Playas: Homeland Mirage

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes an interactive installation that addresses issues of presence and absence by creating a virtualized representation of the abandoned town, Playas, New Mexico. This town is slated for conversion into an anti-terrorism training facility by New Mexico Tech University in conjunction with the United States Department of Homeland Security. Using the metaphor of the mirage, it functions as a critique of our understanding of "reality."

Categories and Subject Descriptors
J.5 [**Computer Applications**]: ARTS AND HUMANITIES--*Fine Arts*

General Terms
Performance, Design, Experimentation, Theory, Verification.

Keywords
Installation, Art, Virtual Reality.

1. CONCEPT
Playas, New Mexico has always been a virtual construct. In the early 1900s it formed around the railroad installed by the Phelps Dodge Corporation. When the railroad died in the early 60s much of the property was sold, the tracks were removed, and the city became a ghost town. In the 70s, Phelps Dodge built a copper smelter near the dry lakebed, and created a "company town" for it's new employees, naming this city Playas, as well. At its height, it provided homes for over 250 families and had a population exceeding 1000. In 1999 Phelps Dodge closed the smelter due to poor sales, and abandoned the city. For the next several years the city sat in the arid climate of the New Mexico desert with little hope for its resurrection. But in late 2004, it appears that there is hope for Playas after all. The United States Department of Homeland Security has funded the purchase of Playas, by New Mexico Tech University. Playas will be reborn as the site of a national and international anti-terrorism training facility.

This set of circumstances and the geography of this place suggest certain questions apropos for digital virtual space. How real is reality? Is a constructed reality real nonetheless? How real is the training that will take place at this site? How real is the threat? What is the relationship between manufactured security in suburbia and this new national focus on security? To what point is embodiment "real."

As an artwork, this project does not propose to answer these questions, but attempts to raise questions in the mind of the viewer. The project works with these ideas using the somewhat familiar interface of the computer video game, though, here implemented in an installation environment.

Viewers of the installation participate in the reconnaissance of a reconstruction of a portion of the homes and public structures located in the city of Playas. A table with keyboard and mouse is located in the middle of the installation space. A single participant navigates virtual Playas interacting within an environment that toys with the dichotomies presented by the subject matter. Simultaneously, a large-scale video is projected on the wall in front. This projection consists of the live feed from the video game, but the large-scale imagery is affected by the presence of those within the installation environment, as is the content of the "game" itself.

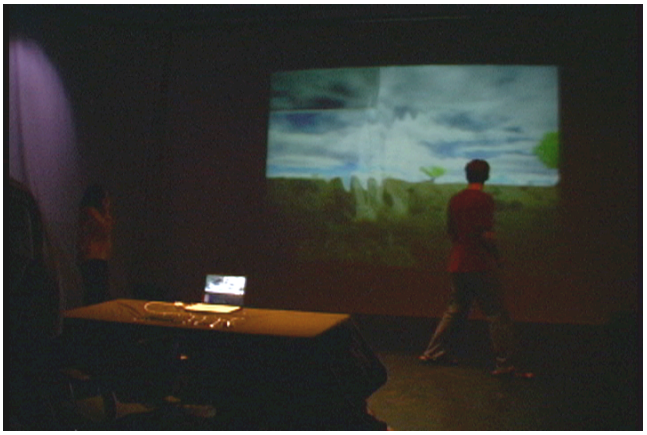

Figure 1. Installation View

In keeping with the proposed use of Playas as a training site, the installation is presented as a "game." The selection of the gaming interface is an intentional act to reinforce the idea that as we struggle to simulate reality, we fall short in profound ways. It also draws parallels between gaming, suburbia, and our recent obsession with terrorism. Suburban models of the city, as well as the anti-terrorism training exercise, are man-made constructs that are superficially connected to reality.

The primary experience of the "game" is from the point of view of an innocent civilian explorer. Real world geographic data

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has been gathered and used to generate the environment. As one approaches the homes, actual photographs from the site are displayed along with technical information regarding the structure, it's placement within the environment, and plans for it's future use. Each structure is documented with photographs taken by Steve Rowell of the Center for Land Use Interpretation[1], and gives a sense of what it might have been like to live there.

In addition to the visual technical information each structure provides, selected homes contain objects such as furniture, a television, or toy that trigger audio and/or video samples that suggest the life that once occupied this place. These objects remind us that this is not just an empty structure, but also the place someone calls home. The objective at this level is to begin to feel a sense of place, and connection with those who lived there. Juxtaposed with this imagery are suggestions of the future use of Playas; video clips of training exercises, military equipment, and politicos proclaiming the value of this place to society.

Simultaneously, while exploring the city, other events are taking place that thwart the explorer's desire to learn more. As people enter the installation zone, a video tracking system monitors the number of people in the environment. As people enter, a new character is spawned into the game world. This character can take on the characteristics of one of three types: an innocent, a terrorist, or a Department of Homeland Insecurity (DHI) agent. Innocents and terrorists are visually similar, appearing as civilians, while DHI agents wear typical "SWAT" uniforms. DHI agents hunt terrorists, but periodically, accidentally kill innocents (explorer included). For every innocent they kill, multiple new terrorists are spawned. From the point of view of the explorer, the introduction of these personalities into the game instills a sense of fear. Characters approach who cannot be distinguished as friend or foe. One character may simply want water, while another may self-detonate. A third may accuse you of terrorist activity.

In addition to the viewer contribution to the in-game activities, the viewer also impacts the visual representation of the environment itself. This is an intentional act to suggest the idea that we, as a society, are implicit in the world we create. As viewers move throughout the installation space, a ghost-like form of their presence is composited within the game environment. Their presence perturbs the video imagery in a way that suggests the idea of a mirage. Waves of displacement follow their movement through the world.

2. PRIOR WORK

Recently, artists such as Brody Condon, Anne-Marie Schleiner, Julian Oliver, Maia Engeli, Gonzalo Frasca and others have used game technology to produce art works. John Klima created some of the earliest works in the late 1990s. Of these, his Great Game[2] series is most closely related to this work by virtue of its critique of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In this "game" a terrain map of the Afghanistan Theater is patrolled by icons representing aircraft, troops and targets culled from daily Defense Department briefings. The map automatically refreshes itself every 60 seconds to produce a timeline of the military events taking place remotely.

In 2002, Anne-Marie Schleiner created Velvet-Strike[3], a modification to the Half-life based game, Counter-Strike. This modification allows the player to place user-created imagery within the online game. As such, it functions as a tactical media work that subverts the game designers intention.

Another innovator of game based artwork is the art collective, c-level. Of their works, the most closely related to this project is Waco Resurrection[4]. This project reconstructed the site of the Branch Davidian Compound and the FBI siege of 1993. Using networked game play, participants assume the avatar of a resurrected David Koresh and navigate Mount Carmel listening to inner voices and interacting with FBI agents.

Of course, the video game environment is a child of other types of computer based immersive environments such as VR systems and computer graphics in general, but gaming seems to be a distinct variant within the field. This project distinguishes itself from other, similar projects by creating an environment that responds both in-game, and from without, to the installation environment itself.

3. DEVELOPMENT

Playas: Homeland Mirage uses the Torque Game Engine[5] as the foundation for game development. The primary visuals and interactivity within the installation are produced using Max/MSP[6] with SoftVNS[7] for tracking. The Playas environment is modeled in Alias' Maya along with Quake Army Knife[8]. Characters and various props are modeled in Maya and exported as DTS geometry. The system runs on two wirelessly networked Apple computers.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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