Games

PEGGY WEIL

"As a participant you enter Palazzo Zenobio to find a phone. Press dial and a man on a video link answers. He asks you to put on a pair of sunglasses. He guides you out of the gallery and into the city. He asks you to choose between Eamon, a Customs Agent from Northern Ireland with four children, and Ulrike, a journalist and single mother based in Berlin. As you walk you receive a number of phone calls. It becomes clear that now you are the person you have chosen. It is you who has lived under cover, who has spied, who has robbed and killed. You have made the ultimate decision to risk your life to change the world."

Thus begins your experience of *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant*, a project by Blast Theory at the De La Warr Pavilion for the 2009 Venice Biennale. *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant* belongs to an emerging genre of work, known as "pervasive gaming," that uses the city as game space. The genre has theatrical roots, particularly in street theater, improv, performance art, and literature. The current near ubiquity of GPS-enabled mobile phones has enabled a new form of outdoor games by inserting player position in physical and virtual space into the hybrid playground of mixed reality. Unlike traditional games that unfold in urban space—such as marathons or the college craze for zombie tag—pervasive gaming is a heady remix of club and fan cultures, online gaming, social networking, and mobile technology.

In the past century, the daring high-wire and skyscraping feats of Philippe Petit, "human spider" Alain Robert, and the urban parkour/free-running movements transformed city towers, walls, and obstacles into props and game pieces, inviting a recontextualization of urban space. Pervasive gaming similarly transmutes the familiar, but with the added dimension of networked play that heightens players' perspectives beyond the built landscape to form new urban social and cultural constructions.

Pervasive games include alternate reality games (ARGs), live-action role-playing games (LARPs), locative media, and humble street games. They range in complexity from no- or low-tech to intricate virtual environment systems known as *mixed and augmented reality*. They make their appearance boldly as art and theatre in *biennales* and festivals—or furtively, as clues teased from fan media that lead down an entry point known as a "rabbit hole." No matter how sophisticated, these events draw from familiar play motifs: tag, races of all kinds, stunts, treasure and scavenger hunts, puzzles, charades, and the huge menu of trust and comedy exercises from improvisational theater.

ARGs are generally characterized by their use of the environment to tell a story through multiple sources ranging from movie posters to the use of phones, fax, email, Internet sites, GPS, and mobile technology. This type of ARG is a

ABOVE and TOP: A participant in Blast Theory's *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant* receives phoned instructions at the 2009 Venice Biennale, and proceeds into the city to play the game.

"distributed narrative"—imagine that every object or message delivery system in the local and global environment is potentially a piece of the puzzle or story. To make sense of such a widely dispersed narrative, one must marshal the "hive mind" to put the pieces together again. Signature ARGs such as *The Beast* and *I Love Bees* (the former promoting the film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* and the latter promoting the computer game *Halo 2*) planted clues in jars of honey, movie trailers, and messages delivered from payphones scattered around the globe. Other ARGs launch a narrative premise to provoke a "mass collective imagining" as in *World Without Oil* where players uploaded online journals of their actions and thoughts inspired by the as-if conditions of peak oil. ARGs introduced the concept of TINAG, or "This is not a game," to refer to the deliberate conflation of a player's so-called real life as differentiated from the voluntary and conscious participation within the boundaries described by a game's "magic circle."

LARPing grew out of the tabletop Dungeons and Dragons games of the 1970s into large role-playing reenactments of fantasy fiction. LARPers immerse themselves in character and setting for extended periods of time, improvising narrative according to rule-based direction. Influenced by *Dogme 95*, there is a Scandinavian LARP Manifesto, which applies theory and aesthetics to a growing practice most recently employed by Brody Condon in the 2008 Sonsbeek Festival.

Informed by the outdoor adventure movement, one of the key city games of the new century debuted in a dream in 2000. San Francisco–based Ian Fraser, a former Outward Bound leader, reports that he experienced a "vivid dream" that he was navigating the city in a magic helmet. He shared his dream with Finnegan Kelly and together they created *The Go Game* and marketed it as a team-building experience. They transformed Fraser's magic helmet into a "Super Hero Lunch Box," containing a cell phone, digital camera, and map. The game, loosely modeled after a scavenger hunt with elements of improv and puzzles, sends teams on missions to scour their neighborhood for clues, solve puzzles, and interact with actors planted strategically through the area to pose riddles and judge tasks received, via cell phone, from Game Headquarters. The highly competitive missions are timed and judged, seeding new relationships with uninhibited street performance—team-*play*, not teamwork.

New York City's *Come Out & Play Festival* (held additionally in Amsterdam) and San Francisco's SFZero emphasize social networking. *Come Out & Play*, founded by Catherine Herdlick in 2006, is a boisterous, all-out, all-hours,

As part of *The Go Game*'s 2009 Bollywood-themed game in San Francisco, two teams start the "Dance Off" mission, and 100 players perform the final scene of their Bollywood movie.

ABOVE and TOP: Photos by Anne Brassier.

ABOVE RIGHT: Photo by Amanda Boggs. BELOW RIGHT: Photo by Finnegan Kelly.

A team playing "Day in the Park" during the 2009 *Come Out and Play Festival* in Central Park, New York City. The teams work to solve huge tangrams to create their ideal day in the park.

romp-in-the-streets festival promising "to bring together a public eager to rediscover the world around them through play." This June's festival scattered 34 games throughout Times Square, Pier 84, Central Park, and Brooklyn, awarding not only the game players but also the game designers in categories from "Best Use of Technology" and "Best Narrative" to "Best Use of Space."
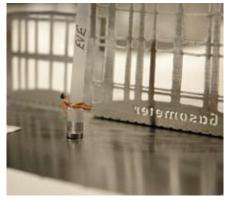
Billed as a "Collaborative Production Game," *SFZero*, launched by Ian Kizu-Blair and Sam Lavigne in 2006, enjoins players to create characters, complete and invent tasks, and keep score while "meeting new people, exploring the city, and participating in non-consumer leisure activities." The collaborators' website displays a continuous stream of new tasks as well as documentation of completed tasks. As an example, for "75+405 points" you might be instructed to "totally replace a public sign (the bigger the better) with a modified version." The result, attached to your social profile, draws comment, starting conversation. *SFZero* is pervasive in that it is continuous: Players incorporate their characters and missions into ongoing social relationships.

Commissioned by the University of Minnesota Design Institute in 2003, *Big Urban Game*, known as *B.U.G.*, is the

most literal model of city-as-board-game. Designers Frank Lantz, Katie Salen, and Nick Fortugno, when challenged to create an experience that would "change people's perspective of urban space," created 25-foot tall inflatable pieces and designed an old-fashioned, if unwieldy, five-day race through a route determined by community votes to a toll-free phone line. Lantz, of Area/Code, a company that makes cross-media games and entertainment, writes: "By drastically reframing the familiar territory of the players' urban environment, the game forced them to see that environment with fresh eyes." The experience even inspired the writing of a "Big Games Manifesto."

Area/Code followed *B.U.G.* with *Pac-Manhattan*, produced by students in the Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) at New York University in 2004, bringing the beloved console game *Pac-Man* to life in the streets of Manhattan. As in the computer version, *Pac-Manhattan* navigates a maze, his

LEFT TO RIGHT: *B.U.G.* players in downtown Minneapolis, 2003; Blast Theory, *Day of the Figurines*, 2006, Berlin; *We Like Your Bike* sign, posted by a *SFZero* game player in Chicago, 2006.

ABOVE: Photo by Jim Bearden. BELOW (LEFT TO RIGHT): Photo courtesy University of Minnesota Design Institute; Photo courtesy the artist; Photo by Dax Tran-Cafee.

Photo courtesy the artists.

progress measured by his consumption of the little white dots lining the route as threatening ghosts give chase. In this version, however, the Pac-Man and ghost characters are human, wearing large bright costumes, while the dots are virtual and visible only to the player controllers tracking the runners via Wi-Fi. The *Pac-Manhattan* website posts the rules, encouraging worldwide localization of the game.

Blast Theory artists Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr, and Nick Tandavanitj cite theater and club culture among their early influences and design deliberately to blur the boundaries between the physical and virtual landscapes. As in *Pac-Manhattan*, their 2001 work *Can You See Me Now* overlays the real street with a virtual map but with virtual runners chased by (physical) street runners using Wi-Fi and mobile devices. As Adams describes:

> It's a chase played simultaneously online (by the public) and in the streets (by assigned participants). You're dropped into a virtual city, you use avatars to navigate, and there's a chat interface so that real-world and online participants can text one another. You're chased in the real city and the virtual city, at the same time. Three runners on the street are equipped with PDAs, GPS devices, and walkie-talkies.

Playing on a computer screen, your avatar is chased by physical runners on the city streets. Virtual players, ostensibly safe at home, possibly thousands of miles away in Tokyo or Seattle, are not safe from their physical pursuers on the street of London. Tagging involves taking and uploading a photo of the physical location corresponding to the virtual—confronting the player with evidence of her inhabited yet unembodied, location. Blast Theory adds pathos to the chase by theatrically exploiting a bit of personal history gleaned during game registration: Your earlier answer to, "Is there someone you haven't seen for a long time that you still think of?" is broadcast as you are tagged; the name of your missing person is called out in that space where your avatar was caught, longing for a distant connection.

Uncle Roy All Around You, which premiered in 2003 and won that year's Golden Nica at the Ars Electronica Festival, continued Blast Theory's blurring of the physical and virtual city. Players, stripped of their possessions, are sent on an hourlong mission to find Uncle Roy. Online players, inhabiting a virtual version of the same city, are also looking for Uncle Roy. Messages fly and are recorded, social interactions ensue.

Day of the Figurines, billed as an "MMG for SMS" (massively multiplayer game using the SMS messaging protocol), premiered in Berlin 2006. In this game, Blast Theory returned the city-as-game-board to its rightful scale as a miniature in a museum gallery. Players adopt a physical figurine, endow it with a name and identity, and immerse themselves for 24 days in the life of a fictional town. Players interact with the game, their positions updated on the physical game board via SMS messages sent to their phone at intervals during the day. Spectators participate in the game by following as the figurines are moved, tracking players' physical movements, on the miniature game board, an elaborate augmented reality system developed at Nottingham University's Mixed Reality Lab.

Reminiscent of the MUD (multi-user dungeon) and MOO (MUD, object oriented) games of the 1980s, it was designed as an interstitial experience, a game to be played in short bursts between other activities. It is pervasive in the sense that players' adopted characters occupy the in-between spaces in their lives in an episodic narrative with other members of the game community.

Participants serve as avatars for players from the general public in Blast Theory's *Can You See Me Now?* game in 2003. Learn more at www.blasttheory.co.uk.

Brody Condon, an artist steeped in the iconography of computer games, inserted a LARP production within the 2008 Sonsbeek International Festival the Netherlands. Twenty-six sculptures arrayed in a 160-acre park provided the setting for 30 LARPers to inhabit both a 40-foot tower (Condon's sculptural contribution) and an alternate narrative describing a futuristic landscape of structures (the artworks) calling for ritual celebration. The performers improvised their devotions amidst the artwork, creating a parallel existence with the viewing public whom they'd been instructed to consider as "ghosts." Setting the LARP within the larger spectacle, Condon has brought the game full circle back to its theatrical roots: the players wholly involved in their own play for benefit of the festival spectators. The lack of intersection between these wholly contained worlds added a dimension to both [see interview on page 36].

The fun and the aesthetics of pervasive gaming shouldn't obscure the role of big business. The "hive mind" required to solve ARGs positions them as viral marketing vehicles for the entertainment industry. Matt Adams' statements that *Day of the Figurines* is about "making an artwork that sits in your own pocket on your own personal device," and that "it is something that is very much about how an artwork could insinuate yourself into your daily life," take on another sense when one considers that Blast Theory's work is funded by the Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming (IPerG), which includes Nokia Research and Sony Europe. Is it the artwork or the telecom industry being insinuated into our pockets and our daily lives?

Yet celebration of the city and fresh perspective might be reason join the urban hunt: In 2003, following the rules proscribed by the Angel Project, Deborah Warner's theatrical urban treasure hunt through Manhattan, I read the advertisement directly in front of me in the packed subway car. It posed the question, *"Where are YOU Going?"*

Unsure, I glanced at the book held by the adjacent passenger. The title was *Neverwhere*. Random events both—neither question nor answer had been placed by Ms. Warner, yet, contextualized by her direction, they as well as I fell into place: The city revealed its poetry.

PEGGY WEIL, *based in northern California, is a digital media artist and designer focusing on interactive media, serious games, and immersive design.*