

The New York Times

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**November 12, 2009**

When All the World's a Staged Game

By PETER WAYNER

In his imagination, Greg Trefry is building a golf course right in the middle of Manhattan where he will make his fortune charging everyone to play.

His planning began after he and his business partners asked themselves, "What's a good game that allows people to pace themselves?" Golf sounded promising because it gave everyone plenty of time to talk casually while walking along to catch up with the ball. Why not make it easy to play at lunch?

The buildings are a bit of a problem, but not for the obvious reasons. Mr. Trefry and his other partners at the interactive company Gigantic Mechanic are creating a virtual game that will use smartphones with accelerometers and GPS sensors. He does not need to move tall buildings; he just needs to deal with any inaccuracies they add by blocking the signals used to locate the people.

Everything in the game will unfold in the imagination of the players who might look a bit mad to everyone else on the street, but it will be guided by the accelerometer of the smartphone that will measure the swing and plot the path of the ball in an unseen course.

"It's kind of a weird mixture of Putt-Putt and golf," he said, referring to a particular brand of miniature golf. "You've got a driver. You can hit it three or four blocks. You can really whack it. Then when you get close, you knock it in."

Mr. Trefry is just one of a number of game designers experimenting with an intriguing combination of features on today's smartphones. Onboard GPS software indicates where in the physical world a player is; accelerometers can track gestures or movements that can have an effect on places and objects nearby.

With these new tools, designers are building mystical realms, orienteering courses, immersive fictions, and parallel universes in a way that may or may not have anything to do with the world around them. Mr. Trefry, for instance, is weighing the option of using a bar, a figurative watering hole, as a literal hole for his figurative golf course.

Pure games are just one application — social networks are also rushing to add location to the mix. Foursquare.com, for instance, lets members tag places and share them with friends. Dopplr.com alerts you when a friend happens to be traveling near you.

Kevin Slavin, a co-founder of another game company, Area/Code, started in early 2005, explained the allure, "It gives you something about a place that is legible to you but invisible to most everyone else. There's a kind of beauty to that."

One of games built by Area/Code, called Plundr, divides the world into squares of about a third of a mile on each side and rewards contestants for moving fictional goods from one square to another.

"There's one player in New York City whose apartment is improbably large so he straddles the line," said Mr. Slavin. "He has a trading route between his living room and his kitchen and so he does very well."

Area/Code finds a user's location with a combination of GPS data and triangulating the position with nearby Wi-Fi routers, a technique pioneered by Skyhook.

"The thing that was so interesting about their solution is that Wi-Fi becomes most effective where GPS fails," said Mr. Slavin. "Wherever people build stuff, they install routers, and your position becomes easier and easier to calculate with greater precision."

Once the position is established, the challenge becomes finding a good set of rules. Many games mix capture the flag with scavenger hunts to send the contestants roaming in search of clues. For instance, Groundspeak, based in Seattle, runs Geocaching.com, a database filled with locations and the clues for how to find them. It also markets WhereIGo, a set of programming tools that makes it easier to create virtual tours, pub crawls and alternative reality games for smartphones and GPS tools.

There are already a number of variations with different rules. When the editors of the Web site Slashdot met in Chicago recently with colleagues from Sourceforge, they competed in a "team building" GPS-based quest run by Geoteaming.com that required them to prove they had solved the game by taking a picture of all team members at each point along the way, making it difficult for them to split up.

Sometimes simply getting to a place is not enough. Players immersed in Parallel Kingdoms need to be wary in case digital dragons or other mythical creatures are lurking nearby.

"The whole world is covered in creatures" said Justin Beck, the chief executive of PerBlue, the creator of the game. "Wherever you go, you can stumble upon these creatures. You can combat them. You defeat some of them and partner with others. Some dragons are very vicious and you want to defeat them, but some trolls are very kind and they can help."

Sometimes the game designers add darker themes. Participants in Ulrike and Eamon Compliant, a game staged recently among the churches, palazzi, and streets of Venice, slip into covert roles, get directions from their cellphones and signal their decisions to the puppet masters running the game by removing sunglasses or sitting on a bench.

"There are calls that come in and give you direction in a subtle way," explained Ju Row Farr, one of the several artists in Blast Theory, the London-based artist collective that created the game. "They try to lead you geographically and mentally. They try to lead you into character."

Eventually the participants discover they have assumed the persona of either Eamon Collins, a soldier for the Irish Republican Army, or Ulrike Meinhof, one of the founders of the Red Army Faction. The game, like many of the scavenger hunts, required Ms. Farr and others to monitor the players' progress in case they got lost or needed a bit of assistance with clues. The game is not being run any longer, but she said she hoped to restage it in London.

Some games add hidden mechanisms and secret tools to the world that react to those playing the game. Visitors to the Epcot park at Walt Disney World in Florida can assume roles from the cartoon series "Kim Possible" by picking up a reprogrammed cellphone that will lead them around exhibits in the World Showcase. Ordinary visitors may see a motionless parrot, but those carrying the phone rebranded as a "Kimmunicator" will hear the parrot come alive and pass on the next clue.

There are seven villains to thwart at the seven country-themed pavilions at Epcot. One wants to build a mind-controlling device, and another has stolen the priceless Jade Monkey. Then there is one named Duff Killigan who wants to turn the world into a giant golf course.

When told about Killigan's evil plans, Mr. Trefry of Gigantic Mechanic said, "I don't know why he would be a bad guy, necessarily."

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