The Peoples Republic of Monsters

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ABSTRACT

Free All Monsters is a location-based game that turns a players iPhone into a Magic Monstervision Machine through which they can spot invisible monsters lurking in our city streets. The game draws upon Lefebvre's concept of 'the right to the city' by encouraging the appropriation of the everyday space in which the game is played. It achieves this by presenting players with lusory goals anchored to the actual environmental conditions relating to that particular space, and at that particular moment in time, rather than the desires of the designer or controller of that space. Further, these goals are not defined by us as 'the designers' of the game but by their fellow players who can put into practice their own interplay between context and situation by setting their own monsters free. In relation to role of monsters on the mechanics of the game we reject the Gothic view of monsters in favour of the Japanese tradition of yōkai. Therefore for us Monstrous' is not used in relation to being 'hideous or frightful' but rather relates to the collecting and cataloguing of these fabulous imaginary creatures. As there is no limit to the number of monsters that can be set free we intend the game itself to become monstrous, on a gigantic scale, self generating and beyond our control.

Keywords

Games, mobile, location, magic circle, monsters, yōkai.

CITIES AS GAME SPACES

Digital games as cultural artefacts have been variously considered as rule-bound ludic activities [Salen and Zimmermann, 2003], interactive narratives [Frasca, 2003], transmedia combinations of these [Juul, 2005], or a systems operating as procedural rhetoric [Bogost, 2008]. Each of these definitions either implicitly or explicitly assumes that games are/have taken place in a game space often described as the 'Magic Circle'. Where the concept of the magic circle within games studies came in common use through the games designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman use of the phrase in their book Rules of Play [Salen and Zimmermann, 2003] which they themselves adapted from

Huizinga's more general description in Homo Ludens [Huizinga, 2008 (originally published in 1944)] for *'the place dedicated to the performance of an act apart'*. While these play spaces are often explicitly defined by the computer game world, physical game board, or every chalk lines on the pavement there are games, such as a children's game of hide and seek, were the magic circle is more fluid and often under constant negotiation between players. A common criticism of the magic circle definition is that it is too literal and divorces games from the influence of the outside world although neither Huizinga [Aarseth, 2011] or Salen and Zimmerman either explicitly or intentionally sought to create such a view and indeed Eric Zimmerman has tried to expel this myth by stating that the magic circle should be treated as *'the relatively simple idea that when a game is being played, new meanings are generated. These meanings mix elements intrinsic to the game and elements outside the game'* [Zimmerman, 2012]. It is this more fluid and permeable view of the magic circle that is most applicable to the game described within this paper that use real world locations to form a game space. Such games are often described as 'pervasive gaming' although terms such as mixed reality, augmented reality, alternate reality, ubiquitous games, location based games, big games, and urban Live Action Role Play (LARP) (to name but a few) are often used to differentiate certain aspects of such games. In many respects the term pervasive games has also fallen foul of the rigid magic circle myth as they are described in terms of *'extending and blurring the spatial, temporal and social borders of the magic circle'* [Montola et al 2009]. We would align with Nieuwdrop in that we should first decide *'what makes a game pervasive?'* [Nieuwdorp 2007] before using this distinction and indeed prefer to use the older term mobile location based games as pervasive games is now predominantly represented by urban LARPs.

Steffen Walz reframed the spaces created by location-based games as 'Playces' through his analytical framework of games as architectures [Walz, 2010]. In this work Walz highlights Henrí Lefebvre's concept of Rhythmanalysis *"Everywhere there is an interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy there is a rhythm"* [Lefebvre, 2004] which Borden suggests relates to the psychological concept of "flow" [Borden 2001] developed by Csíkszentmihályi [Csíkszentmihályi, 1975]. Flow is an oft-cited desirable quality for games, if they are to maintain player engagement over a sustained period, as it constantly seeks to keep a player at the edge of their abilities . By equating these two concepts it appears to be suggest that if location based games are to be engaging, the physical space must also be viewed in relation to how it aligns with the flow of the game play. Whilst this seems useful for the many location based games that utilize avoid and/or chase as their core game mechanic[1] [Rashid et al, 2006] it seems less relevant for games such as Geocaching[2] where social exploration and discovery are seen as the core mechanics [O'Hara, 2008]. As Free All Monsters draws inspiration from the game mechanics and player motivations of Geocaching we will draw instead from

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[1] Game mechanics are the rules, processes, and data at the heart of a game, they define how play progresses, what happens when, and what conditions determine victory of defeat. [Adams and Dormans, 2012].

[2] Geocaching is a real-world outdoor treasure hunting game in which players use GPS enabled devices to try and hidden containers, called geocaches, which often contain small items or trinkets. Players are expected to take and item and leave one in return and then share the details online.

Lefebvre's triad spatial model which includes: Social Space (representational space), Physical space (spatial practice), and Mental Space (representations of space) [Lefebvre, 1991]. Where physical space refers to the concrete space people encounter in their daily environment and mental space refers to conceived constructions of space. Social space is the complex combination of perceived and conceived space. In terms of location based games they facilitate the move by player from conceived space of the designer to the perceived and lived space of the game. Further, in the case of Free All Monsters players can also take a role in the conception of the space. Lefebvre further uses these concepts of space in relation to urban life of a cities inhabitants in particular *'the right to the city'* of its citadins[3] [Lefebvre 1996]. This right to the city is further enshrined within the right to participation and the right to appropriation. Whereas the right to participation maintains that citadins should play a central role in any decision making around urban space, appropriation is not only the right to occupy urban space, it is also the right to produce urban space so that it meets the needs of citadins [Purcell 2002]. Therefore we would argue that only location based games that include their players within the creation of the rules of the game, rather than those that restrict players to the limits imposed by designers of a game, would conform to Lefebvre's appropriation and produces an alternate, but commensurate, definition of Walz's Playces [Walz, 2010].

ROLE OF MONSTERS IN GAMES

In the same way as the use of space has been considered in relation to the game mechanics chosen it can also be argued the experience of the monsters within a game is also related to the games mechanics. For example in the zombie inspired pervasive game 2.8 hrs Later[4] for Slingshot the mechanic is primarily *'avoid'* whilst the game rules drive you towards ever more dangerous situations. The player experience can therefore be considered analogous to reading Gothic literature in that it readily switches the experience between the concepts of horror and terror. The distinction between these characteristics is that terror is the feeling of dread that precedes a horrific event whereas horror is the feeling of revulsion after something frightening is seen, heard, or experienced. Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe said that whereas terror *'expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life'*, horror, *'freezes and nearly annihilates them'* [Radcliffe 1826]. The experience this provides the players conforms to one of the four forms of play, Illinx, defined by Roger Caillois in Man, Play, and Games [Caillois, 2001]. Where illinx creates a temporary disruption of perception, as with vertigo, dizziness, or the disorienting changes in direction of movement of roller coasters. There is apparently a saying amongst roller coaster designers that *'fear minus death equals fun '* [Schell, 2008] and in this case being chased by zombies in real world settings without being eaten alive would seem to be in the same vein. It's worth noting that horror is a common theme in video games and there are hundreds of zombie themed games in particular that all utilise illinx and terror as primary factors.

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[3] Lefebvre's emphasizes the difference between the French world for citizen (*citoyen*) and the word for urban inhabitant (*citadin*).

[4] http://slingshoteffect.co.uk/ourgames/28-28hourslater

In Free All Monsters the player experience of the monsters more closely resembles the cryptozoology[5] that forms the basis of games such as Pokemon[6] or Digimon[7]. The game designer behind Pokemon, Satoshi Tajiri, in a rare interview in Time cited his adventures collecting bugs as a child as a major inspiration for his creation of the game [Time World 1999]. The culture of collecting and cataloguing is very old within Japan and evident in the their tradition of yōkai which was revitalized in 1959 by legendary manga artist Mizuki Shigeru and no doubt also influenced Tajiri. Although yōkai are often simply equated to monsters in the West, in Japan no formal definition is usually provided but rather a list of examples are used to illustrate the complexity of yōkai. As Michael Dylan Foster states *'the meaning of yōkai, their very existence, comes only with naming, listing, and organizing'* as they are *'a presence characterized by absence'* the naming and listing is *'driven by a desire to make concrete this abstract, absent presence, to make visible this invisibility'* [Foster 2009]. As will be discussed when we consider design of Free All Monsters, the game facilitates both the creation of individual identities for monsters and their categorization, together with the ability to make visible the invisible in an analogous manner to the early Japanese who catalogued yōkai. Therefore the monsters within the game are not there to induce a feeling of illinx within players during game play but rather as a fun means of exploration and discovery within the space the game is being played. This also aligns with the fun element of the yōkai and they generally encompass both fear and fun and sometimes simultaneously appear both a serious danger and a plaything [Foster 2009]. The playfulness of yōkai appeared in texts of Toriyama Sekien who listed and illustrated over 200 yōkai in the eighteenth century in what Foster describes as a shift from an *'encyclopaedic mode'*, in which yōkai were recorded alongside all other parts of the natural world, to *'ludic mode'*, in which they were recorded separately including the more playful aspects of their natures [Foster 2009]. This shift coincided with a general change within the culture of Japan at that time brought about by factors such as: the rise of a mass consumer culture, the 'pax Tokugawa'[8], and growth of a leisure class [Foster 2009].

FREE ALL MONSTERS

Having introduced many of the concepts that have influenced the creation of the game Free All Monsters we shall now consider how these have been addressed within its design. The game is normally introduced by the following paragraph.

"There haven't always been great towns and cities, full of people hurrying to and fro to school or work. Where now stand shops, factories and offices were once streams, woods

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[5] Cryptozoology refers to the study of 'hidden' animals i.e ones whose existence has yet to be proved.

[6] Pokemon is a romanised contraction of the Pocket Monsters and refers to the media franchise created by Nintendo in 1996.

[7] Digimon short for Digital Monsters started out as a Tamagotchi style pet in Japan but is now a media franchise encompassing digital toys, anime, manga and video games.

[8] This terms relates relates a period when a family of shoguns ruled Japan from 1603 to 1867. The period marked by centralized feudalism, the growth of urban centers, exclusionary policies against the West, and a rise in literacy.

and hillsides. And every one of those places, even the loneliest tree standing by itself on the moors, had a monster to guard it. The place belonged to the monster, and the monster belonged to the place. So when towns and cities were built, the monsters had to stay, trapped under the tall buildings made of brick and stone and concrete. And there they remained, for hundreds of years. Until now...FREE ALL MONSTERS!"

This description emphasizes the playful nature of the game and was deemed preferable to a more technical perspective as we felt this would be more appealing to a wider demographic and in particular to the family audience who seem to be embracing geo-caching. The game currently offers two means of participation, through users creating the monsters that populate the game and/or spotting monsters using the Magic Monstervision Machine[9] (mobile application) which in turn populate their field guide as shown in the following Figure 1.

Figure 1: Screen shots for Free All Monsters iPhone App.

Spotting a monster requires a player to co-locate themselves within 50m of the monsters shown on their screen, which then adds it to their field guide. The game is populated by players drawing a picture of a monsters and then uploading them to the game using the application were they also add the contextual setting for the monster (time, date, weather, position). As this is not simply creating the image of the monsters but also its operational context, which effectively form part of the operational rules of the game, we would argue that this conforms to Lefebvre's definition of appropriating the city. We would note that user creativity is not new to computer games whose early evolution owes much to the amateur programmer [Kent 2001] but is most often associated with Modding[10] and Machinima[11] which first appeared in the 1980s and we are therefore merely extending such practices to location based games.

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[9] Available for download http://itunes.com/apps/FreeAllMonsters

[10] Modding is a slang expression derived from the verb 'modify' and in gaming generally refers to user created levels or in some cases whole games.

[11] Machinima is the use of real-time graphics engines (generally from computer games) to generate animations.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have considered 'Performing Monstrosity in the City' in relation to the location based game Free All Monsters and examined the space in which the game is played in relation to Lefebvre's right to the city in particular the ability for players to appropriate spaces to play the game. We have argued that the game mechanics used within location-based must be designed to allow such appropriation otherwise players are operating in a space effectively controlled by the game designer. Further we have considered the role of monster within such games and how the nature of the monster is also directly related to the mechanics of the game. Whereas the Gothic view of monster is useful for producing games that utilise illinx and terror the Japanese tradition of yōkai produces a more playful operation based on collecting. Given that video games have become a major feature of the cultural landscape that extend beyond the games themselves such that we can now see their aesthetic and iconography represented in the other main forms of media: film, books and television they are no doubt having an effect on our notion of monster and through location-based games perhaps our notions of the city.

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