exploration of 'the temporal issues of how a pervasive game can be mixed with the patterns of players' ongoing daily lives, an aspect of pervasive gaming that has hitherto largely been ignored in favour of location oriented issues' (ibid.). Feedback from the initial test at the Laban Centre revealed that the majority of players had adopted an episodic mode of play. This means that players dipped in and out of the game over the course of 24 days, sometimes not playing for several days before re-engaging again. These kind of players require a particular kind of responsiveness from the game. They demand a quick response with engaging new interactions as soon as they are ready to play. However they wish for the game to back off quickly and not flood them with messages as soon as they stop playing. Yet they also apparently want to receive at least one message a day from the game so as to maintain a background connection to the experience.

Steve Benford asks Matt Adams

How vital is the use of SMS? Does the nature of SMS fundamentally shape the game or would it work as well or even better with an alternative form of text communication such as through a WAP interface?

SMS fundamentally shapes the game because the game becomes one of the message senders within the players' existing spectrum of communications. Players are already sending and receiving SMS regularly; once they join the game Day Of The Figurines becomes another part of that activity and thus embeds itself very deeply into their lives.

That SMS is asynchronous, intermittent, expensive (compared to other text based message systems), intimate and quasi-anonymous also governs to a great extent the nature of game play. SMS is about a playfulness with language. Entire dictionaries and dedicated translation tools are available for the multiplicity of language styles used. The use of slang, short hand, abbreviations and tabloid style truncations in the text we have written for the game springs from this freedom of communication. Furthermore SMS itself is a modern communication phenomenon – the clearest example available of how users appropriate media for their own ends – and so the work itself comments upon electronic communications through its use of such an iconic technology. This is not to say that Day Of The Figurines would not work well or even better were it to be available as a WAP service. Just that it would be a very different experience with very different resonances.

In the initial version of the game, the board was divided into squares and

players would laboriously journey from destination to destination one square at a time, a process that would often take many hours or even days. Given that players would often initiate a new episode of play with an instruction to move to a new destination, this resulted in them usually not receiving a quick response. The spatio-temporal structure of the game was therefore significantly revised through the introduction of a 'hub' model of movement. On moving to a new destination, a figurine immediately steps out into the streets, represented by a central meeting point called the hub. On entering the hub they are quickly allocated a new interaction, either a pre-scripted game event message, a dilemma that requires a multiple choice response, or an encounter with another player who is also in the hub. Once this is complete they then move onto their destination. Consequently, and in direct contrast to the impression given by the game board, all destinations in Day Of The Figurines are equidistant, being two hops away from each other. In fact the physical board contains several hub regions on the city streets into which figurines are moved while they are in the central game hub.

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Kath's Café at Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin. Photo: Gabriella Giannachi

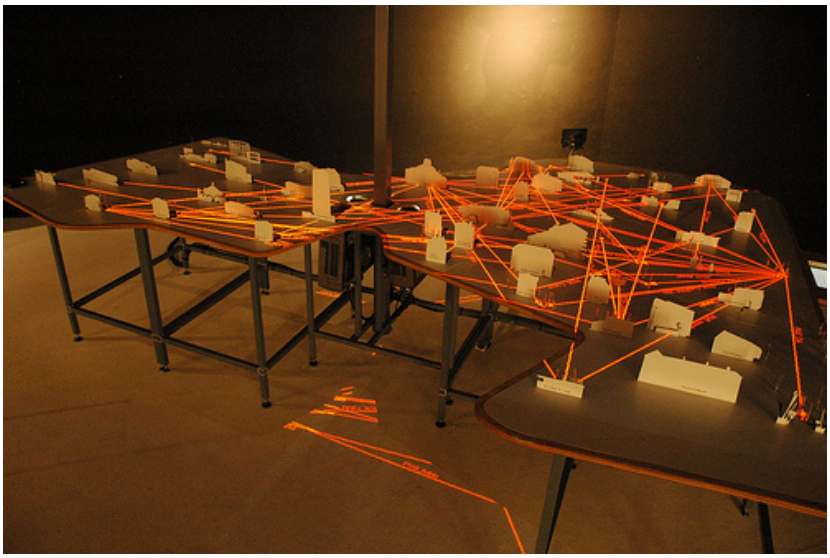
Gabriella Giannachi asks Steve Benford

What do you think is the function of role-play within this piece with particular

reference to SMS messaging?

Day of the Figurines is a role playing game and its players are invited to create and maintain a character within a fictional world. However, there are some interesting ways in which role play in Day of the Figurines may differ from role-play in more conventional online environments. The game will often interrupt players, potentially taking them unaware and arguably giving them less time to step into their characters than they would get with more traditional role playing experiences where they can actively choose and prepare for the moment they assume their role. Furthermore, rather than sitting down at their PC and console in the familiar environment of their home, players may play the game in a wide variety of locations. Some players have reported that aspects of their current context, ranging from details of their current location in the real world to their current mood affect their figurine's actions. Perhaps the most extreme example of this involves showing messages to other people in their current location and involving them in framing responses to game. As a consequence of these various factors, there may well be a greater blurring between the players' real selves and their fictional roles in Day of the Figurines.

Whereas in previous Blast Theory works, such as Can You See Me Now? and Uncle Roy All Around You, players had been invited to inhabit specific parts of real cities, either on the streets or virtually, here players are brought together in an imaginary world that, like a fold, weaves in and out of their lives. In his fascinating discussion of Leibniz and the Baroque, Gilles Deleuze defines the fold as that which is 'always folded within a fold' (2006: 6), existing only virtually, 'in something that envelops it' (ibid. 24). The board table, with its white cut up destinations folded upwards, itself unfolding around a central pillar, constitutes both the inside and outside of the game, a closed room or space, 'containing' a number of inhabitants, *and* its façade to the outside world, thus, borrowing Deleuze's phrase in relation to the fold, representing, irreconcilably, an 'exterior always on the outside, an interior always on the inside' where the 'façade-matter goes down below, while the soul-room goes up above' (ibid.: 39).



The augmented board showing all recent figurine movements at once. Sonar, Barcelona. Photo: Blast Theory.

Steve Benford asks Gabriella Giannachi

What was more important to you, social interaction with other players via chat, or gameplay involving objects, destinations, scripted events, dilemmas and missions? And why?

I enjoyed traveling, meeting players, occasional conversation with strangers, occasional conversation with non-strangers, the subtle changes in light, mood, the inevitable closure of things, the general sense of desolation and waste, the uncanny apparitions in the hubs, the non-places between destinations. I loved the slow, ongoing, pervasive timing of it all, and I particularly enjoyed the company of a few players who time and again reappeared, as if out of nowhere, like old friends. I was often on my own, attempting to find out how to improve my health, how to help players whom I knew were experiencing difficulties, find specific players whom I wanted to spend time with. I survived at least three critical moments: an electric shock from my own defibrillator that I stupidly decided to use on myself to see what it could do; a face injury caused by a brush that I misused in a dilemma; and a gossip column started by Trampoline that was in part about my own figurine. I fed myself on scampi (good), fry ups (not so good) and above all saveloys (which substantially improved my health). I did not drink as much as I ate (some tea, some beer), but I found out where coffee was served, and that felt almost as good as the real thing. I also went to the sauna and the internet café regularly. The first location I visited was the deserted and eerie canal site. I still remember the uncanny thrill I felt in reading about my fictional location whilst actually being in my hotel room working out what to do the next day. At that time I was still in Berlin, and I could see from board that most players were at Kath's Café, so I decided to join them. I realized then that the game had, fundamentally, two paces: a slow, calm, unknowing pace – for lone and exploratory travel – and then a fast, exciting, unpredictable pace – for

SMS message exchanges with other players. I enjoyed both kinds of activities, but tended to long for social encounters, possibly because they increased my sense of immersion and connectivity as well as my sense of presence and engagement within the work. When I left Berlin and I had no way of knowing what was happening in the game, I felt more isolated, almost in a different, more introspective game. Inter- and meta-textually, Day Of The Figurines is very rich, wherever you are, not only because it is a language game but also, philosophically, because of its non-Cartesian, unfolding structure. So, in the end, I don't know if these nuances had to do with the game or, rather, were caused by fortuitous events in my own life.

Toward the end of his essay on narrative interactivity Eric Zimmerman notes that the relevant question to pose in relation to games is not as to whether they are narrative but *how* they are narrative, and especially how they are in ways that other media are not (in Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, 2004: 161 but also in Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 79). This is partly related to the complex and shifting relationship between play and game (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 72-3) which are a sub-category of each other, depending on the viewpoint adopted, i.e., according to Katie Salen and Zimmerman, whether we consider them typologically or conceptually. Zimmerman defines games as a form of 'voluntary interactive activity' in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behaviour, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome' (ibid.: 160 and also in Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 80). Day Of The Figurines does not entail a conventional dramatic or game conflict – Salen and Zimmerman's 'contest of powers' (2004: 80), nor result in a clear quantifiable outcome – players don't clearly win or lose (unless they die, of course), nor do they receive a score. Structurally the piece follows less formal play activities allowing, in Zimmerman's words, rather for 'the free space of movement within a more rigid structure.' (ibid.: 159). In fact, 'the focus of this game', Adams comments, 'is on social interaction and emergent behaviour. The game sets an imaginary society into being and allows the players wide agency – their responses will determine what happens in the imaginary city' (Adams, 2005a). Day Of The Figurines is not only a board game, it is also a role-playing game, which, like other games of this category, 'has no "winner", no final objective, and the campaign grows and changes as it matures' (Gygax in Salen and Zimmerman, 004: 81).

Steve Benford asks Matt Adams

What are your success criteria for the player experience? I.e., what do you hope that players will get from the experience?

This is a complex question. Of course, traditional virtues of experience design apply: the work must command people's attention, it must lure them into finding

out about a novel and unfamiliar experience, it must convince them to spend time (and, at times, money) to enter the game, it must sustain their interest and reward their effort over a period of many days and it must provide a finish that is gratifying. Within the game play itself Day Of The Figurines must offer a fascinating scenario that prompts intriguing possible actions with swiftly discernible ways of executing them. It must deliver rewards to the player at a micro level (e.g. sending a message and receiving a reply) and a macro level (the journey through the course of the day, the overall goals of the game). In this respect the work is no different from most other games.

However it is in its divergence from these traditional game design goals that Day Of The Figurines derives much of its interest. The game as a whole is sited within a gallery or museum, is created by artists and sits within a body of game related work by those artists. As a result it is our intention to lure players into observations, reflections and experiences that they would not usually get in a game. For example, in Day Of The Figurines many players experience the game world as disjointed, lonely or disorientating. This is a deliberate part of the design of the game although it runs counter to many of the truisms of game design that I've outlined above. Because the figurines, are, in fact, refugees in the town – a fact not apparent until quite late in the game – it is imperative that they experience these emotions. Players may find this uncomfortable, they may find it intolerable and even leave the game but it is crucial to the experience. It frames the pleasures and rewards of the game experience in a plausible, realistic world in which the moral order is hard to discern. It may seem glib to insist on the importance of participants disliking this game but in the world of games where willing, ongoing interaction from participants is essential and in which almost every experience is constructed to 'maximise fun' it is important to establish that play need not be synonymous with fun. Games like 911 Survivor and Escape From Woomera highlight the possibilities of games in which players are invited to struggle with events over which they have little control. They demonstrate that games can address complex, emotive subject matters by inverting the Nietzschean archetypes that have dominated games design up to this point.

The formal properties of the game are also key factors. The use of SMS, the presence of hundreds of players, the visit to the board, the length of the game: these combine to make a unique experience in which not knowing exactly what will happen is part of the pleasure. There is a sizeable audience of people in the art world, in the games sector and in new media for whom this alone is a major incentive to engage. Our intention is to immerse players in a world where there is great pleasure in outcomes being uncertain. This has posed tremendous challenges for the design of the experience because to interact and to play you must have a good sense of how your actions will be responded too. In early versions of Day Of The Figurines outcomes were too oblique and merely confused many players.

SMS allows short game sessions and the length of the game allows the world of Day Of The Figurines to insinuate itself into your life. I hope that players enjoy the distinctive type of game play this affords. It also allows a subtly different perspective on role-play from most electronic games. The use of a figurine complete with a pseudonym and sketchy history invites players to send messages as someone else. And yet the setting in a present day, run of the mill town also allows a completely familiar tone of voice. Players can then pitch themselves at a comfortable point on this spectrum between fully fictionalised role play and their usual tone of voice. The asynchronous, clipped form of SMS then allows players to vary their position on this spectrum quite widely over time. Our intention is that this

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allows those who might be uncomfortable with pretending to be an elf in real time chat to explore the freedom of role-play. Because of its limited rule set and the restrictions of SMS, Day Of The Figurines also allows players to generate content in novel ways. Because player names and object names are defined by the system merely by being written in capital letters, it is easy for players to simulate other players' names or objects. Using short, infrequent messages makes it easy to sustain a very wide set of fictions.

Ju, Nick and I have a fifteen-year history of making work as artists across a variety of media and themes. The only consistent thread linking this body of work is a subjective, collaborative impulse to explore certain areas. Certain ideas and motifs re-emerge but often we are not quite sure why something is interesting. As a result some of our success criteria for a player's experience in the game is personal. It matters to us that the portrayal of small town England in the game is acrid, detailed and pleasing. And, most importantly, we hope that participants will think further about the relationship between games and reality, about the differences between interaction and control, and about the nature of social relationships in virtual space.

A player looking at the figurines at Sonar, Barcelona. Photo: Mauricio Capra.

In an article written specifically for *Receiver*, Vodafone's communication technology magazine, Lev Manovich notes that

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> using personal information devices is now conceived as a carefully orchestrated experience, rather than just a means to an end. The interaction explicitly calls attention to itself. The interface engages the user in a kind of

> game. The user is asked to devote significant emotional, perceptual and cognitive resources to the very act of operating the device.

Acknowledging the complexity but also the impact of the performativity of technology, he then continues: 'simple acts of opening a mobile phone or pressing its buttons were turned into real micro-plays: very short narratives complete with visual, tactile, and three-dimensional effects' (2006). Following a similar though distinct analysis, Sadie Plant captures the haptics of texting as follows:

> text messages (and voice mail) can be saved, but most are extant only for as long as it takes to write, transmit and read them. Most mobile messages are immediate and short-term – made, read, and often responded to as quickly as they travel, often with little thought or consequence. So too are the memories they make. These are not messages made to last; they belong either to the social world of sudden changes of plan, last minute and approximate arrangements, or else to the realm of haptic gestures, digital squeezes of the hand – small and intimate – sent directly between bodies (in Brouwer, Mulder and Charlton, 2003: 34).

Manovich and Plant draw attention, respectively, to the interactive ('visual, tactile, and three-dimensional'), ephemeral but also sensual and private nature of texting ('immediate', 'short term', 'small' and 'intimate') noting how the interaction with mobile phones as objects 'performs' its users, engaging them into a 'game' which, of course, then, typically of mixed reality performance (Benford et al 2006, 2006a and Reeves et al 2005), as well as other forms of new media art (Giannachi 2004), becomes a spectacle for potential onlookers. In Day Of The Figurines, the mobile phone thus 'performs' its users, who are also its players, *twice* in that, characteristically of pervasive gaming, it subverts 'the relationship between an object and its accepted conventional meaning' (Nieuwdorp, 2005: 5) not only by offering itself as a object of communication but also one of rhizomatic fiction *through* which the performance of Day Of The Figurines becomes possible.

Matt Adams asks Gabriella Giannachi

Is it possible to define Day Of The Figurines as a piece of theatre? What are the limits of this approach? Are the players in Day Of The Figurines engaged in an improvised performance?

Day Of The Figurines is a complex hybrid of game, theatre, performance and life. The piece starts in a location. In other words, players have to go to an actual destination. When I began documenting it, I wondered why you didn't just start the game virtually, on the web. However, when I arrived in Berlin and you showed me the space, just a few hours before the opening, it became clear to me that something aesthetically very powerful was going to happen around the board

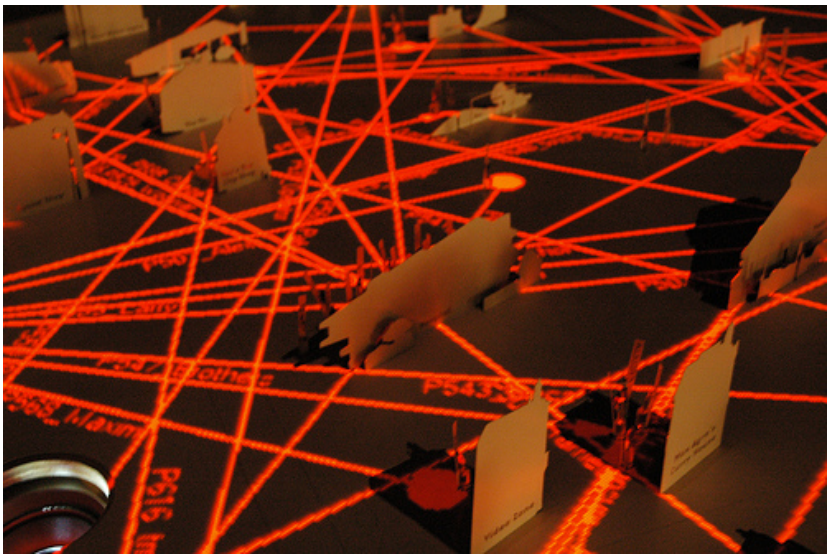
particularly, but also the figurines' table. The precise formation of the tiny but perfect figurines on the small square table, the separate beautiful white board with its suggestive but also somewhat ghostly cut up folded destinations, the accurate lighting, shining through, transforming the board into a stage, with the destinations acting as flats, the reflection of the destinations in the augmentation mirror, creating a double (or virtual fold) right within the actual space, all contributed to form an evocative and yet also somewhat uncanny installation. Entering the game constituted a very public moment. As players watched other players, listening into conversations, overseeing the continuous, private acts of texting, they found that they themselves were watched and had become spectators, audience, as well as performers in someone else's play. When I left Berlin I thought the 'theatricality' of the piece had been exhausted, but then, while I was playing, I realized that most of the players I met, like myself, were looking for action, things to happen. I distinctly remember, for instance, being told by the person who played Hassan that he was going to pretend to be a doctor. Later, when asked where the action was, I told my fellow players that someone was playing a doctor at the hospital. This produced some considerable interest and I realized that audience could also be formed from within the game. When I left Berlin and I had no way of knowing where players were, I also realized that the game, like life, needed some kind of parallel or meta-narrative, so that players could find themselves inside the game by reading about it from the outside (the Trampoline gossip, my blog and the Starhub archive of the Singapore game all fulfilled this function). So Day Of The Figurines contains aspects of theatricality, but it is also performative, not only because of the performative nature of texting, but also because the game is played via role-play. In this sense I definitively agree that the players are engaged, as you say, 'in an improvised performance'. However, this improvisation, like Commedia, takes place within very specific structural (or dramaturgical) boundaries. We have to use SMS. We have to wait in the hub. We have to play at a certain pace. This means that we have to learn to improvise from within the given structures and rules of the game. And this, of course, implies that we have to learn what these structures and rules are, which brings me back, in yet another unfolding process, the life-like, 'play' behaviour of the game. So the pervasiveness of Day Of The Figurines also manifests itself at an aesthetic, inter-medial level through the continuous infiltrations, of 'bleeding through', as Steve might say, of the game's narrative structures (from game, role-play, theatre, performance, flâneurism) with the players' lives.

The figurines at Sonar, Barcelona. Photo courtesy of Mauricio Capra.

Steve Benford asks Matt Adams

How important is it when individual player's die and how should this be handled? Is it like death in a conventional computer game or does it have a different impact or significance in Day of the Figurines?

My attitude to this question is changing. Originally I thought this would occur infrequently and be a significant game event not just for the player concerned but for many other players too. In the Singapore game over 70 players died, partly due to the murderous intent of a handful of players. Despite those players, in Day Of The Figurines death is often caused by a sequence of minor mishaps. Trying to help a boy who has fallen off his BMX, not bringing a cup of tea to Gary in the burgundy track suit, looking at a soldier in the wrong way: these events can combine to bring about your demise. As a result many players die alone, stranded, waiting for a passer by who never comes. Their death is quite bitter and anti-climactic. This sense of being alone on a street corner is also a dominant thread in Can You See Me Now?, Uncle Roy All Around You and I Like Frank and springs from our ambivalence about electronic communication systems. In each instance a powerful, high tech, communications device lies useless and unusable at the emotional apex of the experience. The bathos that this provides is critical to the experience. What we've learnt from the Singapore game is that the volume of deaths mean this experience is even more lonely because other players often do not notice and even more rarely do they remark on someone's death.



The augmentation of Day Of The Figurines. Photo: Blast Theory.

Gabriella Giannachi asks Matt Adams

Why did you choose not to be particularly visible within this particular piece? Also, what do you think were the consequences of such a low level of orchestration?

The move towards user generated content in many cultural realms (particularly those that are most engaged with technological advances such as computer games and software) both springs from and helps to further foster a belief in the validity of the voice of the public within culture. This is a profound shift in cultural production that has wide social implications. Our work has since its inception been focused on the audience and interactivity. Day Of The Figurines is our latest attempt to reconcile the tensions that such an approach raises. When does a consideration of the audience slide into a banal and redundant form of market provision? Does giving the public a voice within an artwork result in a collaborative work or merely provide pigeon holes for pre-scripted interventions? Is there any seriously democratic thread to this process or does the artist merely establish a benevolent dictatorship with him or her at its apex?

The aesthetics of Day Of The Figurines are especially pertinent to these debates. In any interactive work in which the public are invited to express themselves, we can ask three questions:

1. *what can be said?*
2. *why should it be said?*
3. *in what way is that which I say meaningful to either myself or to others?*

The restrictions of SMS suddenly become assets in light of these questions. Because the very substance of the world itself is concise text, the players have some control over the fabric of time and space itself. Unlike a highly rendered three-dimensional world, in Day Of The Figurines it is easy for players to conjure

up new parts of the world. The game mechanic places certain restrictions on this process; for example, the list of destinations is defined in advance and every message is prefixed with a time stamp. However each object is defined as such by being written in capital letters and it is therefore easy for a player to 'create' an object and present it as having currency within the game. Similarly it is easy to invent players just by creating a name in capital letters. The judges of whether this object or player may exist are fellow players: if you can sustain this fiction there is no reason why others will not accept it. In a game about not knowing, the striving towards meaning is the dominant task that hangs above all other in-game tasks such as completing missions or helping others. Players therefore are invited to explore the tolerances of the game world to their fullest extent and to find subjective, self defined reasons for their continued existence there. At the simplest level the game invites players to play, to experiment. Although the players are not made aware of it until late in the game they are all refugees who have been dropped in the town. Recursively their confusion and disorientation finds a narrative explanation. The process of engaging with strangers and trying to find common cause with them, which is the core game mechanic and in similar ways to Kidnap, Desert Rain and Uncle Roy All Around You, the game boundaries are suddenly vague. Are you text chatting with another player, another audience member or just another human being? How much has your willingness to engage others and your success or failure at it, been a reflection on your own willingness to engage with people around you?

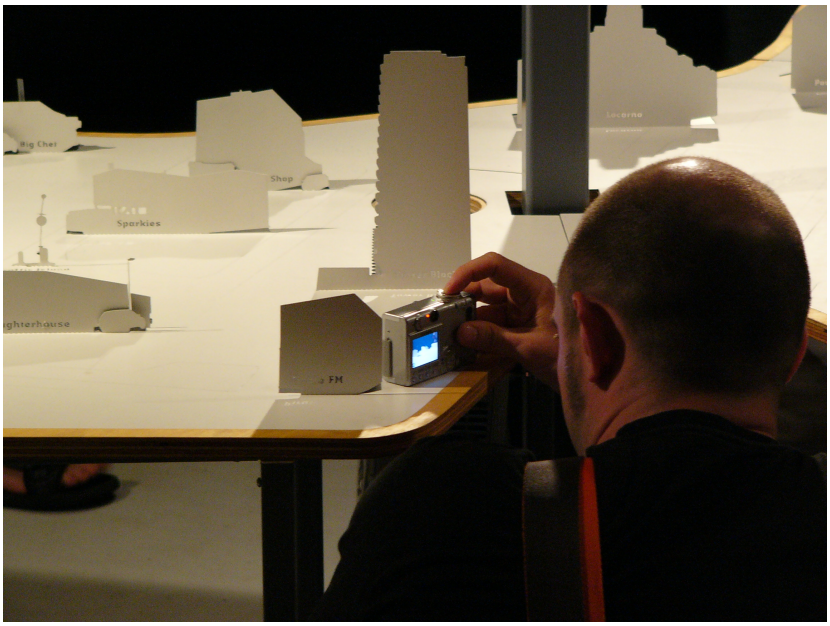
Mizuko Ito describes how mobile phone users create an 'augmented co-presence' (2003). Castells talks about texting as a way to create a 'collective identity' (2007: 156-7). Interestingly both scholars identify connectivity, rather than mobility, as a 'key feature in the practice of mobile communication' (Castells et al, 2007: 248) where connectivity indicates 'the individualized, distributed capacity to access the local/global communication network from any place at any time' (ibid.: 248).

Gabriella Giannachi asks Steve Benford

Did you find the game pervasive within the context of your own everyday life?

I did find the game to be pervasive within my everyday life, and played it from a wide variety of locations, including at home and at work and very often while traveling. I found the experience to be most engaging during my travels, both because I had downtime in which I could easily play but also because it acted as some kind of familiar thread in my life as I visited quite different and unfamiliar places. My first experience of the game spanned a period when I was traveling between London and Nottingham and then to Sardinia and Stockholm. It was somehow surprising to be pulled back into this ongoing game from each of these different places. Perhaps my most striking memories of the game, and probably also my strongest sense of presence within it, arose at those moments of greatest contrast between the virtual town and my physical situation, most notably when I was away from the UK and relaxing on holiday in Sardinia. I can remember quite a deep engagement with the game while on the beach and traveling around the Island which, with hindsight, I would attribute both to feeling relaxed and having time to fully contemplate my actions, but also because of the heightened contrast between the somewhat seedy UK-based setting of the game and the Mediterranean setting of Sardinia. On reflection I wonder whether such an experience is most powerful when there is a striking contrast between the

physical and virtual settings.



A member of the audience photographing Day Of The Figurines at Sonar, Barcelona. Photo Mauricio Capra

Matt Adams asks Gabriella Giannachi

When we play, in what ways are we engaged in a different kind of presence from when we perform, spectate or participate in a performance?

In discussing the notions of presence and absence in modern architecture, Peter Eisenman introduces the notions of memory and immanence in relation to the concept of 'site'. Eisenman argues that site cannot be understood entirely as presence and that it has to be constructed as 'palimpsest' and 'quarry', containing traces of 'both memory and immanence' (1986: 5). To explain his theory, he uses the effective analogy of the difference between a moving arrow and a still arrow. Whereas in 'real' life the moving arrow can produce pain, while the still one does not, if a picture of each were taken and compared, they would be virtually indistinguishable. Yet, the two arrows are not just physically different. As Eisenman argues, the difference between them is that the moving arrow 'contains where it has been and where it is going, that is it has a memory and an immanence that are not present to the observer of the photograph; they are essential absences' (ibid.: 6, original emphasis).

Day Of The Figurines has a complex hybrid and inter-medial structure, which means, in terms of presence research, that it does not play with one but a

number of 'kinds' of presence. There are theatrical aspects to the piece, which have to do with situating its beginning in an actual location, where, to paraphrase Peggy Phelan, the 'real' is implicated through the 'presence' of living bodies (1993: 117) and the, albeit virtual, possibility for players to perform at their destinations (as in the case of Hassan's medical act). These types of presence have not only to do with spectatorship but also with aura, being-in-the-moment, and, to some extent, the act of repositioning one's awareness – Bertold Brecht's Verfremdung. There are also performative aspects to the piece, which have to do with the fact that we are using a specific interface. Presence here may be re-interpreted as engagement with or connectivity to a wider and broader community (of people, objects, events). An early IPerG deliverable concludes that 'in case of games that are played out in the real and in the virtual, the challenge is to make the players visible both in the real and in the virtual space' (Benford and Capra, 2005: 27). This to me also indicates a doubling, multiplying or blurring of presences between the real and the virtual. The authors of the report coined the term PLAYER PRESENCE and suggested that 'the identification of the role and action potential of a player enhances the level of social presence' and that indicating a player's 'actions enhances the level of social presence and facilitates interaction' (Benford and Capra, 2005: 28) whereby social presence indicates 'the other's experience of one's presence' (Heeter in Benford and Capra, 2005: 27). The fact that this is not happening once and for all, but over time, is also significant. In Day Of The Figurines presence changes throughout the course of the piece and, very much like Eisenman's essential absences, is constructed precisely in the palimpsestic relationship between these various positions. Mel Slater considers presence as 'a perceptual mechanism for selection between alternative hypotheses' (2002: 435) and argues that the 'issue of presence is only interesting when there are competing signals from at least two environments.' (ibid.: 437). Here, as we shift from spectating to participating, playing to performing, we become aware of the estrangement involved in moving from one kind of presence to another, caught between seemingly dichotonomous worlds, between presences and essential absences, 'always already' augmented, performing our presence.

The increasing mobility of our society and the pervasiveness of mobile communication suggest that forms of entertainment that can take place within the fabric of our everyday life, and that can be consumed while we work, spend time with family and friends, shop, or simply are between tasks, will prevail in years to come. Plant notes that 'the mobile introduces new senses of speed and connectivity to social life, establishing new kinds of relationships' so that it 'can facilitate the emergence of a new private world, a virtual community which can be pulled together in a matter of moments' (Plant: 2001). For Manuel Castells, the fundamental consequences of the rise of mobile communication is 'the blurring of the boundary between work and the private sphere' so that we will witness not only a spilling of work into the private sphere but also, viceversa, the penetration of personal communication into 'the formal boundaries of work' (Castells et al, 2007: 82) and the consequent 'blurring of the boundary between commerce and everyday life' (ibid: 108). This 'perpetual contact' (Katz and Aakhus, 2002: 2) also allows for 'the creation

of new spheres of intimacy' (Castells et al, 2007: 151). Day Of The Figurines is at once a public and private game that can be accessed from anywhere in the world, almost 'at any time', in which the boundaries between life and game are blurred, and so constitutes an inter-medial mixed reality *info-polis* in which new ethical, social, and even political encounters are possible.

Gabriella Giannachi asks Steve Benford

How would you describe the differences between your own experience of engagement, immersion and presence within Day Of The Figurines?

For me, like some other researchers in virtual reality, immersion is a technical term that refers to the extent to which an interface technology blots out sensory input from the real world to replace it with input from a virtual world. Thus, virtual reality head-mounted displays tend to be immersive whereas the mobile phone interfaces used in Day of the Figurines do not. Presence on the other hand can generally be thought of as the feeling of being there that is actually experienced by a participant. Immersion may contribute to presence, but so may many other factors, including the ease with which participants are able to imagine or project themselves into a virtual world. There were moments when I did feel highly present in the world of the Day of the Figurines even though I was only experiencing the world through short text descriptions. I think that this was to due to the way in which the framing of the experience and the nature of the messages provided space for my imagination to fill in the details. Engagement, on the other hand, I see as being something different again. For me, this is about sustained participation in an experience and in the case of Day of the Figurines, is about the way in which I repeatedly returned to the experience over an extended period of time. So I felt an ongoing engagement with the experience and occasional moments of presence but without being immersed by the technology.

Acknowledgments

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