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12/20/2006  
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## Postmortem – Pursuit New York

### **Ideation**

To conclude the keynote panel discussion at the *Come Out and Play Festival* in September, Nick Fortugno, a game designer at GameLab, delivered a rousing speech on the political and social ramifications of the use of streets as public space. In particular, he remarked that the demarcation of a contained, fenced-in area for “legal” protests during the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York was an ominous sign that our rights to use public space are being stripped from us. He argued that games that are played in the streets, such as those featured at the *Come Out and Play Festival*, are one way to take back what is ours in the truest sense of democracy and collective ownership.<sup>1</sup>

While I do not share Nick's passion for such games as a political statement, I do feel that creating such games is a fascinating way to explore interactivity between players and their environment as well as between players and non-participants of the game. In my opinion, these games provide a nice contrast to conventional digital console and online games because they lay a game interaction and narrative on top of objects and places that participants can already experience in their every day lives. Perhaps these games rely on some use of technology to facilitate the game play, but the heart of the game experience often approaches interactions that we may have enjoyed playing as children, such as “tag”, “capture the flag”, or “hide and seek.”

Finding precedents and sources of inspiration for this genre of games was not too difficult as the field has gained traction in recent years. I do feel that there is much to be explored in this area, though, which makes the idea of working on such a project so very exciting. For the sake of narrowing my

scope to something that would be manageable in the time that I was given to complete the project, I decided to take an existing game, *Live Action Super Scotland Yard (L.A.S.S.Y)*<sup>2</sup>, and focus on how I may adapt the game to Manhattan as well as consider how technology may be used to further push the interactions that I find compelling.

## **Research**

Because of the tight deadline, I wanted to explore some of the technology while I worked out the interactivity and game mechanics. My first step involved speaking to the Parsons team that developed *Spy Text* for the *Come Out and Play Festival* this year. Matt Plotecher, one of the designers of the project, explained how they used paper prototyping to work out some of the spatial relationships that might be involved when participants take to running around large public spaces. He also told me to be aware of conditions and situations that are out of my control (e.g., dangerous weather conditions, a subway train breaking down).

Matt suggested that I contact Joel Friesen, the creator of *L.A.S.S.Y.*, to gain insight on his experiences playing and running the game in Toronto. To my surprise and delight, I exchanged a few emails with Joel, where he discussed his design process and his feelings on the game dynamics. He explained that his game created two experiences, one for the players of “hide and go seek”, and one for the dispatches of playing a large board game with live moving pieces. He said that my idea to use voiceXML was “creepy”, but also interesting. I knew, at this point, that using technology to replace the dispatchers, which effectively gives the players all the agency in the game, would provide more of the game experience that I sought.

I also discussed my idea with my game design instructor Nick Fortugno. Nick recommended that I contact Greg Tefry at GameLab, who was one of the designers for *Payphone Warriors*, a game at the *Come Out and Play Festival* that employed asterisk server to support voice interactivity. Over

email, Greg described the mechanics of his game and detail as well as how the technology supported the game play and scoring. He gave me suggestions on how I might create the user interaction for my game, and he told me that he wants to play it when it is done, which was very encouraging.

Although user testing would be crucial, I wanted to explore the possibility of voice as a method for interacting with the game system and the other players. To this end, I contacted Dennis Yuen, the lead designer of *Talking Street* ([www.talkingstreet.com](http://www.talkingstreet.com)), which features voiceXML to deliver location-based narratives of urban environments to users over cellphones. Since Nick and Greg had mentioned asterisk server to support voice interactivity, I also wanted to get Dennis' opinion on the various technologies. Dennis told me that asterisk server could be challenging to setup and would be more appropriate for a thesis project, which probably saved me a lot of time. I was set to start exploring voiceXML.

## **Planning and Discovery**

With my deadline quickly approaching, I knew that I had to solidify the interactions with the mobile phones quickly if I was to complete a play test before my final presentation. When I presented my user flow schematics to class, I was disappointed to hear that I had much more work to do on exploring the best user experience for the game. Eric Raymond points to a Harvard Business School study in the *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* that when held to a strict deadline, “quality goes out the window....”<sup>3</sup> With this in mind, I wanted to avoid creating a bad game for the sake of completing a deliverable for my final presentation. Morry stressed the importance of focusing on the interaction before considering technology, so I decided that I would need to solve two problems. The first is the interaction with the mobile device. The second is the actual game mechanics and balancing. I would have to determine the former before working with any technology. I would have to iterate through versions of the later before I could confidently play test the game in the public transit system of

Manhattan as I had intended.

I set out to create two prototypes to test voice interactivity as well as text messaging to compare and contrast the users' experiences with both methods. With the small user pool that I tested with, I found that voice was not too taxing, and that an option to press keys rather than speaking would be helpful. I also set out to start testing game mechanics by sending SMS information blasts from my email account to players as they played a turn-based version of the game on paper. At this point in the project, I decided that I would focus more on the interactivity with the mobile device rather than focus on refining the game. For that reason, I decided not to move forward with testing game mechanics at this time.

## **Development**

Based on advice from Dennis, I decided to move forward with building a prototype with Cafe BeVocal, which provides a development platform for voiceXML applications. I was quickly able to get a simple prototype working and shared my results with some friends and my classmates. The feedback was quite positive and I felt encouraged to explore the technology further, both for this project and for other other projects. By the time of my final presentation, I was able to integrate the voiceXML with PHP and MySQL to create simple proof of concept that my intended interaction could be possible. Text messaging was also supported through PHP and sendmail. I was pleased to get a proof of concept working so quickly, and I hope to continue developing the back-end to the point where I may be ready to play test on a small scale, perhaps between 55 W. 13<sup>th</sup> St and 2 W. 13<sup>th</sup> St and different floors and rooms within these two New School buildings.

## **Critique**

I got a lot of valuable feedback on my presentation. Much of the feedback had to do with ways

in which the game may break down. I felt that feedback of that nature was to be expected because I did not spend as much time focusing and iterating through the game design. Nevertheless, it will be imperative to consider those issues as I move forward with the game and play testing. Florian Fangohr also mentioned the possibility of visualizing location data over Google Maps on mobile devices. While I do think that could be a helpful way to visualizing game information in real-time, I also do not want to confine the game to specific devices, such as phones with large screens that require Flash Lite, Java, or a compliant web browser. My current interactivity focuses on voice and text which are supported by more phones and more closely align with my design goal. After presenting, I also spoke with Kyle about a web interface with Google Maps where users may participate with the game from a browser. Again, I felt that the idea is interesting, but moves away from my focus of giving the players who are running around the city full agency to play the game.

The other questions that I received related to clarification on my project and my design criteria. These questions indicated to me that my presentation was not clear and that I did use my time effectively to highlight the key points that are necessary to understand my project. In the future, I will need to consider practicing my presentation from the perspective of timing and relevance.

### **Related Projects:**

Two related projects from the world of new media and gaming are *Can you See Me Now* (2001)<sup>4</sup> by Blast Theory and *Mob Zombies* (2006)<sup>5</sup> by William Carter, Aaron Myers, and William Bredbeck. Both games are augmented reality games (ARG), which means that the game combines virtual elements with interaction in a real physical space. In *Can You See Me Now*, 20 online players attempt to evade capture by runners equipped with gps devices that are navigating a real physical space.



The runners carry walkie-talkies, which transmit audio to the online players. This game, through its use of gps technology and its blend of reality with remote players, is quite different from my project, but the collaborative strategy and communication between the runners is similar to the behavior that I would like to elicit from my game. In addition, the runners will have to heed obstacles and challenges while navigating the physical space, which is very much how envision my game working.

*Mob Zombies* also deals with navigating a physical space, but it is on a smaller scale. Players move around a space where their positions are determined by sensors.



A handheld device communicates their position in the virtual world in relationship to virtual zombies. The goal of the game is to avoid the zombies for as long as possible. This game is also quite different from my game in terms of the virtual context for enemies, such as zombies. Also, the game is only social in that a player must avoid bumping into another player in the same space, but otherwise the focus is on the player's own position and its effect on the system. Although virtual objects are not currently a part of my game mechanics, it might be worth exploring. I can see a situation where Mr. X could leave a “bomb” at one location. If one of the detectives visits the location shortly thereafter, he could be killed and forced back to headquarters.

### **References:**

1. Self, noted while in attendance at the *Come Out and Play Festival*, 9/26/2006.
2. Joel Friesen, (*Live Action Super Scotland Yard (L.A.S.S.Y.)*),  
[http://www.culturehole.com/blog\\_commento.asp?blog\\_id=14](http://www.culturehole.com/blog_commento.asp?blog_id=14)
3. Eric Raymond, *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*(O'Reilly, 2001), p. 30.
4. Blast Theory, *Can You See Me Now?*, [http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work\\_cysmn.html](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_cysmn.html)
5. Mob Zombies Team, *Mob Zombies*, <http://www.mobzombies.com/>