Intermezzo: play trajectories in mixed reality worlds

Giuliana Fenech

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Intermezzo: play trajectories in mixed reality worlds

Giuliana Fenech

Faculty of Arts, Department of English, University of Malta, Msida, Malta

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the work of Steve Benford, Gabriella Giannachi, Oliver Grau and Mark Hansen, this article explores the paradigms of mixed reality worlds in order to try to establish how aesthetic illusion is negotiated in the shift from a culture of representation in which art is formed by a fixed gaze and perspective which audiences interpret privately, to a culture of participation that offers audiences multiple opportunities for interaction with the work and each other. This analysis is important because it investigates the interfaces between real and virtual through an analysis of convergence culture and play. It will be argued that the work of Blast Theory and 1927 demonstrate how the development of digital and mobile technology has revived contemporary cultural interest in play as a dynamic that allows societies and communities to communicate and connect, evaluating their realities and imagining new ones, especially through a re-imagined positioning of the body. In this sense, play has become a practice strongly related to processes of social and cultural innovation.

The characteristics of mixed reality storyworlds are described by new media and performance critics, including Steve Benford, Gabriella Giannachi and Katja Kwastek, as distinctive forms of interactive and often deeply subjective artistic experiences that employ networking to create distributed structures. They often interconnect many local settings to create a global stage whilst integrating live performance by actors and audiences with digital media and the kinds of rule-based structures that are found in computer games. Mixed reality is used to establish complex relationships between multiple physical and virtual spaces inviting participants to re-evaluate both as adjacent or/overlapping spaces in which the artistic experience is interwoven with ongoing everyday activity. These types of mixed reality experiences can lead to transformed understandings of time and space reminding us that 'places are constructed by an ongoing accumulation of stories, memories and social practices', encouraging a questioning of the 'too familiar' routines of daily life (Grau, 2003, p. 248) as their interfaces invite us to experience inbetweenness, understood as being-becoming intermezzo, a term questioned further on in the paper. The mixed reality paradigm, however, also seems to require another level of analysis as it invites, and facilitates the development of, the creation of narratives centred on the primacy of the body as ontological access to the world and the role of tactility in the actualisation of such access, leading to the axiom put

forward by Mark Hansen, in his book *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (2006a), that all reality is mixed reality. In justifying this claim, Hansen draws on Oliver Grau's work, pointing out that interactive media are supporting the multisensory mechanisms of the body and are thus extending man's space for play and action. For Hansen, in the aggregate of the material world, the body can act like other images, receiving and giving back movement. Images can no longer be restricted to the level of surface appearance but are extended to encompass the entire process by which information is made perceivable through embodied experience. What may be said to result, according to Hansen, is a 'body-in-code' – a technical mediation of the body schema (or the scope of body-environment coupling) whose embodiment is realised in conjunction with technics. Hansen claims that our contemporary specification of technics is to stimulate or provoke the power of the body to open up the world in order to understand how the body enframes information and creates images.

Read in this way, mixed reality is an important condition of our contemporary age because of its ability to replace the principle of representation with that of indirection, quoting Hansen, 'loosely modelled on the autopoietic principle of organisational closure [that] states that the organism undergoes change by reorganizing in reaction to external perturbation' (2006a, p. 13). Hansen explains that in the mixed reality paradigm, association with social images occurs from within 'the operational perspective of the organism and thus comprises a component of its primordial embodied agency' (2006a, p. 13). The body is freed from its strict correlation with the image and the preconstituted framing inherent in technical imaging. Instead, bodily framing is linked to the 'bodily "underside" of vision' (2006b, p. 230) which shifts it from the centre of perception – a disemobodying of vision – to a contaminating affective basis for human visual experience. In this way, the intrinsic link of affection with the body is restored via 'supplementary sensorimotor' (2006b, p. 240) contact with information.

As I started to explore Hansen's scholarship, I became very interested in the work of 1927, most especially their latest production, *Golem*. 1927 is a theatre company founded by Suzanne Andrade and Paul Barritt in 2005. They are established as a cutting-edge collective whose storytelling style mixes sophisticated animation with physical theatre and original music. Following on the success of *The Animals and Children Took to the Streets* (2010), *Golem* features an adaptation of Gustav Meyrink's novel, *Der Golem* (1914). 1927's *Golem* is set in a world that is fictional yet strangely familiar where technology and the market economy have evolved to a point of transcending the boundaries of human control.

Golem, a creature made from clay, able to perform many tasks often considered to be laborious by humans, becomes a must-have, an indispensable ingredient for a better life until it becomes a threat to those who created it and most especially to the protagonist of the story, a social misfit with the name of Robert. In all the work by 1927, flesh and blood performers become part of a two-dimensional landscape in which detailed animations give audiences the sense that the space in which the story takes place is infinite. The ordinary and the fantastical, the live and the animated become completely intertwined as Paul Barritt explains, 'the actors become like animations. They have to use the logic of animation and all the movements are choreographed to go with the music'. Barritt emphasises, 'It's the magic of artifice, the satisfaction of seeing a trick pulled off. A real performer might sweep a broom, releasing a cloud of animated dust. A cartoon lightning bolt can strike a 3D person' and the body adapts as it comes into contact with new information expanding the space for play (in Trueman, 2015). Thus, in the worlds created by 1927, the possibilities of what a body can do

or become are infinitely expanded for the performers because the technology of animation is used to extend the corporeal and the organic. This is a good example of the ways in which interactive media support the multisensory mechanisms of the body, extending its space for play and action. The body-environment coupling through technics is made clear however it remains, I would like to argue, seemingly enframed within the principle of representation in the work of 1927. Whilst the process allows for a technical mediation of the body, it does so only for the performer as dictated by the producers. The performers adopt the screen and projections as extensions of their bodies and once they accept the rules of the animation, the possibilities are endless. For the audience, however, it seems that engagement with this particular mixed reality paradigm is still set along a binary of fantasy and real rather than the possibility of participation and upon closer analysis one notes that this also applies to the characters as whilst the quality of the animation remains of the highest calibre, the body is tied in strong correlation with the image and its preconstituted framing.

One wonders, therefore, whether play is a strategy that opens up new possibilities of body-environment schema for the creators of the work but less so for the audience so that, whilst bodies are constantly being reinvented in the work of 1927, it is only through the *production* of the work rather than its reception through the participation of the actors and the audience that the schema is expanded. Perhaps in *Golem* the potential of reconfigured modes of body-environment coupling is best represented on a meta-textual level. *Within* the fictional world, coupling with the domain of social images occurs from the operational perspective of the organism that is changed by it – Robert's life changes as a result of the way in which he responds to Golem and Golem represents the technics of the contemporary moment. He is, one may claim, the potential of technological development materialised. He represents the future – initially he represents progress – the amplification of space and time through potential of new metaphors of participation. He crosses over from a techno-fantasy vision into reality, changing the lives of all those who engage with him and this is made evident in the physical changes we see Robert undergo. Thus, the relationship between Robert and Golem, and one may tentatively also say between the 1927 performers and their fictional world, presents agency as the space of encounter between the human, non-human assemblage that is always a product of technics. The only problem with the work of 1927 this far, I would like to argue, is the firm respect towards the fourth wall – their performances remain representationally fixed and delivered through a highly immersive but closed interface.

Within the contemporary hypermedial media landscape, the pervasive disappearance of the interface through highly immersive technologies is, Grau argues, a political issue. He claims that it invites a loss of distance 'the most obvious symptom of [which] will be a voyeuristic, dissecting penetration of representation of objects and bodies' (2003, p. 203). Technics that stimulate and provoke the power of the body to open up the world and question this dissecting penetration are political, one may argue, because moving beyond the re-appropriation of social 'images' to the re-inscription of recipients' agency within the storyworld, they operate beyond a level of performativity to one of re-coding the terms and platforms of participation – modes of interaction between bodies and environments. This begins to make clear the ways in which the principle of indirection may be allowed to operate but what of aesthetic illusion and the principle of representation that requires audiences to develop strategies of proximity and distance from the work in order for it to be experienced or understood?

In his book, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1990), Kendall Walton claims that aesthetic illusion is similar to participation in a game of make-believe as the etymology of the word illusion implies – *in-lusio* – this is a game in which one knows that it is 'only' a game and therefore maintains a 'critical' distance from it, keeping the experience from turning altogether into delusion. When we are centred in imaginary worlds, 'we cannot choose our centre of perspective at will, since it is prescribed by the illusionist artefact at hand' (Wolf, Bernhart, & Mahler, 2013, p. 14) but we maintain awareness of the medium and its fictionality. However, in mixed reality worlds that are not based solely on the principles of aesthetic illusion but also on those of interactional dynamics, the question of engagement is not set along a binary of fictional and real, therefore, a representational binary. Rather, engagement becomes an interplay of potentiality and actuality (Olsson, 2009) as the invitation to immerse oneself in the fictional world is sequenced with the strategy of distancing oneself from the fiction in order to understand it more completely. This is, according to my argument, a key characteristic of hybrid storytelling.

In her book, *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art* (2013), Katja Kwastek claims that these mixed reality art pieces must therefore be considered from the twofold perspective of the materiality of the artwork and the individuality of aesthetic experience. This involves a central premise: the possibility of reconciling reflective aesthetic distance with immersion in the flow of interaction. She claims, 'the characteristic feature of media art is that it not only consciously orchestrates the manipulation of attention, it also often – self-referentially – makes such manipulation the theme of a work' (2013, p. xvii). She considers the importance of process aesthetics and action analysis embedded in these works as, she claims, it is 'the recipient's activity that gives form and presence to the interactive artwork, and the recipient's activity is also the primary source of his aesthetic experience' (2013, p. xvii). In interactive art, the recipient becomes a performer. In interactive media art, the focus is not on face-to-face communication but on technically mediated feedback processes. Ultimately, Kwastek claims:

> Interactive art's predication on the physical activity of the recipient contradicts a fundamental condition to which the possibility of aesthetic experience of any art form is usually linked: that of aesthetic distance. The aesthetic object – according to the prevailing theory – is constituted only in the contemplative act of the viewer. In interactive art, however, we are not faced with an artistic offering that requires straightforward observation; rather, the aesthetic object must first be made accessible through the action of the recipient before any act of contemplation (or reflection) is possible. This makes the requirement of aesthetic distance extremely difficult to satisfy. (2013, p. xviii)

The recipient of the work of art views the work as a space that responds to their presence, so that their interpretation is not, I would argue, private and remote but rather engaged and, in some cases, embodied and shared, meaning that strategies of immersion and distancing are alternated, especially through the development of new technologies. The production of new technologies attempts to overcome the current limits of representational enframing, so that the work offers multiple pathways of interpretation, discussed below through the notion of what Benford and Giannachi in their book, *Performing Mixed Reality*, call 'trajectories' (2011, p. 24). By this argument, therefore:

> […] the fabric of stories is revealed through the conjunction 'and' […] which then does away with the imposition of foundational roots and negates the power of fixed endings and beginnings […] It also suggests that a human-non-human assemblage has a collective force or power to act that cannot be attributed to a single determining substance. In simple terms, rhizomatic

thinking disassembles bordered and fixed concepts about space, materials, bodies and movement. (Legg, 2011, p. 133)

Read through Deleuze and Guattari, within this landscape there is:

no stable human experience because bodies are constantly reinvented as things happen, always in a state of being and becoming so that 'we know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects'. (1988, p. 294 in Lester, 2013, p. 138)

The other affects are determined by the body-environment coupling that Hansen describes, realised through contemporary technics.

On the basis of the case studies I have selected, I would question how the reconfiguration of the interface and the culture of participation is negotiated in the hybrid spaces created by mixed reality that blend representational aesthetics with interactional ones. I would argue that critical distance is not entirely lost but rather framed through the praxis of play. In this way, the critical distance needed for deeper understanding of the work does not prohibit the level of immersion needed to fulfil its potential as a participatory work, but rather negotiates distance through the reconfigured coordinates of time and space. Whilst, historically, play is given importance in studies of aesthetics in the work of Plato and Aristotle, the re-evaluation through Schiller and Kant, and more recently through the work of Freud and Huizinga, among others,[1] for the purposes of this paper play is tentatively set up as a practice strongly related to the process of social and cultural innovation in which communities are re-imagined. From that perspective, play would be an extension of the body-environment coupling. In this sense, through reconfigured interfaces, play pushes spectators into a position that is far more than that of observers who see what is happening in front of them, but rather they become a part of the play insofar as they literally 'take part' in the creation and development of the story that is mapped out at the interface of the real and the virtual.

Trajectories emphasise aspects of a journey, expressing the progressive itinerary of a body or object as originated by an agent but influenced by both agent and context. The trajectory implies 'the act of throwing across (*trans jacere*)' (Benford & Giannachi, 2011, p. 15) as knowledge about an environment is determined while we are 'on the move' within it and the environment is 'perceived not from multiple points of view but along a path of observation' (Ingold, 2000, pp. 230, 238). According to Benford and Giannachi, 'the primary means by which to experience a mixed reality performance environment therefore consists of the trajectories or paths of observation and experience that facilitate one's route through it' (2011, p. 15). They define three types: canonical trajectories which represent the artist's intended narrative or journey through a work, participant trajectories which represent the actual journey that different participants undertake, and historic trajectories that represent synthesised different views of what took place as the experience is subsequently replayed. The work of companies like Blast Theory suggests that participant trajectories combine immersion in the storyworld, represented through mixed reality, with the affordances for interaction that each medium offers. In this combination, proximity to and distance from the storyworld are core considerations when analysing the type of experience and engagement that these stories – or one may also say *performances* – offer.

Through their collaboration with the Mixed Reality Laboratory at the University of Nottingham, the artist collective, Blast Theory, are keen to explore whether their locative, performative and ludic work can be a conversation bringing people together in ways that are unexpected and undetermined. They also explore whether new technology bridges or

reinforces social divides whilst also inviting a reconsideration of the recipient's agency based on the hybridised time and space that frames their work. In fact, since the early 1990s, Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj have been experimenting with 'new forms of performance and interactive art that mixes audiences across the internet, live performance and digital broadcasting' to draw on 'popular culture and games' often blurring 'the boundaries between the real and the fictional'.[2] In his paper, *Proximity and Alienation: Narratives of City, Self, and Other in the Locative Games of Blast Theory* (2013), Rowan Wilken describes the characteristics of Blast Theory projects as locative, playful experiences that bring strangers into spaces that are both social and ludic so that they are able to, among other factors, solicit a sense of isolation in an otherwise crowded city. This, I would add, establishes the conditions for the interface of engagement to experiment with the body-environment coupling, as described by Hansen.

In *Can You See Me Now?* (2001–), for example, online players are chased through a virtual model of a city by four street performers or runners who negotiate the streets of the city equipped with handheld computers with wireless connections and GPS to trace them. The online participants are asked 'Who are you looking for?' as they wait in a queue and are then dropped into a city map at a predetermined position. Represented by blue or white icons, they use their arrow keys to move around and exchange text messages and audio from the runners' walkie-talkies. If they move within five square metres from the runners they are removed from the game. Able to view a map of the city showing their own position as well as the online players' positions makes the relationship between the real city and the virtual city fluid – pavements are the same, road signs are the same, but there is no traffic in the virtual city. As participants developed strategies (removing, hiding, managing, revealing, exploiting) to deal with the uncertainties that emerged in the game, it became clear that by not having to follow a strictly prescribed narrative pattern participants were left free to choose their own relationships to one another and the work so that they are more directly involved in the decisions taken throughout the duration of the work, decisions that are greatly mediated by technology. In fact, mixed reality performances in location-based spaces go beyond theatre-based spaces that are often controlled by the parameters (technical and cultural) of the stage. Unlike theatre productions that present self-contained worlds, mixed reality performances:

> […] are integrated within and undistinguishable from the fabric of everyday life so that there is a blurring of the boundaries, which necessitates the continuous renegotiation of the performance frame. Moreover, the relationship between these spaces is often pre-scripted, established a priori. Crucially, these spaces can therefore never quite be experienced holistically from within and can often be explored only through the help and with the cooperation of others. (Benford & Giannachi, 2011, pp. 46–7)

This taps into a 'vision of distributed networks of play and performance' (Gold, 1993, p. 235) that requires participants (used in a broad sense to include those who participate directly and those who participate inadvertently, such as bystanders) to act in two ways: first, searching for and experimenting with the hidden affordances of everyday objects and places, and, second, exhaustively seeking to activate everything in their immediate environment. The multiple trajectories that are embedded in these works offer experiences that explore the potential of participants who are connected into a sophisticated structure of space–time interface and performance roles using computing technologies so that:

> […] while you are moving about in the city, you become connected to a network. This situates you in two different types of spaces at once. *Can You See Me Now?* is all about managing this

> proximity and distance. You know your game play is dependent on being far away from some-
> one and yet the work itself plays around with proximity and presence – absence and distance.
> (Benford & Giannachi, 2011, p. 56)

The work puts into play the convergence processes of cooperation, exchange and copro-
duction that make it possible. Development in this area has been rapid. Jenkins documented
much of it in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), where he identifies
convergence as a creative and economic process that is central to the aesthetics of distance
and proximity that is being explored in this paper, because it highlights the political, eco-
nomic and aesthetic pressures to which story production is responding. He identifies trans-
media as one of the predominant characteristics of the time, maintaining that:

> Media convergence is an ongoing process, occurring at various intersections of media tech-
> nologies, industries, content and audiences; it's not an end state. There will never be one black
> box controlling all media. Rather, thanks to the proliferation of channels and the increasingly
> ubiquitous nature of computing and communications, we are entering an era where media will
> be everywhere, and we will use all kinds of media in relation to one another. We will develop new
> skills for managing information, new structures for transmitting information across channels,
> and new creative genres that exploit the potentials of those emerging information structures.
> (Jenkins, 2001)

Convergence is often misunderstood as a single, end product, but Jenkins argues that the
term ought to be thought of as referring to at least five processes, which he identifies as
technological convergence (the transformation of words, images and sounds into digital
information), economic convergence (the horizontal integration of the entertainment indus-
try resulting in transmedia brands), social and organic convergence (consumers' multitasking
strategies to navigate the new media landscape), cultural convergence (new forms of crea-
tivity at the intersections of various media technologies, industries and consumers) and
global convergence (cultural hybridity that emerges from global circulation of media prod-
ucts). This affects our understanding of place, play, identity and social interaction because
drawing on large-scale information-gathering and processing activities that emerged in the
mid-1990s, convergence developed as part of strategies of collective intelligence in the form
of, for example, the sharing of knowledge and information in public spheres.

Within this convergent culture, time and space become hybridised into multiple spaces,
extended time scales and shifting roles 'through diverse forms of interface' (Benford &
Giannachi, 2011, p. 7). Space is 'composed of different, adjacent, "enfolding" spaces, simul-
taneously occupying different points on the mixed reality continuum [remaining,] however,
in a heterogenous, discontinuous, unsynthesized, and changing relationship with one
another' (Benford & Giannachi, 2011, p. 45). Time accommodates embedded and emergent
narrative constructions, interweaving a story-time that is determined by the producers, plot
time that refers closely to the temporal structure of the narrative, schedule time, interaction
time that is controlled by the participant and their choices of engagement, and perceived
time that refers to the way in which the timing of events may be perceived by individual
participants. Therefore, recipients become participants, even performers, through a series
of trajectories that traverses hybrid space and time, on different points of the mixed reality
continuum that is negotiating the principles of representation with those of indirection.
They are always at the interface between spaces and times, one may argue always being-
becoming, always *intermezzo*.

Intermezzo might be understood as referring to an inbetweenness of spaces able to
represent dialectical opposites such as organic and inorganic, inside and outside, distance

and approximation – always in the middle, between things, interbeing. This is reminiscent of what Felix Guattari, in his book *The Three Ecologies* (2000) describes as a cross-fertilisation of mental, natural and social 'modes' that suggests the possibility of a rhizomatic interconnectivity between human subjectivity, the environment and social relations, and one may also say between the body and its environment. Within the context of mixed reality, it is a mode of establishing engagement between the artwork and recipients and is influenced by – and, in turn influences – the development and framing of aesthetics, both the aesthetics of illusion that has been a core concern of art throughout the ages, as well as the aesthetics of interaction, a core concern of the contemporary era and digital art. What intermezzo develops out of the two is, I would suggest, a remediated aesthetics of play that fuses the virtual and the physical, contributing to the development of a 'hybrid ecology' – environments that combine mixed reality with ubiquitous computing infrastructures so that ecology comes to mean a 'space or environment that cooperation takes place within and to the socially organised ways in which the environment affords collaboration' (Crabtree & Rodden, 2007, p. 483).

In *You Get Me* (2008), for example, the personal geographies of eight carefully selected participants are transformed into the interface of a large-scale, networked, performative and ludic experience. Important places and events in their life were formed into a map raising critical questions that came to be the animating force of the work. Listening, learning and understanding are described as the core mechanics of this piece which is really an interstitial system that comments on agency of both participants within the games and characters within the story. Moreover, it seeks to connect two sites that are merely five miles apart geographically but are culturally separated by a much wider gulf. Online participants using terminals at the Royal Opera House choose one of the eight people located in Mile End Park and develop a conversation with them. Visitors to the Opera House read:

> Welcome to You Get Me. This is a game where you decide how far to go. At this moment a group of teenagers are in Mile End Park. Each one has a question. Choose carefully because you only get one shot at this. And the others you didn't choose will then try their best to knock you out. Here they come … (www.blasttheory.co.uk)

Participants stationed at the Royal Opera House navigate their avatar through the virtual Mile End Park. Once they choose their runner, they listen to their personal geography and the questions begin to deepen. As the participants track the runners down they offer an answer to the question but if the runner does not approve they reject it – you must try harder. Once the runner accepts a participant's answer, a mobile phone conversation ensues. A night-time photograph of the park slowly zooms in to reveal the person you are talking to as a pixelated presence. The conversation is real, the people are real but the time and space in which they are located are hybrid. Once the conversation ends, the runner sends the participant a picture with a caption that reads 'This is Fern. It's 3.45 in the afternoon on Friday 12 September. I'm near the canal with the Pallant Estate behind me and I'm taking a photo for you. You Get Me.' (www.blasttheory.co.uk). As the participant leaves the Royal Opera House, the photo arrives on their phone.

Both the Royal Opera House and Mile End Park seem to become hybridised places that extend man's space for play and action. The body-environment coupling that takes places through the trajectories of the game and the blending of the real and the virtual allow new frameworks of participation to be opened up as the representation of the places and people involved is rendered interstitial – constantly changing through the agency awarded

participants by the technology that is interwoven into the fabric of this work. Whilst they are at least partly aware of the canonical trajectories set out by the producers, participants are not entirely restricted by them because they enjoy what Hansen describes as a 'primordial embodied agency' (2006a, p. 13). This agency juxtaposes immersion into the work through the connection that is formed with the runners to a distancing that is necessary in order for them to manage the more ludic aspects of the work such as making sure that other runners do not knock them out of the game. Thus it may be said that participants develop a playful distance from the work moving through the space along trajectories that express the progressive itinerary of a body or object as originated by an agent but also influenced by both agent and context.

Seemingly, therefore, participating in projects like *You Get Me* and *Rider Spoke* (2007–2011), discussed below, becomes symbolic of wider processes that can take place within different community settings. Read through Giorgio Agamben's work, one may argue this is in line with 'the coming community', one that 'remains open to the other […] a community deferred, a community yet-to-come, a community of and for the future, a community *in potentia*' (Agamben in Wilken, 2011, p. 55). A true community, according to Agamben, can only be a community that is not presupposed, therefore one that is fluid and changing as our experience and understanding constantly change in relation to the events that we experience. The production of new technologies, one might argue, allows traditional methods of enframing and representation to be confounded so that 'the lines are constantly crossing, intersecting for a moment, following one another. A line of drift intersects a customary line and at that point the child does something not quite belonging to either one [and] thus we must invent our lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, pp. 202, 203). In this way, cities become playgrounds to which the question, 'What if?' becomes the portal for a myriad of possible ways of experiencing time and space both physically and virtually.

In the world of *Rider Spoke*, for example, participants are told:

> Explore a large city drawn in pencil. Pick one of the lit windows and listen to a recording. A stranger who could be in Budapest or Adelaide, London or Copenhagen has stopped their bicycle at a specific spot. On this corner or in this cemetery, under this awning or behind this pub they have a story to tell […] Whatever they tell it is personal and exact, part of a palimpsest of intimate reflections. (www.blasttheory.co.uk)

This work invites participants to cycle through the streets of multiple cities, equipped with a handheld computer. They are guided by a calm and gentle voice and instructed to find a hiding place. Once they find a hiding place they are asked to respond to a question about life. Alone, hidden in a physical location their presence is hybridised through the tracking system that uses WiFi access points to determine the position of each rider so that each one becomes a 'body-in-code' (Hansen, 2006a). Their answers are recorded onto the device and can be accessed by others, yet only when they arrive at that hiding place so that even that space is hybrised offering participants different opportunities of interacting with it. When a participant finds a hiding place, the device alerts them and shows the questions that other riders have answered. Blast Theory remind us that 'the recordings that people make are only available in this context: played to a player, alone, in the place where they were recorded' (www.blasttheory.co.uk).

Within this context, one may argue, that the body, the body's arrival at that particular place, acts, as Hansen describes, as an aggregate of the material world, receiving and giving

back movement, integrated into the entire process by which information is made perceivable. This can only be realised in conjunction with technics. As participants ride through the city streets, the riders enframe information that is constantly changing. They are focusing on their surroundings looking for good places to hide – contributing to the image-creation process of the piece – whilst also wondering where other riders have hidden, so that the city takes on a new geography as it becomes an interconnected web of images and riders. Moreover, within this hybrid system, the body is freed from its strict correlation with the image and the preconstituted framing as the intrinsic link of affection with the body is restored via supplementary sensorimotor contact with information. The riders are strangers, but not entirely so. In fact, *Rider Spoke* like *You Get Me* and *Can You See Me Now?* is all about the relationship between proximity and distance in a hybrid interstitial ecology. The recipient of the work moves in an environment that is constantly changing, so that the 'actual' and 'potential' is constantly reworked.

Within this context, Grau claims that the virtual is:

> no longer a wholly distinct, if largely amorphous realm with rules all of its own, but rather it denotes a 'space full of information' that can be 'activated, revealed, reorganised and recombined, added to and transformed as the user navigates … real space'. (2003, p. 247)

These interactive ecologies, therefore, suggest the possibility of reconfiguring aesthetic illusion through a rhizomatic interconnectivity between human subjectivity, the environment and social relations in a way that uses the multisensory mechanisms of the body to extend man's space for play and action. In this context, the dominant immersion and residual distance needed to produce and engage with art are not, I would argue, compromised but rather synchronised through play. Within this contemporary artistic culture, our experience of the present moment is therefore always contingent, always in some sense removed, always intermezzo.

Notes

1. For more on the philosophical discussion of the relation between aesthetics and play, view; Hilde (1968).
2. For more on the history and approach of Blast Theory, view their website at: www.blasttheory. co.uk (accessed 24 May 2017).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Giuliana Fenech is a lecturer of English at the University of Malta. She researches literature and multimedia, digital literacy, sound narrative, multisensory encounters with the literary and has a special interest in Children's Literature. She is also involved in a number of artist collaborations, studying the relationship between the literary, dance, music and painting. Her forthcoming publications include work on Blast Theory, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Victor Pasmore, J. K. Rowling and Lewis Carroll.

References

Benford, S., & Giannachi, G. (2011). *Performing mixed reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Crabtree, A., & Rodden, T. (2007). Hybrid ecologies: Understanding cooperative interaction in emerging physical-digital environment. *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing, 12*, 481–493.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus*. (B. Massumi, Trans.). London: Athlone Press.

Grau, O. (2003). *Virtual art: From illusion to immersion*. (G. Custance, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Gold, R. (1993). This is not a pipe. *Special Issue on Computer Augmented Environments: Back to the Real World, Magazine Communications of the ACM, 36*, 24–26.

Guattari, F. (2000). *The three ecologies*. (I. Pinder & P. Sutton, Trans.). London: Athlone Press.

Hansen, M. (2006a). *Bodies in code: Interfaces with digital media*. Oxford: Routledge.

Hansen, M. (2006b). *New philosophy for new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Hilde, H. (1968). Play as an aesthetic concept. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 27*, 67–71.

Ingold, T. (2000). *Lines: A brief history*. London: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2001). Convergence? I diverge. *Technology Review*. Retrieved May 24, 2017, from https://www.technologyreview.com/article/401042/convergence-i-diverge

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kwastek, K. (2013). *Aesthetics of interaction in digital art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Legg, S. (2011). Assemblage/apparatus: Using Deleuze and Foucault. *Area, 43*, 128–133.

Lester, S. (2013). Playing in a Deleuzian playground. In E. Ryall, W. Russell, & M. Maclean (Eds.), *The philosophy of play* (pp. 130–140). Oxford: Routledge.

Olsson, L. (2009). *Movement and experimentation in young children's learning*. London: Routledge.

Trueman, M. (2015). Smoke and mirrors – Staging animation. In *The Stage*. Retrieved June 06, 2017, from https://www.thespace.org/news/view/staging-animation-feature-matt-trueman

Wilken, R. (2011). *Teletechnologies, place and community*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Wilken, R. (2013). Proximity and alienation: Narratives of city, self, and other in the locative games of blast theory. In J. Farman (Ed.), *The mobile story: Narrative practices with locative technologies* (pp. 175–191). New York, NY: Routledge.

Wolf, W., Bernhart, W., & Mahler, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Immersion and distance: Aesthetic illusion in literature and other media*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.