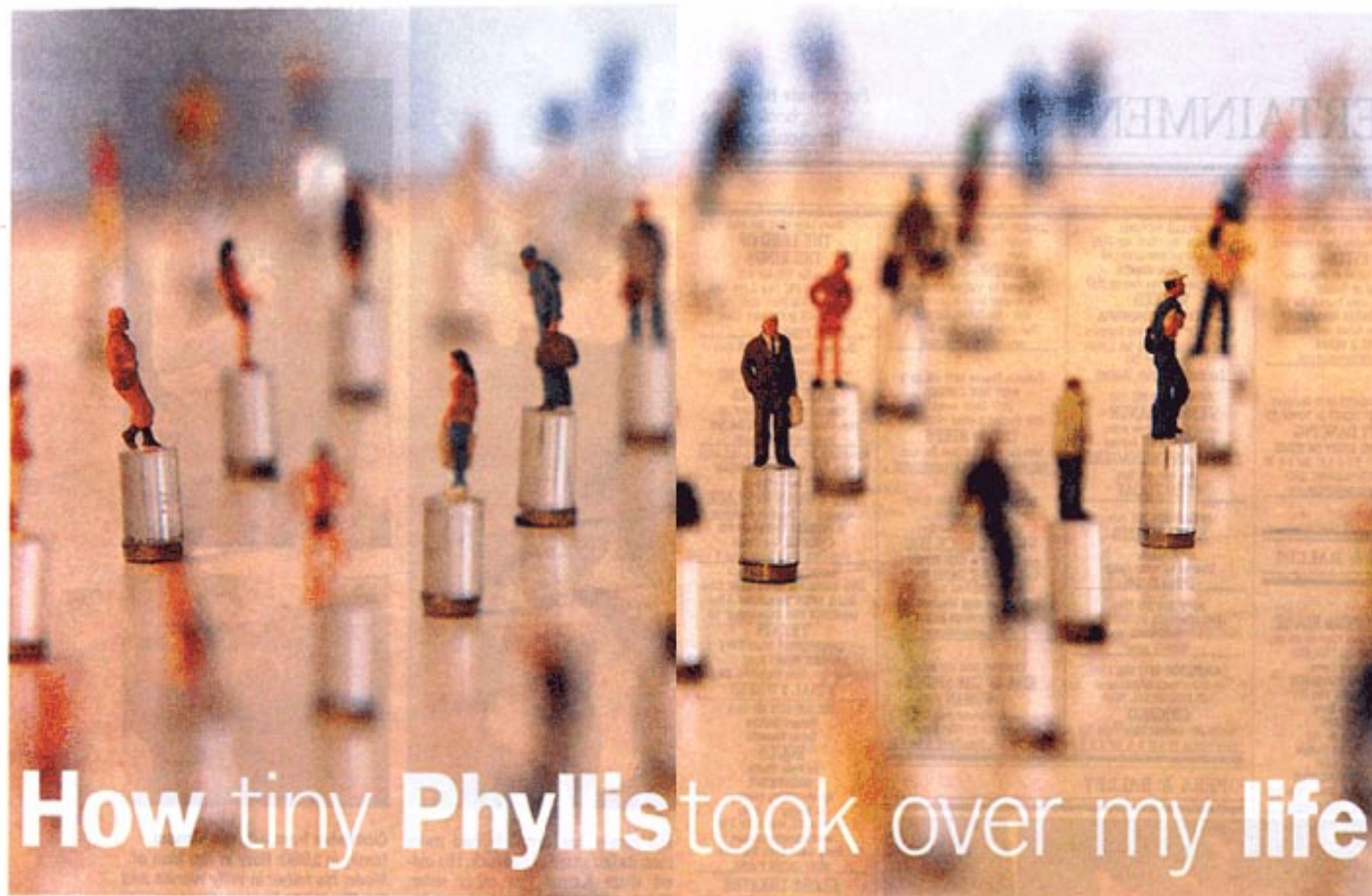


The Times, 19.05.2007



How tiny Phyllis took over my life

Is *Day of the Figurines* art, or theatre, or just conceptual claptrap? **Nick Coleman** finds out

My name is Phyllis. It wouldn't be polite to ask how old I am — but then again I wouldn't be able to tell you anyway because I'm not entirely sure. It is, however, a fact that I am a martyr to arthritis and have to wear built-up shoes to get about. Still, I like to have a kind word for everyone, even the uncouth lorry-driver who dropped me somewhat unceremoniously on the outskirts of this uncouth town. Towns aren't what they used to be, are they?

Well, Phyllis is who I've decided to be, anyway. I selected her 1cm-high body (with handbag, stick and hat already attached) from an illuminated display, handed over what details I could imagine of my new identity and had my name-tag attached to my plinth, which is also 1cm-high. I am now the full Phyllis and it is

my task to explore the town in which I have been deposited, rather like a refugee, for the duration of *Day of the Figurines*.

This "day" has been running for three weeks now and I am a late arrival — only 32 hours remain in which to achieve my destiny. My objectives are to find out what I can and to dispense succour to other poor benighted folk. The only help I'm going to receive is via text message — and from the memory of the town as it is laid out in etched and folded white sheet metal in the art gallery in Brighton currently occupied by Blast Theory. (From today it moves to the Fierce! Festival in Birmingham.)

It is Blast Theory who will move me around the town, its bus shelters, its skatepark, its allotments, and tell me where Phyllis has got to.

Who or what is Blast Theory? Good question. They

call themselves an "artistic group". Interactive media is their thing — they were an interactive theatre company in the Nineties; this century they have staged events round the world that bring virtual space to bear on real space. They are carting *Day of the Figurines* around the country to explore our 21st-century thralldom to game culture, they say.

"My considered opinion," says Matt Adams, one of the three artists behind the event, "is that games are the cultural form of the 21st century. If you look back at cinema in 1907 and at games in 2007, you can see very similar relationships. In 1907, cinema only amounted to titillation, effects and spectacle. Film was strictly for the masses; critics looked down on it completely... You see where I'm going with this?"

What Blast Theory are asking, then, is this: in a society

shaped, underpinned and embroidered by technological interactivity, what constitutes culture? Adams reckons games do, especially those mass online games, such as *World of Warcraft*, which involve millions of players launching themselves into cyberspace to juice up the narratable content of their lives. And maybe make contact with other ciphers in the "online community".

Day of the Figurines is also a

"My opinion is that games are the cultural form of the 21st century"

research project. It was developed in collaboration with Nottingham University's "Mixed Reality" lab and Sony Net Services in Berlin as part of an EU project looking into "pervasive gaming". It's a game, an artwork, a science project and it's an indivisible part of my life for the next day and a half.

Frrrr!
That'll be my mobile phone telling me that Phyllis is "standing on a sodden tabloid. In the

half light you can make out the words "Boob Exam Scam". This is the coin of Blast Theory's interaction: the 160 characters of SMS text locking into the limitless potential — as I like to see it — of my imagination. Or is it Phyllis's?

How do I respond? How would Phyllis? Easy, actually. She would ignore the soggy tabloid completely, pull her hat down against the rain and hobble off as best her legs will

carry her to her destination of necessity. I text back: "Go to CONV." CONV is the abbreviation for "conveniences" specified in the glossary card issued at the gallery.

And so it goes over the next 32 hours: every few minutes Blast Theory drop another small bomb into Phyllis's life. I respond on Phyllis's behalf, negotiating her passage from the loo via the cemetery to the tatters of her future, while her

It's a small world: the 1cm cast of *Day of the Figurines*

path is strewn with "goldfish", "nylon knickers", a "defibrillator" and "a drum kit". It is only at the end of the "day" that a bigger picture is revealed: Arab military units have infiltrated the town centre and set up roadblocks. They are looking for persons unknown. There have been casualties...

"One of the motivations for this work is to make a morally ambiguous universe," says Adams. "We're making a case here for how games — which tend to be morally dry and lifeless — might be made to work... Can art exist on your mobile phone? Can it exist in your pocket, rather than in a gallery or a museum or a theatre?" Without a doubt, is my view. Can't speak for Phyllis though. ■
Day of the Figurines is part of Birmingham's 10th annual Fierce! Festival (www.fiercefest.co.uk www.dayofthefigurines.co.uk 0121-2448080), until June 11

2W

2W

May 19 - 25, 2007 **timeson**