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TEMPORAL EXPANSION IN BLAST THEORY'S *DAY OF THE FIGURINES*

Gabriella Giannachi and Steve Benford

The spread of mobile phones and mobile computers is transforming our lives, steadily leading us towards a world of “ubiquitous computing” in which computation and digital media are embedded into the world around us, potentially becoming available anywhere and anytime. Mobility and ubiquity have the potential to transform theatre, creating new forms of performance and spectating which combine “real” and “virtual” worlds, that respond to participants’ locations, or that are finely interwoven with the patterns of their daily lives. In doing so, these kinds of mobile and ubiquitous performances structure our experience of time in ways distinctive to this new genre. A detailed analysis of the use of time in Blast Theory’s *Day of the Figurines* (2006), demonstrates how pervasive games may coordinate between multiple temporal structures not only to affect the spectator’s role within the work and experience of it but also to empower them to shape this encounter according to the variable contexts determined by their day-to-day lives.

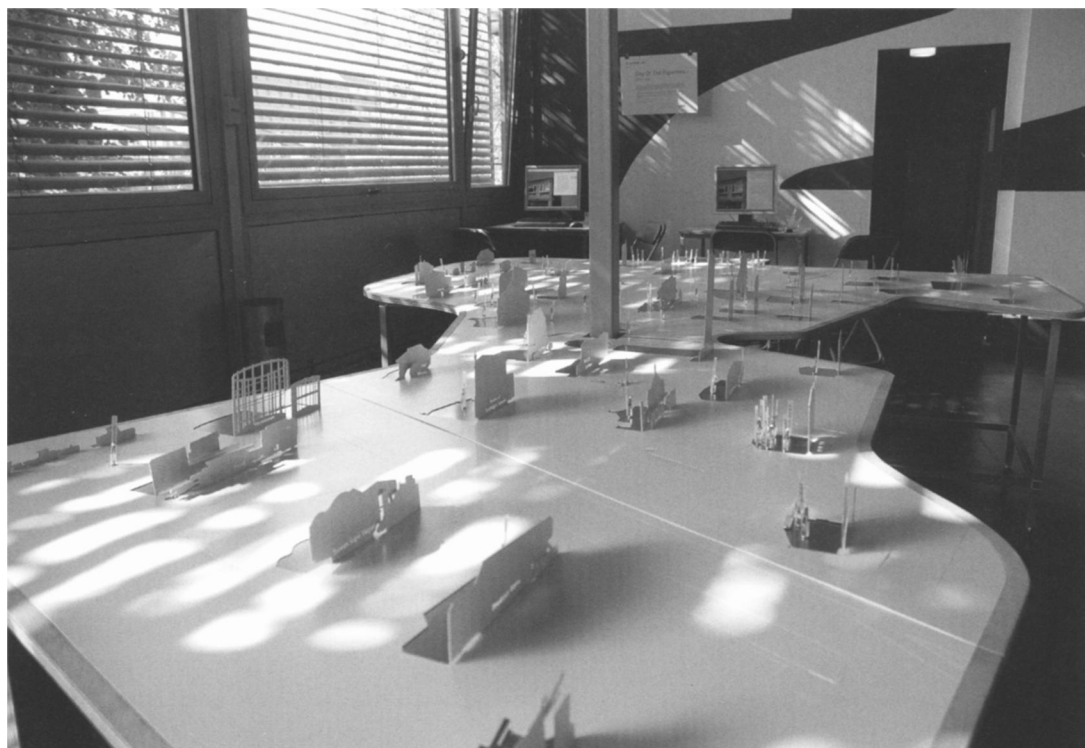
DAY OF THE FIGURINES

That something distinctive is occurring in terms of the temporal organization of entertainment is particularly noticeable in multi-platform works, which span different types of ICT applications and therefore encourage different forms of temporal organization and social co-operation. One of such works is Blast Theory’s *Day of the Figurines*, a massively multiplayer board-game for up to a thousand participants that players can interact with remotely via SMS through their mobile phones from anywhere in the world. The world premiere took place in Berlin at Hebbel am Ufer, as part of Trampoline, from September 28 to October 21, 2006. On this occasion, the game was run for twenty-four days for 141 players. The game was then played from December 6–30, 2006 in Singapore at the National Museum where it was again run for 146 players. In 2007, while on tour in the UK, it received an honorary mention at Prix Ars Electronica.

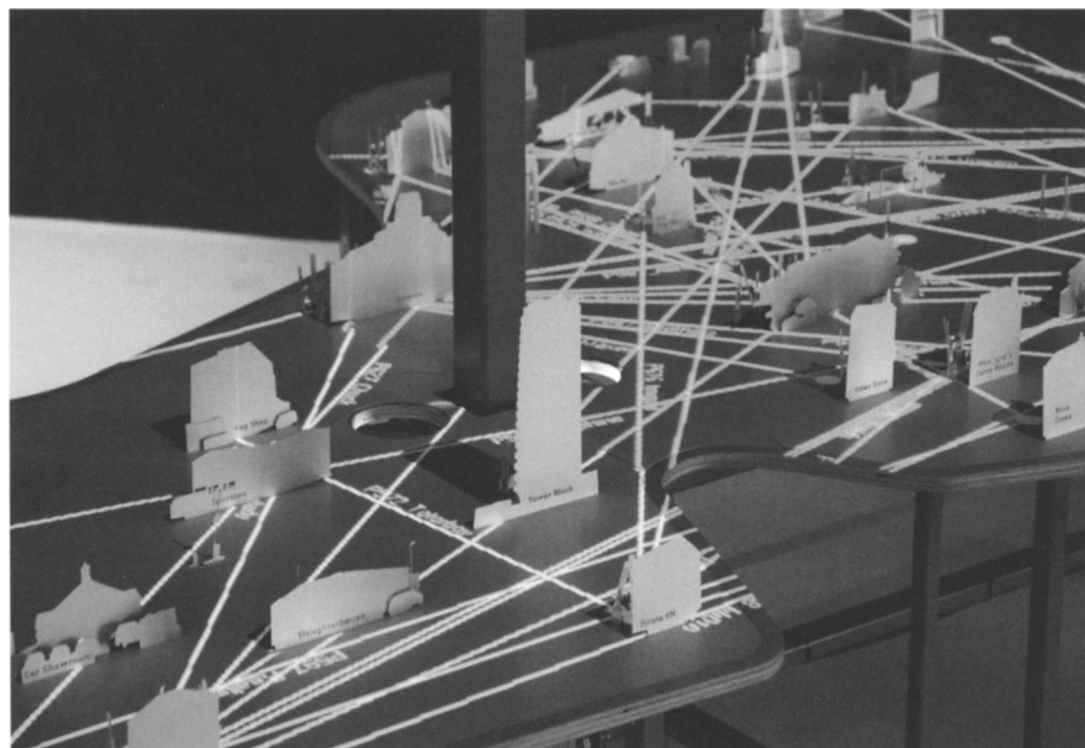
Day of the Figurines was developed by Blast Theory, a company which, since the late 1990s, has developed influential mixed-media performances and installations, in collaboration with Nottingham University’s Mixed Reality Laboratory as part of a larger research project, IPerG, funded by the European Commission’s IST program.

IPerG's principal research objective is the investigation of pervasive games. These extend conventional computer games in one or more of three dimensions. Spatially they usually operate through location-based experiences that respond to players' positions and movements, which may be designed to fit a specific site. Socially, they build on the primarily social use of personal devices, especially mobile phones, and the establishment of new relationships between players and non-players, principally spectators in public settings. Temporally, they operate by finely interweaving game experiences with the patterns of daily life, once again building on the characteristics of devices such as mobile phones, which enable us to communicate with others at many times and in many places. Previous works by Blast Theory, all developed in collaboration with the Mixed Reality Laboratory, have explored the themes of spatial expansion. Thus *Can You See Me Now?* (2003–5), winner of the Golden Nica (2003) at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, utilized the Global Positioning System (GPS) to track performers' movements through an actual 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. Other works have explored social expansions, including *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003), which engaged with the boundaries between the fictional world of a game and the physical reality of a city, implicating bystanders on the city streets into its narratives. In contrast, *Day of the Figurines* set out to explore the theme of the temporal expansion of pervasive games.

Like other works developed collaboratively between Blast Theory and the Nottingham Laboratory, *Day of the Figurines* presents spectators with unusual interfaces. Here, conventions established by previous location-based games are subverted in that a physical space is constructed as a display, an output device in human computer interaction (HCI) terms rather than an input. To enter the game, participants visit a physical space, which could be a museum, gallery, theatre, or art center, where they find a large-scale white metal model of an imaginary town at table height. Designed to be a spectator interface, intended to attract players and reveal aspects of the game that would normally be hidden, the board constitutes a complex liminal boundary between "real" and virtual, life and art. 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, more ominously, a Nuclear Bunker, and the Rat Research Institute. 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 information from the game. This augmentation system is turned off periodically (normally 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 position on the board to its new position as a result of its recent play. This interface is intended to support the task of the operators and to enhance the public spectacle of the board.



Top: The board displayed at Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin. Photo: Courtesy Gabriella Giannachi. Bottom: The augmented board showing all recent figurine movements at once. Sonar, Barcelona. Photo: Courtesy Blast Theory.



The board is baroquely shaped and not only looks but also acts as a “fold,” continuously repositioning the inside of the game as outside. Here, the spectator is initiated into the process of their own spatio/temporal dislocation. By establishing a level of theatricality, the board turns participants into an audience, seemingly sharing its spatio/temporal coordinates. But although the board offers a site for viewing, this spectacle is “located” elsewhere. Yet through the augmentation system, the board also superimposes the presentness of the game with its history. Because of its relatively large size, as well as its unfolding appearance, spectators are unable to view it in its entirety without having to physically circumnavigate it. Through this circular journey, viewers remain unable to grasp the totality of the board, and, despite the presence of a message display allowing them a fleeting view of players’ SMS exchanges at a given point in time, they remain deprived of the possibility of an overview or metanarrative. To enter the game, participants then select a figurine from a display of one hundred figurines neatly arranged on a second, smaller square table. The figurines are the size of a thumbprint, made of plastic and brightly colored. 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. At this point, participants choose a role through which to enter in the game and by enacting that role they become the performers of this work. Before leaving the space, they are given some basic instructions about the game, which explain how to move, speak, pick up 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. The first message is received soon after registering with the game. At this stage the game asks for directions. If the participant chooses a destination, the figurine is moved toward it. Once the new destination is reached, they may encounter other players with whom they could exchange, in real time, SMS. They may also encounter “objects”: ladders, cups of tea, saveloys, fleeces, among others. Or 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. Each element, including objects, has a temporal scope that constrains when in game-time it becomes available to participants. It may also have a timeout, after which a default answer or action is assumed to keep the narrative moving on. An orchestration interface enabled the operators to control the rate of progression of time in the fictional narrative relative to time in the real world. This was used once in Singapore when the hosting venue was closed for a day. In response, the operators speeded up game-time over the following few days until the missing fictional hour had been recovered.

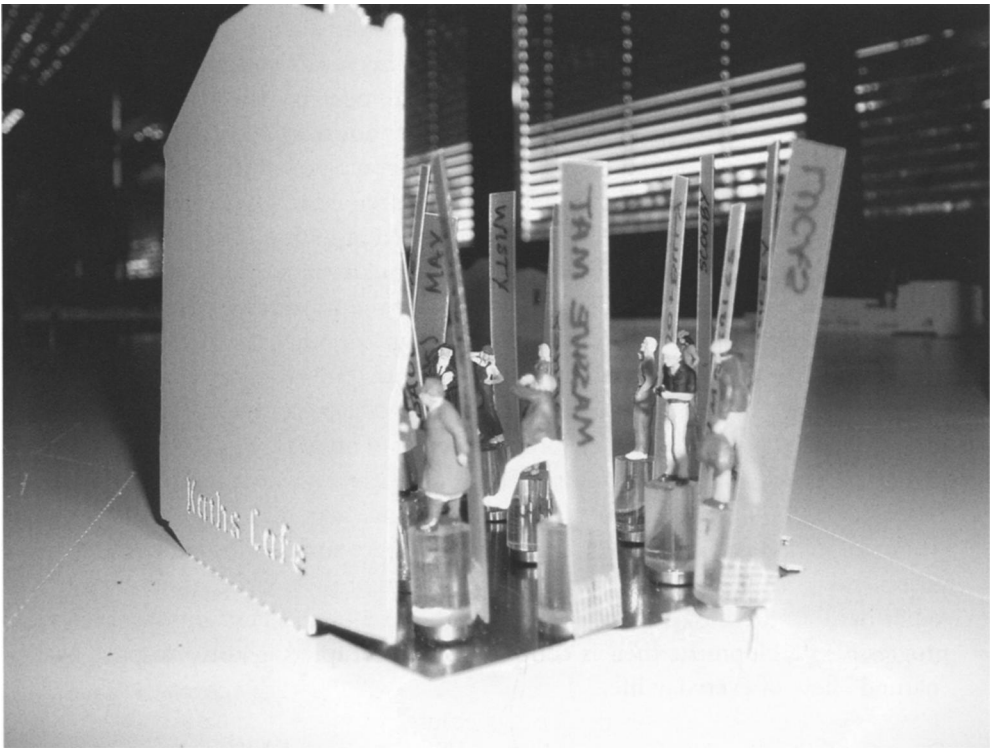
As time goes by, with each day of actual time corresponding to one hour of game-time, the town undergoes a series of subtle changes, which give the sense of the passing of time within an overarching narrative. Participants, who are refugees in an alienating town, learn that by eating and drinking certain foods, or advising others on how to do so, their health can be restored and even improved. They also discover that objects have more than one function, and learn that to survive, they must share objects and knowledge. Although the game publishes some basic instructions, which are available to players as cards and on the web, it is only by engaging with the game that players may gain knowledge on how to survive. *Day of the Figurines* does not

entail a conventional dramatic or game conflict, nor result in a clear quantifiable outcome—players do not clearly win or lose (unless they die, of course). Rather, the game's pace is more life-like, uncertain, indeterminate. Despite the presence of missions and dilemmas, the piece follows less formal play activities, which create the possibility of interaction and emergent behavior. This variable aspect of the game, which allows players to weave in and out of role-play over extended periods of time, is a fundamental feature of this work.

TIME AND THE EVERYDAY

Day of the Figurines operates at the level of *Dasein*, with the players' principal activity consisting of *besorgen* [providing], objects, food, drink, help, but also information and knowledge, for themselves and each other. During this process their presentness in time is expanded. It is interesting that this is achieved by a slowing down rather than a speeding up of time. If time and acceleration are synonymous of capitalism and globalization, a slowing down, prompting a temporal augmentation, becomes here a means to break out of the temporal structures of productivity and engage the subject into a more flexible, hybrid way of being. This hybridity directly affects participants' role-play. So, interestingly, for some players, "their figurine's behavior reflected their own actions and mood in the real world" so much so that "aspects of players' personalities, real world activities and situations" were found to have bled through into the world of the game.¹ Feedback from the initial test at the Laban Centre in London revealed that the majority of players had adopted an episodic mode of play and dipped in and out of the game over the course of twenty-four days, sometimes not playing for several days before reengaging again. In the initial version of the game, the board was divided into squares and players would travel from destination to destination one square at a time, a process that would frequently 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 subsequently significantly revised through the introduction of a "hub" model of movement. In this new model, on journeying from one destination to another, figurines stepped out into streets, which were represented by a central meeting point called "the hub." Here, they were allocated a new interaction, either a pre-scripted game event message, or a dilemma that required a multiple-choice response. Once this was complete, they moved onto their destination. Consequently, and in direct contrast to the impression given by the game board, all destinations in *Day of the Figurines* were equidistant, being two hops away from each other. The physical board contained several hub regions on the city streets into which figurines were moved while they were in the central game hub. So there was a deliberate difference between the geography of the board and the actual structure of the game.

Day of the Figurines is a hybrid, not only because of its pervasive nature, which allows for a contamination between players' lives and the game, but also structurally in that it adopts different temporal conventions. It starts as a spectacle and because of the set-up of the board participants are led to believe that they are in front of a world



Top: A player choosing a figurine at Sonar, Barcelona. Photo: Courtesy Mauricio Capra. Bottom: Kath's Café displayed at Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin. Photo: Courtesy Gabriella Giannachi.

that, from a spatio-temporal point of view, is separate from their everyday lives. This “theatrical” world can be circumnavigated but not penetrated without actually entering the game. Registering with the operators soon leads into a performative dimension as spectators choose a figurine and start their role-play by laboriously performing “the act” of texting for twenty-four days each time they interact with the game. Once inside the game, adopting “character,” however episodically, players slowly realize that in order to survive they have to follow specific rules. However this game world is not only accessible right from their everyday lives but continuously disrupts and interrupts it so that to some extent the game-world and everyday life end up competing for the subject’s attention. As Matt Adams, who, together with Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj, is a founding member of Blast Theory, points out, in *Day of the Figurines* “*Verfremdung* is exacerbated by the uneasy slippage between self and character that these processes enforce. You are never able to slip fully into character because your quotidian self is constantly reasserting themselves.”

A DRAMATURGY OF REAL-TIME

Theatrically, *Day of the Figurines* unfolds according to a pre-scripted narrative, allowing participants the possibility of a passive, “voyeuristic” mode. This dimension is then mapped over twenty-four game hours, constituting the “day” of the figurines, which spans over twenty-four actual days, each representing an hour in the game narrative. Central to this dimension is the relationship between action and stillness, and the reciprocal progression and halting of the game. In this context, Manfred Pfister’s identification of a distinction between different notions of time in drama is crucial. Pfister states that there are fundamentally two conceptions, one “in which chronological progression is concomitant with constant change and one in which time is seen simply as duration—that is the chronological prolongation of a static condition.” He then notes that in naturalist theatre performance time equates with the fictional time-span of the play, and the prevailing tense is the present, so that “it was the progressive conception of time that predominated, because the passing of time was always reflected in the progression in the various strands of plot.” Typically, in these dramas there is no stasis, no waiting, nor reference to anything outside of the world of representation. In modern drama, however, particularly in works by Maurice Maeterlinck, Samuel Beckett or Peter Handke, static conditions often prevail and, in Pfister’s words, “actions degenerate to no more than iterative activities designed to pass the time.”²² Temporally, *Day of the Figurines* adopts dramaturgical conventions that seemingly align it with naturalist traditions. For example, the chronological unfolding of the story allows for progressive development and change, yet this performance time is a slowed-down version of the fictional time-span, in the sense that the story’s twenty-four hours occur over a period of twenty-four days. Its progressive development then is continuously interrupted if not disrupted by the “natural” flow of everyday life.

Day of the Figurines is of course also a performance, and hence the participants’ temporal experience is simultaneously dependent on another set of temporal frameworks. In this respect, useful models for the interpretation of temporal structures

are offered by Peter Thomson's concepts of result and set time. Thomson notes how games usually fall into one of two categories with respect to temporal organization: set time in which "a time limit is pre-established, and the score of the completion of this *set time* is declared the result of the game" and result time, as in tennis, where "the game continues according to its own internal logic until a result is reached, and the clock has no direct bearing on it." Thomson notes that "plays normally use *result time*, which is to say that it is the completion of the story rather than the running out of time that brings them to an end" but that some forms of entertainment adopt both models, so that in boxing, for example, the spectator "is held in tension by the possible imposition of result time on set time."³ *Day of the Figurines* operates within a set time, in the sense that the game lasts ten hours a day, for twenty-four days, and players, via the allocation of missions and dilemmas, which have to be completed within a given time span, are able to control smaller units of set time within the overall time the game puts forward. Furthermore, there are timeouts associated with missions and dilemmas so they too involve an element of set time as well as result time. The game, however, also operates through result time in the sense that if players die, for instance, the game stops for them and when missions are completed before the set time, the game moves on. By requiring participants to move between these different types of performance time, the work creates a tension and movement between times that displaces participants from a more passive, theatrical mode of spectating and instead prompts them to choose between different forms of engagement, so directly affecting the length and intensity of their experience.

Yet the fact that *Day of the Figurines* is also, and perhaps most importantly, a game further complicates the distinction between set time and result time. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan note that typically multiplayer games engage viewers in a duality where they are both themselves and in role-play. It is a duality again reflected in the game's use of time which consists of play time, "the time the player takes to play" (roughly equivalent to Pfister's fictional-time span) and event time, "the time taken in the game world" with action games tending to proceed in real-time, and strategy and simulation games either speeding or slowing down the game (broadly equivalent to Pfister's performance time). However, there is a distinction here between "the adventure game that creates coherent worlds that the player must explore in a coherent time, and the action game that favors unexplained jumps in world and time by way of unconnected levels and rounds." Thus, in the popular city building simulation game *Sim City*, for instance, play time is faster than event time and "an event time of a year takes a few minutes of play time."⁴ In *Day of the Figurines*, however, play time is highly subjective, with players adopting their own episodic mode of play, often affected by events in their own life. Although play time may be interpreted as the time the game is accessible for play (usually from 12:00 A.M. to 10:00 P.M.), it is more accurate to describe it as the relationship between this time (which has a specific real-time duration) and the time the player is engaged with the game (which varies from day to day, and player to player). In other words, each time a player receives a message, they are with respect to the game in two temporal structures, which fold into one another and allow them to engage in the complex human computer interactions, transactions and even negotiations this game

produces. Just as players are continuously relocated between the aesthetically charged descriptions of the game's destinations, and their real-life locations, so they are also constantly repositioned in time, between performance and fictional time, set and result time, play and event time.

What emerges from this analysis of the use of time in *Day of the Figurines* is that the piece, because of its complex overlaying of a pre-scripted embedded narrative, allowing for spectatorship, with an emergent one, arising from participants' interactions with the game and encouraging interactive role-play, utilizes an array of different temporal structures. As the game is available at almost all times, it needs to be playable at different paces. For this reason, it is constructed through distinct temporal dramaturgies that resemble Manuel Castells's "flexible compartments of time."⁵ The fact that the game contains tasks, though it is not exclusively task-oriented, alongside an orchestration between clock time, a collective time and a subjective time, is typical of the social organization of time in the age of ubiquitous computing. The compact nature of tasks may be more suitable at periods when players are between times or during work breaks. So as most professions are task-based, the difference between the structuring of the time of work and time of entertainment is less pronounced. For longer periods of availability on the other hand, non-matrixed play, a form of augmented *Dasein*, or being, is allowed, which means that players could engage with the game as long, as actively and as interactively as they wished.

In this sense *Day of the Figurines* is possibly the first artistic work realizing Jacques Attali's "time of codes"⁶ in that not only do we witness the presence of autonomous times, responsible for the delivery of the game's emergent narratives, but also of a collective and integrating time, though which the embedded narrative proceeds and the relationship to clock time can be managed and maintained. The most important theoretical implication of these various uses of time is then the way that the relationship between them not only constructs the "now" for the player in the game world but does so in response to the actual "now" of their everyday life. The augmentation of the now, the presentness of the subject in time may then well be what will lead us out of the culture of speed that has been so far associated with technology, into an era which the human is not only augmented prosthetically, socially and spatially, but also temporally. This, in turn, may lead to a new digital economy in which work, creativity and entertainment may become substantially more integrated into one another and in which the management of our *oikos* (house), and implicitly of our *Dasein*, will depend on our ability to perform creatively across temporalities.

NOTES

1. S. Benford, S. (ed.) "WP12: City as Theatre Deliverable D12.4 Evaluation of the first City as Theatre Public Performance." Version 2 Release date: 10 February 2006. Available online: http://www.pervasive-gaming.org/index_swf.html (accessed 17/6/06), p. 10 and p. 43.

2. M. Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, tr. J. Halliday (Cambridge: CUP, 1991 [1977]), p. 289, p. 290.

3. P. Thomson, "Games and Plays—An Approach to Ionesco," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 22:1 (March 1970), 64–65. original emphasis.
 4. N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2004), p. 131, p. 132 and p. 134.
 5. M. Castells, M. Fernández-Ardèvol, J. Linchuam Qiu, A. Sey, *Mobile Communication and Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), p. 176,
 6. J. Attali, *Histoires du temps* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), our translation, pp. 247–48.
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