

No. 28

'Day of the Figurines with Blast Theory'

in Digital Resources: Performance Research. 11:4. 2007, pp. 148-151.

In Autumn 2006, I was co-editing this issue on 'Digital Resources' for Performance Research. I had seen 'Day of the Figurines' in Berlin early that year, thought it was fitting the theme of the issue and was also looking for an opportunity to reconnect with Blast Theory who had been important to my research at an earlier stage. Therefore, I proposed to include this short dialogue with Matt Adams.

Performance Research is a specialist journal published by Routledge that promotes a dynamic interchange between scholarship and practice in an expanding field of performance. Interdisciplinary in vision and international in scope, its emphasis is on research in contemporary performance arts within changing cultures. Source: <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/13528165.asp> (accessed 7 May 2010).

Day of the Figurines

BLAST THEORY (MATT ADAMS) AND
SCOTT DELAHUNTA

Day Of The Figurines (DOTF) is set in a fictional town that is littered, dark and underpinned with steady decay. The game unfolds over twenty four days, each day representing an hour in the life of the town that shifts from the mundane to the cataclysmic: the local vicar opens a summer fete, Scandinavian metallists play a gig at the Locarno that goes horribly wrong while an occupying army appears on the High Street.

How players respond to these events and to each other creates and sustains a community during the course of a single day. From the gasometer to Product Barn, the canal to the Rat Research Institute, up to a thousand players roam the streets, defining themselves through their interactions.

The centrepiece of the game is a vast model town installed as a game board in a public space - created using silhouettes of buildings, cut and folded from the metal tabletop. Each of the thousand players is represented by a small plastic figurine, which is moved by hand every hour for the duration of the game. To begin the game, players are invited to select their own figurine and create a **biography** for it including answering questions about its past and future and how it is represented to other players. They then see their figurine placed in the model town. Thereafter game participation is via mobile phone, with players receiving a minimum of one text (SMS) a day updating them on the progress of their figurine and inviting them to make increasingly challenging decisions regarding the fate of themselves and other players. The

goal of the game is 'to help others' and texting messages to other players may provide opportunities to do this.

DOTF continues Blast Theory's enquiry into the nature of public participation within artworks and within electronic spaces.¹ Using emergent behaviour and social dynamics as a means of structuring a live event, Blast Theory's work invites participants to establish their own codes of behaviour and morality within a parallel world. One of the unique aspects of DOTF, compared to earlier works such as 'Can You See Me Now?' (2001) or 'Uncle Roy All Around You' (2003), is that it deliberately targets low-end phones. The game is playable on any phone that is able to receive SMS, which embeds the game much more deeply in the players' daily lives. With up to a thousand players, managing the interactions is accomplished using sophisticated **orchestration** tools developed especially for DOTF.²

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

The player biography is an important piece of information in the overall game framework. Can you say something about how you decided what information to collect?

The player biography is critical and we spent many months revising the five questions that are asked. All five questions are entered into the game database and are then available for use as part of messages generated for the player. The advantage of a twenty-four day game is that the

¹ Blast Theory: <http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/> accessed 14 May 2007.

² For more information on the research and development of DOTF see: The Presence Project <http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/627> accessed 14 May 2007.

long time period that may elapse between a player providing us with this information and the game using it back to them adds to the sense that the game is personalised for that player. When registering for the game, each player sits at a web terminal next to the board with their chosen figurine mounted on a metal plate next to them and writes their answers into the appropriate fields. We finally settled on this technique having used written cards and face-to-face interviews in previous iterations because it gives the player the most time to arrive at answers that are right for them.

I'd like to explain each of the questions:

Q1 Describe a special place from their childhood?

This provides the figurine with a history; it locates them in time and space. It is also filled with an emotional resonance and is open for the player to interpret very widely.

Q2 How would they like to be remembered?

This projects forwards in time and suggests even at the outset that the figurine may die. It invokes feelings of mortality and legacy.

Q3 Name someone they feel safe with?

This establishes the figurine as part of a social world in which relationships matter. By

referring to safety it suggests that risk and danger may be ahead. And, as with their own figurine, the choice of a name provides a huge opportunity for subtle expression with only a single word.

Q4 What's their distinctive feature?

Some players refer directly to their plastic figurine as a way of choosing this answer and thus link their fictional representation in the previous answers with their physical representation on the board.

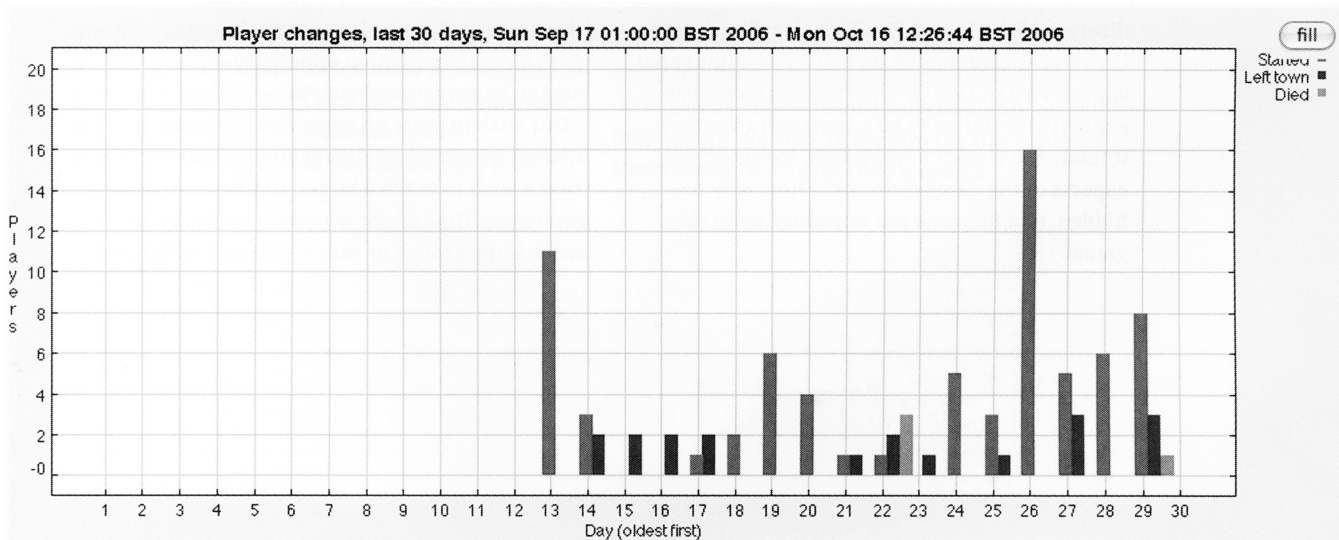
Q5 What kind of shoes are they wearing?

A throw-away finish to undercut some of the previous answers. Shoes are distinctive and expressive and are used easily within the game to describe players.

THE GAME BOARD

To participate in the game, an individual has to come to a particular location, fill in a biography and select a figurine to be placed on a physical game board, which represents the fictional town. Why the elaborate creation of physical materials?

The board provides a significant threshold for entry into the game: players must make a



journey to the board and choose a figurine before they can join the game. And the board then establishes the mood for the piece. Because the game is usually played through the narrow channel of SMS in which we cannot even author the font in which the text is displayed we felt that the board can provide a rich and stimulating aesthetic experience at the outset to imprint the geography of the town into the minds of players. It also retains a performative aspect: players see each other joining, they witness the moving of the figurines.

The board almost acts as an inversion of location-based games such as in some of our earlier work (e.g. 'Can You See Me Now?'). The figurines appear to be bound by Cartesian space as they are moved around the board while the players roam free sending and receiving SMS wherever they are. It is essentially a display for a digital world.

The game as a whole is sited within a gallery or museum, is created by artists and sits within a body of game related work by those artists. As a result it is our intention to lure players into observations, reflections and experiences that they would not usually get in a game and the board is a critical part of that process.

Steve Benford, our long-time collaborator and director of the Mixed Reality Lab at Nottingham University, commented on this: 'The augmented game board in *Day Of The Figurines* has been explicitly designed to be a spectator interface, intended to attract new players, to reveal aspects of the game that would normally be hidden, and to frame the introduction to the game'.

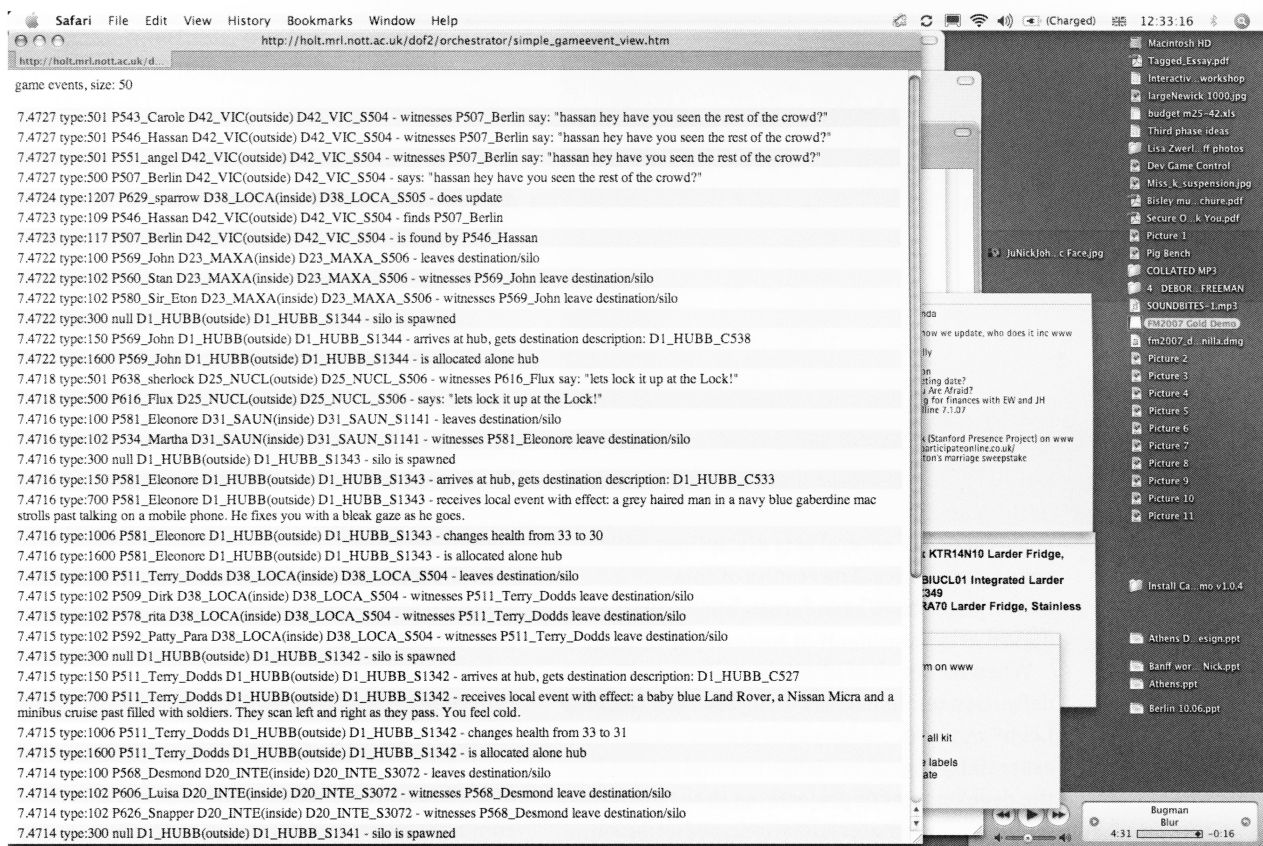
ORCHESTRATION TOOLS

Can you briefly describe what 'orchestration' is and how it relates to the idea of 'scaling up' gameplay? And how does your work as artists collide and/or blend with the objectives of a more commercially orientated project?

Orchestration refers to the tools and techniques employed during the course of a game to manage player's experience. This might be as simple as providing help to a player who is stuck or might be as complex as creating a fictitious player who interacts with a player to give them a particular game experience. We have used orchestration techniques in all of our games. For example in 'Can You See Me Now?' we can move players in the queue when they are waiting to play, we can throw them out of the game and we can alter the distance needed for a runner to catch a player.

However because DOTF runs over twenty four days, uses very short discrete game events (sending SMS) and moves slowly it provides a very rich opportunity for orchestration. And because it is designed for up to a thousand players we have needed tools to give us a picture of what is happening in the game. So we have graphs that show how many messages have been sent in the last ten minutes, in the last twenty four hours and in the last twenty four days. This gives a crude indication of activity in the game but can be surprisingly useful.

Our wish to scale up comes less from an interest in commercialising our work and more from a wish to reach a larger audience on their own terms. How might we create artworks in which large groups of people interact with one



another in a rich and nuanced way? That this piece runs on players' own mobile phones is a big achievement for us because mobile phones are extremely hostile spaces for game innovation, as we learnt when making 'I Like

Frank' (2004) for 3G phones. Trust, community and democracy are frequently bandied about in discussions of new media and communication technology. We seek to explore the limits of these ideals in *Day Of The Figurines*.