

Pervasive and Trans-Reality Games

Parallel Kingdom

The game itself is, like a lot of the games I looked at, essentially an overlay on your mobile phone's Google Maps app. You see the names of the streets around you, but overlaid on top of that are images of in-game items, like monsters to fight or places to rest and recover your character's health. Interestingly, *Parallel Kingdom* is only mostly based on your actual physical location—you have a “circle of mobility” of about a third of a mile from your actual physical location, and can move your character anywhere within that circle.

The game seems to be aimed at players of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs)—it has a lot of the conventions that are very familiar to fans of those games, such as dungeons, rare monsters, territory-based player-vs-player combat, and even trade skills and crafting. That puts the target audience as likely being males in their early to mid twenties.

The game is free to play, but there is an online store where you can buy in-game food for real money. This is important because food is a very important commodity in the game, and the only ways to acquire it are to trade for it with other players, to buy it for real money, or to refer a friend to the game.

The degree of interaction with the user is something that would be absolutely impossible without new media—the closest you could come would be a live action role playing game (LARP), and to operate one of those on this sort of scale would be inconceivable. This is a media that takes a classic MMO (which are frequently included in the class of new media) and integrates the GPS in a mobile device to integrate your current physical whereabouts into the game. Traditional media just can't do that sort of thing—at least not without an army of game administrators with cellphones and a large cast of extras.

Virtualpunk

Virtualpunk is very similar to *Parallel Kingdom*; monsters, resources, and items are all overlaid on top of the Google maps display. They do not have the circle of mobility that *Parallel Kingdom* has, which means that you have to move physically to get your character to move at all. In addition, *Virtualpunk* has “portals” to other worlds; these are essentially different layers on the Google map. Another striking difference is that you do not see other players in *Virtualpunk*. The developer plans to work on this by the time the final game is released (it's in beta at the moment), but for now the MM part of the MMO is conspicuously absent.

The audience for this game is not very clearly defined; the main site (unlike that of *Parallel Kingdom* does not have a section devoted to press, so it's hard to see where they are trying to

advertise. It's likely that the developer does not have a marketing strategy as such, and is working more on the game. *Virtualpunk* has the potential to have a very wide audience because it can be run on any phone that can run Java (as long as the phone has a GPS), rather than being limited as *Parallel Kingdom* is to "just" the iPhone and Android platforms.

The game is free to play, though in the FAQ the developer says "The client is free to download, but to experience all the features of the game you probably want to upgrade to a premium account." As the game is currently in beta, all features are being offered to all players for free, but once the beta period is over players will be locked out of certain features until they upgrade to a premium account, which will be done on a monthly subscription basis (as is standard in the MMO world). The developer has not yet set the cost of upgrading to premium.

While *Virtualpunk* lacks the inter-player interaction that *Parallel Kingdom* has, it is still a strongly new media text just by being a computer game; your experience in the game is dependent on your actions. Because of the GPS-based nature of the game, the scope of your actions that are relevant to the game is increased to include actions outside of the game world.

Zombies, Run!

Zombies, Run! is another game that overlays on Google Maps on an Android phone. The graphics in this game are fairly primitive, even when compared to *Virtualpunk* and *Parallel Kingdom*—the zombies in question are little red dots on the map (at least when zoomed far out; closer in they are tiny red or green silhouettes). When you start the game, you set a destination, choose the number of zombies and how fast they move, and then you start running.

This is not an MMO-style game; you do not see other players, and there is no character progression. It's simply (in the words of one reviewer) "an app that will make your daily jog that much more interesting." The market being appealed to is a much more casual one, as the game is not meant to be played for long periods of time—it's a brief diversion.

The game is available for free on the Android market, and has no monetization. I would guess that it is being developed and maintained by one person, as practice (as it's a fairly simple game) and as a way of gaining exposure—and because the developer likes running from zombies, presumably. This is essentially a way to play tag if you don't have any friends around; it's almost more a sport than a medium.

Uncle Roy All Around You

Uncle Roy All Around You is much closer to a LARP than the other games I've mentioned; like a LARP it's time-based as well as location-based, and involves administrators and actors. Interestingly, it also involves two kinds of players: street players and online players. Street players are those who are physically present in the city, while online players are in a virtual representation of the city in question, and can communicate with the street players through instant messaging. The game takes place in a particular city at a particular time, and street players have to register and check in to play. When they do, they are given a PDA and told that they have one hour to find Uncle Roy's office. The PDA is used in place of the Google Maps app to show a map of the surrounding area and the positions of other players (it's worth noting

that *Uncle Roy All Around You* is an older game than the others mentioned; most of the game description I've seen comes from the premiere, which was in London in 2003).

Uncle Roy All Around You seems a bit more self-consciously experimental than the other games I looked at; Blast Theory (the group who developed the game) describe themselves as “one of the most adventurous artists' groups using interactive media”. The audience they are going for is one that will appreciate the artistic nature of their creations; probably an older demographic than the standard MMO audience, and certainly a different psychographic.

It was unclear from the description whether or not Blast Theory charged participants in *Uncle Roy All Around You*. The group has several studios and an impressive list of other projects of all types; it also seems that they got funding from Arts Council England, BT, and the mixed reality lab. The primary motivation for Blast Theory is probably an artistic one, and also to provide media exposure for themselves, which would help attract funding for other projects.

This is curated storytelling, so in many ways also like a LARP; the big difference is the interaction of street players and online players. That seems to be the central point of *Uncle Roy All Around You*, as at the end of the game, street players are asked to commit to being called on to help an online player who has likewise committed to them for the next year. While the street players could play this game new-media-free with the help of more actors and lots of organization, tying in online players who can also interact with the story line and progress through the city makes this definitely a new media project.

JOYity

JOYity is very similar to *Parallel Kingdom* and *Virtualpunk* in that it is overlaid on your phone's Google maps app. It actually comes with several games, and is itself a platform for developing more. The games are more location-centric than *Parallel Kingdom* or *Virtualpunk*; for example, the *JOYity* game *The Streets of San Francisco* is set in San Francisco, and unlocks different story elements as the player travels around that city. It is possible to play the games remotely, in which case you simply move your avatar around the Google map. The games in general seem to be more about storytelling than about killing monsters on the streets of your home city—in fact, I haven't seen any examples of combat in any of their games. The main emphasis is in going to certain locations in order to unlock clues that will lead you further along the story line. These clues can be text alerts or images, and can also be time-based; after enough time has gone by, the game can prompt you or give you more information.

Because it's a platform, the audience for *JOYity* is very wide. The storytelling focus of the games would argue for a slightly different psychographic than that followed by or *Virtualpunk*; perhaps something closer to the arts focus of *Uncle Roy All Around You*, though I could see the platform being embraced for use in ARGs as well.

JOYity is free to play. Because it is both a game and a platform for developing new games, they developers are probably trying to acquire as large a base as possible to make the platform attractive to other game designers. They do say on their website that “We might introduce a payment model for premium games in the future, but the details are not set yet.”

JOYity is very new media, particularly because it's a platform for producing more works like it. The story line depends on player interaction with the text, and players can form teams to work with each other to solve the puzzles in the game.

JOYity Extended case study

OF THE FIVE DIFFERENT EXAMPLES of pervasive games that I looked at for my midterm project, *JOYity* was the one that had the most appeal for me. The games themselves are fairly similar for the most part, but *JOYity* is set apart from the others because it is not just a game; it's a platform for creating games. The three games that Zelfi (the company that produces *JOYity*) has made are some of the more compelling ones on the platform, and they illustrate fairly well the different possibilities available to budding game creators:

City Race Munich: This is a time-based game set in Munich that's designed for tourists. It takes you all over the city to various historic sites and gives you puzzles that you need to solve within a certain time in order to progress to the next puzzle. This is a competitive team-based game, and the first team to arrive at a given destination gets more points.

Roads of San Francisco: This is a fairly short detective story. In the game, you are Lt. Rock, on vacation to San Francisco. You're hoping to get in touch with an old friend, but things go awry and you find yourself in the midst of a mystery. Your phone sends you clues in the form of text messages or pictures that will lead you to particular locations around San Francisco. Once you get to those places, you can find more clues or interview people about what's happened. Following these clues will lead you through the story.

You Catch: This is basically a variant of tag that's fairly similar to that favorite of college campuses everywhere, Assassin. Each player is assigned one person who they are hunting. The object is to get to within 25 meters of the person you are hunting and then "shoot" them by pressing the trackball on the phone. If you are within 25 meters, you score a kill and are assigned a new target. If you are not successful, you miss and your position becomes visible to everyone else on the map (they hear your gunshot).

The games can be team-based or played individually (there's even an option to play *You Catch* in single-player mode, using computer-generated characters as hunters and victims). In-game communication is possible, so you can chat with teammates and with friends who are playing different games. You can also use the chat function to find other people who are playing near you.

On the development end, *JOYity* is fairly straightforward. There are four different types of quests available for designers to make use of:

- **Instructions:** These are exactly the sort of things you might expect—information about the sorts of things you need to do in the course of the game.
- **Map Quests:** These are tasks that involve the player needing to find a particular location. You can also include teammates or enemies as the target location to be found.
- **Side Quests:** These are more like supplementary material than like actual quests. They can be set as either distance-based or time-based in relation to the main quest, so that if, e.g., you've given a quest to go to a certain point, you can give the player some more information when they're getting close, or if they haven't gotten there after a certain amount of time has passed.
- **Riddles:** These are essentially password-protected areas. The player has to answer a question correctly in order to proceed.

There is a lot of flexibility in the structure of *JOYity*, but it has one big drawback that

differentiates it from many video games: *JOVity* is totally linear; you have to progress through the quests in the order they are given to you. There is no possibility of getting to a riddle that stumps you and going elsewhere to find more information. In a sense, you're walking through a book and have to go directly to Chapter 3 after Chapter 2. You have no choice of the order in which you experience the narrative, and can't really control anything in the game world other than how quickly you move through the story line.

This insistence on linear storytelling is probably present because it's easier to program that way, but it has a definite impact on the medium. It would be easy to imagine someone getting stuck on a particular riddle and just giving up on the game, knowing that there is nothing else that they can do in the story to get more information to help them solve the problem. The linear nature also really reinforces that you are playing a game; real life, after all, is not nearly so cleanly defined, and you always have the option to go somewhere else. Playing a game with such a linear structure can take away from the apparent freedom operated by turning the real world into your playing field, and can make the player feel "railroaded" into making decisions and doing things that you wouldn't have otherwise. Given that a big part of the appeal of these games is the breaking down of the barriers between the real and the virtual, this is less than ideal.

As I mentioned in the midterm, *JOVity's* FAQ makes it clear that *JOVity's* business model is still evolving: "We might introduce a payment model for premium games in the future, but the details are not set yet." The business model will probably drive changes in the kinds of games that are able to be created through *JOVity*; the current model, for example, would be exactly the sort of thing that a sponsor would want to see in the game—by ensuring that everyone playing a particular game had to go to a certain place, it would be easier to sell product placement opportunities. On the other hand, a non-linear narrative would give the opportunity to create more difficult puzzles that would require a more in-depth exploration of the story line and the world, which could tie in very well with an alternate reality game advertising campaign.

JOVity and other pervasive forms of gameplay or storytelling (a line that is blurring more every day, it seems) are incredibly compelling; they integrate the real and the virtual in a way that nothing else has done so far. As more and more technologies are developed to use in pervasive games (augmented reality is a prime example of a technology that would complement pervasive gaming), these types of experiences will become more and more common. The great thing that *JOVity* does for this emerging market is that it empowers regular users of smartphones to be able to experiment with this new form of entertainment. This is incredibly important because it gets people used to playing around with these kinds of texts and making them up, which means that people don't have to view the texts as being something beyond their control that have to come from a big company. If *JOVity* makes pervasive game creation really easy, then anyone will be able to do it. This has the potential to launch a very vital pervasive text community, which is far better for a new medium than total corporate control.