Living in Second Life versus Acting in Flash Mob

Re Thinking Place through Virtual and Urban Play

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ABSTRACT

Figure: image by Aikaterini Antonopoulou

The aim of this paper is to display the ways in which an online digital game and an urban action may serve as media to explore how people realize and experience place. After briefly describing the way that these two practices operate, it studies how they relate to individuals' perception of the contemporary environment and finally it raises questions concerning the concept of place.

The sense of place lies between materiality and context. Traditionally associated with the "ground", it may signify rootedness, or the desire for fixity and security. In the context of digitization, there is a call to rethink "place" taking into account the telecommunication networks and the digital environments in which everyone participates. In order to stress the tension between the physical and the digital, but more importantly to suggest a unitary sensibility on the conceptualisation of place, this paper employs two popular, interactive "platforms" as case studies.

Launched in 2003, Second Life is an open, privately owned online digital world. To enter this world, the user/player has to decide initially on the name and the appearance of his "avatar", that is, his digital representation. He is then granted a great degree of control over his environment and the freedom to create anything that appeals to him.

First conceived in 2003, a Flash Mob is basically a group of anonymous individuals, having nothing in common apart from their connectivity to a digital network, that agree to meet in a predetermined location, perform an unusual act and then disperse peaceably within ten minutes. This is generally seen as a fun, spontaneous event that has by default no ideological background and focuses only on the excitement of the moment.

Both case studies can be seen as place-making activities, each one in a different way, and they can hence question the philosophical, socio-anthropological and psychological perspectives of place. Second Life consists of a community developed in an entirely digital world modelled on individuals' fears and desires of the real world. It serves as a medium to easily visualise, read and study the existence of digital place, because of its three-dimensional graphics and the resemblance to the real world. On the other hand, Flash Mob displays how an email can activate a digital community to perform a physical action in the city. During those performances, the Flash Mobbers surprisingly transformed a physical space just for a short period of time and suggested alternative uses and new forms of appropriation for the urban environment. In the contemporary city that often becomes a field of urban anxiety, the Flash Mobs attempted to put public and semi-public spaces back into the map. Finally, they established 'visible' links between the city and its superimposed networks.

Such sorts of action and their wider context attempt to question our perception of materiality and connectivity. Our world can no longer be considered only physical or local and at the same time, the digital realm cannot be seen as utterly unreal. The juxtaposition of the two displays how our "physical presence" in the world is being overlaid with electronic networks and suggests that instead of distinct, the real and the virtual are in fact closely linked and interwoven.