

PlayStation 2: Selling the Third Place

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ABSTRACT: As the “Third Place”, Sony markets its PlayStation 2 game platform as a new digital commons, as well as a surreal, dreamlike space. Simulated adventures are promoted as being preferable to physical experiences. While players connect to form gaming communities, online communities are becoming more like structured games. The result is a displacement of public space by privately owned and controlled electronic amusement parks.

KEYWORDS: video games, online gaming virtual community, social aspects of cyberspace, place

THE PLAYING FIELD

Like television and film, the global videogame industry touches the lives of millions of people. The market for video games is growing up, and so, too, are the sales figures. Players who became hooked as children are buying more powerful hardware and more sophisticated games as they get older. By January 2003, 130,000 PlayStation 2 (PS2) systems were sold in New Zealand, contributing to a worldwide total of 50 million units. Owners of the Sony console could choose from 1,500 software titles worldwide [10].

Like Nintendo’s GameCube and Microsoft’s Xbox, the PlayStation 2 has not made a large profit for Sony directly. The strategy for all three is to win the console market and make a killing on the games, which typically retail for about US\$50 and return a substantial royalty to the console manufacturer. A popular game can generate sales of more than US\$100 million within days of reaching the shelves, eventually earning US\$200-300 million. Global sales of video games were expected to top US\$17.5 billion in 2002, with the largest game publishers, such as Activision and Electronic Arts, earning revenues in the order of US\$1 billion. The market is expected to grow by 15-25% until 2006, by which time the next generation of consoles and games are expected to be in the stores [2].

MORE POWERFULL EXPERIENCES

Sony launched into the games console market in 1995 with the PlayStation 1 and “Twisted Metal” [14], a lethal vehicle combat game, when Sega’s Sonic the Hedgehog was still battling it out with the Super Mario Brothers, from Nintendo. With a big marketing push, Sony

promoted its console as a dedicated games machine with advanced computer graphics technology. The tagline that appeared on all the ads was “Do not underestimate the power of PlayStation”. The president of Nintendo, Hiroshi Yamauchi, did not believe that their dominant position in the market was threatened and he predicted the PlayStation’s demise within one year. Sony countered with ads that claimed “We’ll hit a million units!”, which they soon did. By mid 1997, Yamauchi conceded that Sony had won the platform war [16] (p. 133-9).

Over the next five years, the technology matured and the gamers grew older. While Sega and Nintendo continued to appeal to a younger audience, Sony extended their reach to attract older teens and young adults [22]. The marketing campaign that launched the PlayStation 2 in early 2000 showed a dramatic shift in both the message and the intended audience. Brand-building ads on TV, on cinema trailers, on billboard posters and in magazines showed no console or games. The technology was downplayed, as attention was focused on the environments and the experiences it enabled game creators to produce. The cartoon comedy of pixilated characters was replaced by the attraction of a darker, more menacing world.

In a black and white movie trailer directed by David Lynch to promote the PlayStation 2, Sony introduced what they called “The Third Place”. This is depicted as a sinister, dreamlike space characterized by abrupt and disturbing transformations to the environment and its occupants. A disoriented visitor wanders down an Escher-like corridor as sirens blare and fire shoots out from the walls around him. He passes a window and sees a woman floating in space. He walks by an opening through which his double greets him. His head is suddenly and painlessly detached and reattached to his body. An arm is wrenched from its socket and spewed out of his mouth before disappearing in a cloud of smoke. The air clears and he sees three figures in a room sitting on a comfortable couch beside his severed arm. The first is his double, the second is a motionless body, battered and wrapped in gauze, and the third is a man with the head of a duck, who politely welcomes the bewildered guest to the “Third Place”. Suzie Shaw, an account director at the advertising agency that chose Lynch to direct the *Eraserhead*-like ad, reports that the aim was to highlight the intensity of the game rather than the power of the box. The “Third Place”, she explains, is a mental space that allows for “more powerful experiences” [13].

In television ads that followed, that message was reinforced by the insertion of tantalizing glimpses of the gaming environment into mundane, real-world situations. New Zealanders were shown three recognizable scenarios: two women cycling over green paddocks, two men driving down a motorway, and a pair of security guards on night patrol. In each ad, one person experiences a brief hallucination of an action-packed PlayStation 2

game. The normal scene returns, overlaid with text asking, “CAN YOU SEE IT?”. The spots end with the PS2 logo and a voice proclaiming “PlayStation 2: The Third Place”. Significantly, although the two individuals are just inches apart in the three ads, there is almost no communication between them. This suggests that, if we are not socializing in our everyday environment, then we may as well choose to spend our time in the more exciting world of videogames.

In an ad that screened in New Zealand in the summer of 2002, a dedicated gamer sings about spending his time indoors, despite sunny weather and proximity to a good beach. A cool young woman on a motorcycle meets him at the Mairangi Bay Motel, for what we expect will be a bit of furtive fun. Instead, they close the curtains, turn on the TV, plug in a console, and go to work on their PlayStation fan. Clearly, no place, or activity, can compete with the screen-based fantasies supported by the PlayStation 2. Furthermore, there is no need to go out to socialize if you can play with others in the “Third Place”, where the geek gets the girl.

GAMING COMMUNITIES

It is significant that in David Lynch’s surreal trailer, communication between the visitor and other characters is a central feature. This is more than a mysterious and unpredictable dreamscape. The “Third Place” is envisioned as a social space, in which identities are as uncertain and malleable as the environment they inhabit.

Many videogames are designed for one console and a lone player who interacts with digital characters within a virtual space. Several PS2 games allow individuals to play against up to four other friends on a single console in multiplayer mode. This allows for at least some quick comments to be exchanged between a small group of opponents during short breaks in the action.

The potential for individuals to interact with one another as well as with the game environment is increasing dramatically, as players begin to make use of the networking capabilities built into the PS2 console. With the purchase of a hardware accessory and the availability of a broadband connection, players are now able to “[r]each out and smoke someone”:

Or cross-check, smash, tackle, leg-sweep or ollie over them – even if they’re in another time zone. With the Network Adaptor (Ethernet/modem) for PlayStation@2, just about anything is possible. Like downloading new rosters, stadiums or characters. Trash-talking opponents you’ve never met. Or better yet, starting your very own east coast-west coast sports rivalry. All against live competition, so no two games are ever alike [11].

David Darling, of British game developers Codemasters, sees a promising future for online gaming. Connecting to other players will be easy, and, although players would

not know who they are playing with initially, “it won’t take long before online communities emerge where there are other ways of communicating – online chat maybe, or voice discussions back and forth” [21] (p. 179).

THE GREAT GOOD PLACE(STATION)

Sony’s appropriation of the term “third place” as a gaming environment challenges the prevailing notion of the third place as a category of sites, distinct from the first place (home) and the second place (work), which serve as the core settings for informal public life. In a survey of these third places, *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg discusses the cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons and other public hangouts that he believes constitute the heart of vibrant communities [20]. Although the examples he discusses are all drawn from Western culture, he nevertheless outlines the essential characteristics that he maintains are shared by all successful third places.

Oldenburg observes that a successful third place is on neutral ground where everyone can feel comfortable. It is a leveler; rank and status are unimportant and it is open to the general public without requiring any form of membership. A typically ordinary and unimpressive appearance gives a third place a low profile. Individuals can go there at almost any time and be sure that friends will be there. The mood is playful, and regular visitors give the place character. It is a comfortable, congenial environment, a home away from home. Above all, third places are characterized by lively, engrossing, and inclusive conversation (p. 22-27). The more popular PlayStation 2 environments, like those in other video and computer games, would fail to satisfy most of these conditions.

Not surprisingly, the dominance of violence as the preferred mode of interaction presents the most obvious contrast. The fighting game, “Smackdown! Shut Your Mouth” [12] is a leveler, but only in the sense that the objective is to lay your opponent flat. If players own “Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance” [9], they can visit more than sixteen exquisitely-detailed environments at any time of the day or night. However, they better be in a fighting mood, because Johnny Cage, Sonya, Scorpion and other familiar characters are less likely to engage in conversation than in hand-to-hand and deadly-weapon combat. Each warrior has three unique fighting styles, and realistic fighting effects include bruises, dripping sweat, and blood. This has a tendency to reduce the comfort level.

Repeat visits to familiar 1980s settings in “Grand Theft Auto: Vice City” [5] might make the glamorous, hedonistic metropolis feel like a home away from home. However, the environment hardly qualifies as congenial. The story features Tommy Vercetti, an outlaw who takes on biker gangs, crime bosses, and corrupt politicians in an effort to fight his way to the top of the criminal world and take over the city. In this game, it is hard to know who to root for.

On the journey south toward Gondor in “The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers” [8], players pass through many highly elaborate settings that often detract from the action. In “ATV Offroad Fury 2” [1], competitors have to be careful not be distracted by the beautiful, detailed scenery that surrounds them. Improvements in software design and increased processing power have enabled game designers to produce environments that are far from ordinary. However, according to Oldenburg, impressive backdrops can work against the effectiveness of social spaces. In a successful third place, he says, “the ‘visuals’ that surround individuals do not upstage them” [20] (p. 37).

“Crash Bandicoot: The Wrath of Cortex” [3] is one of the few top selling PS2 titles that can be described as ‘playful’. The objective is to help Crash run, jump and spin through over thirty hazard-filled levels, accompanied by several familiar characters from the long-running game series. Sherry Turkle observes that video games “reflect the computer within” and that the challenge for players is to work out the logic of the game and the intent of the designer [24] (p. 68). Crash Bandicoot fits this description with a form of play that is highly structured, rule-bound, and goal orientated. If we apply Oldenburg’s criteria, such spaces are not likely to function well as third places, which support sociability best when activities are unplanned, unorganized, and unrestricted [20] (p. 33).

Above all, the crucial feature missing from PS2 games that precludes the possibility of Oldenburg’s third place status is the lack of relaxed communication between people. There is no time for idle chatter in places designed to support dangerous activity and fast-paced action. The tendency is to shoot first and dispense with questions altogether. This leads Oldenburg to conclude that:

“[n]ot all games stimulate conversation and kibitzing; hence, not all games complement third place association. A room full of individuals intent upon video games is not a third place . . .” [20] (p. 31).

PLACE AND NON-PLACE

Obviously, the mission of Sony, and other companies producing software for the PlayStation 2 console, is not to serve the public interest by creating places for unstructured conversation. Their objective is to earn a profit by selling videogame hardware and software. However, an increasing number of people are choosing to spend significant amounts of time in these elaborate digital environments. By providing “powerful experiences” and the possibility of social interaction, game spaces are competing with other sites for individuals who are looking for entertainment and the company of others. It is, therefore, worth considering the nature of these “mental spaces” and their relationship to other, more familiar places that they are designed to displace.

Oldenburg’s idea of a third place assumes a specific location within the built environment that supports the kind of social activity necessary for the creation of a sense of community. Although familiar, his notion of place represents just one of many different views. In a study of place and placelessness, Mahyar Arefi notes the lack of a universal definition of place and discusses how the term’s production and meaning has been transformed in recent decades [15]. He cites Tuan’s concept of ‘rootedness’, an unconscious sense of being in a locality [23], as the first stage in the process. The second stage is marked by the modernist aim to consciously create a ‘sense of place’ through historic preservation projects that rely on nostalgia rather than emotion for their effect. The third stage, he suggests, is a shift from conscious to ‘manufactured’ or ‘invented’ places, such as theme parks, amusement arcades, and other contrived and packaged places [15] (p. 183-85). Arefi believes these developments have led to a loss of meaningful places and an absence of appropriate connections between places. As a consequence, we are faced with geographies of ‘otherness’ and ‘nowhereness’, as well as a crisis of identity.

Sony’s gaming environments seem to be the logical extension of places that are invented and packaged for consumption. Unlike Oldenburg’s “Great Good Place”, the attraction of Sony’s “Third Place” is the degree to which it succeeds in creating a geography of ‘otherness’ and ‘nowhereness’, which result in a confusion of identity. These features are highlighted in David Lynch’s trailer as well, when a muffled voice is heard repeating “not here, not now, not there” before the word “WHERE” appears in front of the disorientated but curious visitor. Instead of creating a sense of place in the digital realm, this environment offers an escape from place. Here, we are released from the constraints of the physical world and the responsibilities associated with a fixed identity.

As a magical non-place for conscious dreaming, the “Third Place” is an example of what Marcos Novak calls “liquid architecture” [19] (p. 250). Novak promotes a vision of cyberspace as an infinitely changeable environment that caters to individual needs and personal wish fulfillment. He celebrates the possibilities of a dematerialized, ethereal architecture in which the relationships between abstract elements are in a constant state of flux. This dream-like space morphs in response to the constantly changing desires of individual inhabitants, resulting in a fluid environment without barriers. He imagines that, by applying the principles of “liquid architecture” on a larger scale, equally fluid virtual cities are possible.

Parallels between these digital dream spaces and the more tangible built environment are not hard to find. In *Fantasy City*, John Hannigan documents the transformation of urban environments into themed fantasy experiences [18]. He discusses how, as city economies depend increasingly

on tourism, sports, culture and entertainment, the metropolis is reinvented to facilitate a culture of consumption centered on packaged entertainment venues. Hannigan lists six features that characterize Fantasy City. It is theme-based and blind to the surrounding context. It is aggressively branded, and exploits profitable synergies with related products. It is open for business night and day, reflecting the demands of customers, who expect to find entertainment and sociability at any hour. It exhibits a modular design in which standard components (such as themed restaurant, cinema complex, bookstore, game arcade) are combined in a variety of configurations. Its isolation from surrounding neighborhoods, culturally and economically as well as physically, results in a solipsistic environment. Finally, it is a postmodern place in that it is “constructed around technologies of simulation, virtual reality and the thrill of spectacle” (p. 3-4).

Sony’s PlayStation 2 gaming environment not only exhibits all of the features that characterize Hannigan’s Fantasy City, but it also builds on its central attraction. Hannigan suggests that Fantasy City is the urban outcome of the cultural contradiction in American society between a craving for experience and a reluctance to take risks. It satisfies the key desire for “riskless risks” [18] (p. 7, 10). By removing the potential dangers that physical presence entails, the “Third Place” amplifies the “thrill of spectacle” while eliminating personal risk altogether.

COMMUNITY AS A GAME

Hannigan explains that a major attraction of Fantasy City is that it enables individuals to interact informally with large numbers of people, creating what he calls an “affective ambience” [18] (p. 74). Sony’s effort to support online gaming is an attempt to create a similar “ambience” in cyberspace. David Darling’s description of the social activities that are likely to develop with online gaming sounds very much like the “virtual communities” phenomenon that has developed in parallel with video games. These immersive, digital spaces provide a preview of the kind of third place that is likely to evolve as online gaming becomes more popular.

Habbo Hotel and Cybertown are two of the most popular Internet sites where people can communicate with others in simulated environments using 3D avatars. Both are described to potential members as virtual communities that have a primarily social purpose, and to potential advertisers, partners, and investors as a mechanism for attracting, segregating, and targeting the lucrative youth market. Games feature prominently in both environments.

Within two years of opening in January, 2001, nearly three million individuals checked into Habbo Hotel, a virtual 3D hotel with over 100,000 public spaces and guest rooms in which teenagers are invited to socialize. Members assemble their own “Habbo” character and chat with other Habbos in a SimCity-like environment. The result, according to Habbo Ltd, is “the ideal vehicle for third party brands to reach this highly desired 12-18 year-

old market in a cost-effective and creative manner” [6]. With constant sales pitches and product placements, Habbos soon discover that consumption, not conversation, is the real purpose of this community [7].

Cybertown is an immersive, real-time 3D environment. The owners describe their futuristic world as a “Civilization for the Virtual Age”. Started in 1995, its population grew to nearly 1 million “citizens” by January 2003, when a monthly fee was introduced. Citizens use a personalized 3D avatar to shop in the mall, dance in the nightclub, play games in the Casino and Arcade, attend events, and chat. They become active members in this “large intergalactic online community” by joining and forming clubs, constructing objects, holding a job, and taking part in ongoing role-playing games.

Individuals identify their interests when they join Cybertown by choosing to settle in one of the many themed colonies and neighborhoods, where they are exposed to related content. For example, the “Video Games” neighbourhood in the “Games” colony is subdivided into blocks devoted to specific games. The company vision is to attract millions of members who will consider this “metaverse” to be “their community”. Advertisers and sponsors will then be eager to reach the Cybertown population “as will companies introducing new products or entertainment, including movies, records, books and especially games” [4].

CONSUMING COMMUNITIES

Like 3D virtual communities, the Sony PlayStation 2 gaming environment holds out the promise of satisfying, in a concentrated and spectacular form, many of the desires often associated with virtual environments. These include freedom from the confines of the physical body, freedom from the constraints of geographic space, freedom from the fear of strangers, and freedom from control. Both provide the illusion that these freedoms have been realized within elaborate environments and scenarios that are highly structured, internally reinforcing and constrained by predetermined goals. Playing the game means accepting the illusion and embracing the rules.

In the game that Sony is playing, safe experiences and online community serve as the lure, not the aim. The real objective, not surprisingly, is to attract a continuous stream of individuals who are prepared to play their part as consumers of Sony’s hardware and software products. As Andrew House, Vice President of marketing for Sony Consumer Entertainment America (SCEA), explains it, the PlayStation 1 is “all about expanding markets.” Every convert to the entry-level console, from children as young as five to grandparents, is “a stake in the ground for a long-term consumer relationship” that continues with the more capable (and expensive) PlayStation 2 [17]. Sony has substantial media interests and can place the consoles in any of its other entertainment properties, including television programs and Sony Pictures Entertainment films. Numerous cross promotions with Pepsi, Pizza Hut,

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Nabisco, and other brands extend the marketing reach [25]. mConsumer activity is further increased by turning games into films, and films into games, with books and other merchandising supporting both.

As we pay at the gate and enter the pixilated fantasy city, we turn our backs on the communities we leave behind. Buying into the “Third Place” means consuming an exciting, risk free, virtual community, rather than engaging with others to create more ordinary social spaces offline. Just as the digital simulation interrupts and displaces physical reality in the ads, Sony aims to dislodge the idea of “The Great Good Place” as a site for informal public exchange and to substitute their vision of the “Third Place” as a site for controlled personal consumption. The more time we spend working on our PlayStation tan, the harder it is to recognize when we are getting burned. We have to be able to step outside of the game to see that we are not the ones holding the controller.

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