What is *Mindplay*?

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Mindplay was held on the 20th January 2006 at London Metropolitan University, UK. The conference was organised by the Group for Research in Interactive Media within the Department of Applied Social Sciences. *Mindplay* focused on play and interaction within digital media environments, encompassing mobile and ubiquitous media, interactive cinema and gameplay, wired performance spaces and networked communities. However, the emphasis was not on technological innovation or commercial viability but on the quality of experiences within these environments and their intellectual, experiential and social dimensions.

The conference was organised using five core themes: 'Playtime' (physical play and improvisation), 'Let us play' (play in communities and society), 'The smart player' (game audiences, games and learning, the game industry), 'Record-stop-play' (play and the moving image), and 'Plug-and-play' (play on portable media). Contributions to *Mindplay* included presentations of practice-led research, demonstrations, installations, scholarly papers and posters.

1 What is *Mindplay*?

> *...the apparently quite simple question what play really is, leads us deep into the problem of the nature and origin of religious concepts...It is a mystic unity....In play as we conceive it the distinction between belief and make-belief breaks down. The concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness. (Huizinga 1980, p.25)*

Huizinga's attack on the Protestant work ethic of 1950s' capitalist society rediscovers play and arguably elevates it to the level of religion. What we also find here is the transgressive power of play that takes hold of the player. Like Gadamer, who insisted that it is the game who plays the player (Gadamer in Sutton-Smith 1997, p.182), Huizinga acknowledges that play is beyond control as it

> ... *can at any time wholly run away with the players.* It imposes its own order and timeframe, *its own course and meaning. Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is 'over'. It plays itself to an end.* (Huizinga 1980, pp. 8–9)

This sounds quite mystic, and as Davis (1998) argues, mysticism dominates digital media culture; it becomes visible as gnosticism, new age philosophies or occult practices, and re-enchants our postmodern lives with premodern rituals. We are

> *… a hypertechnological and cynically postmodern culture seemingly drawn like a passel of moths towards the guttering flames of the premodern mind. (Davis 1998, p.2)*

The ubiquity of mysticism could be interpreted as a reaction to a crisis in postmodern Western society, a search for re-engagement with senses and emotions, escapism from effects of globalisation and the stress of living in a world whose rules and

technological tools have become too complex to understand. In the 1960s McLuhan already warned that any

> *technological extension of our bodies de- signed to alleviate physical stress can bring on psychic stress that may be much worse. (McLuhan 1994, p.67)*

Playing can be a coping strategy: here we can confront anxieties brought on by new technologies and imagine a life where these forces have already been integrated.

> *Children often play at what perplexes or threatens them—at features of their environment which they need to understand, master, or otherwise bring themselves into balance with. Art for the adults serves a similar function. It is man's make-believe way of practising to engage himself with what is salient yet unfamiliar, unexplained, or uncontrolled in his grown-up world (Rosenboom 1976, p.2)*

As we play robots, daleks, androids, mutants or cyborgs we enact our belief in the endurance of human life, and—like a self-suggestion—weave the new technologies into our cultural heritage, thus stretching our psyche to accommodate change. However we are often so engaged in this process that we fail to question why these changes have arisen in the first place, and whether there are ways for us to direct change.

If play is a coping strategy it is interesting to observe that we play harder and longer. Over the last two decades the field of digital media has seen the emergence of multi-user games, video games, CAVES, games for mobile and locative media, online gambling, interactive TV, responsive environments, virtual performance and dance tools, as well as interactive music performance tools. All this time, play has become better organised and marketed. Game genres such as action, fantasy, sport, strategy and puzzle games have begun to establish themselves. In late capitalist consumerism we have become used to buying play experiences off the shelf. But will the commodification of play lead to the emergence of a global monoculture? Or a pick-and-mix approach to cultural history? Can digital media tools help to maintain cultural links between individuals in a diaspora? Will the use of western technologies lead to a western domination of cultural production? How can diverse cultural roots be safely brought into digital media environments?

2 The production of play and play experiences

Play experiences not only concern the games industry. With technology becoming smarter, smaller and mobile it is easier to get involved. Since the computer pioneers of the 1960s, political (h)activists, counter-culture groups and communities that promote self-education, creativity and free information sharing have with their grassroots approach demonstrated that there is an alternative to the corporate model. As play is shared by all humans it is vital to maintain public access to its production and distribution tools, freedom of information flow and content creation. At *Mindplay* we learned about activities that focused on participation and ownership of community-based digital media projects (Fleuriot and Miskelly), artefacts that dissolved the structures of linear media such as film (Brecevic and Andersson); and installations that raised important questions on status and ownership of cultural

artefacts (Lane, Cryer, Haeffner, John and Spiropoulou). We also learned how the use of mobile phones in Brazil—as 'small scale' cultural output—can have consequences on society at large (Hartmann), and how games artefacts begin to reveal wider social and cultural implications (Kirkland).

Projects like these oppose play commodification whilst still embracing latest digital media technology. This empowers its users but we need to remain aware of the extent to which our spiritual and psychological needs have become intertwined with technology. The popularity of mystic content in computer games demonstrates the fascination this holds on society (*Summoner*, *Final Fantasy*, *Myst*, *Myth*, *Aura*, *Neopets: the Darkest Fearie*). Burke and Ornstein also show how—in the course of Western history—spiritual and emotional needs once satisfied by religion have become transferred onto science and technology; and how belief in scientific progress has come to replace religious beliefs. They warn that if continued, such progress will destroy our environment and psyche and instead call for a fundamental change towards more a-rational, creative and diverse thought patterns (Burke and Ornstein 1997, pp. 280–311)[i].

However the focus of Western society on the self within the last century (Freud, Jung, Klein, Lacan, Maslow) makes such a change of thinking more difficult. Winnicott emphasized the importance of play for the formation stages of a healthy and creative self:

> *It is creative apperception more than any- thing else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living (Winnicott 2005, p.87)*

and agreed with Huizinga that play is a fundamental and irreducible concept and the basis for culture. Huizinga refers to an instinct for play and insists that we must play. If we dismiss play, we discard what makes us human (1980 pp. 7–8). But since play is a tool for cultural as well as individual identity formation, neither aspect can be neglected[ii]. Seganti reminded us at *Mindplay* that the self cannot be analysed separately from its sociological background. Neither can we investigate the mind separately from the body[iii], one of the critiques often voiced about early digital media arte- facts.

Questions of how we experience the world through our senses, how perception works and how we translate this into digital media artefacts have become core concerns. *Mindplay* particularly sought submissions where experience was explored through the senses and hosted a range of practice-led presentations where subconscious bodily functions (Boyd Davis et al.), sight and sound (Hosea) and olfactory play (Lai and Haddad) were explored. Other installations at *Mindplay* also explored notions of identity through merging and layering of space and place (Richards and Konczak; Chollet and Ravindran). Power outlined how recent research in neuroscience and emotion studies transferred into the digital media environment will allow us to create more meaningful interaction, and Harvey examined the role of the body in memory and the creation of meaning.

3 Play as ontology

In postmodern western society we observe neo-mysticism often running alongside positivist thought in a bricolage consumer lifestyle where each element patches up the

shortcomings of another, and although most of us are aware of the irony of it all, we are satisfied if we can somehow cope. Maybe it is such postmodern cynicism that reintroduces chance. As Dovey observed at *Mindplay*, our culture is becoming more and more inclined to accept alea (chance). The aleatory subject not only upsets the traditional work ethic by gambling (card games, betting, stock market) but also by achieving goals via risk taking and luck rather than training, competing and playing by the rules. Although this reveals a great shift in society's values, chance still remains subjected to agon (rule-based play) when it only directs some parts of our lives. The truly revolutionary potential of chance can only be released when it is not subjected to agon. Therefore more fundamental than Caillois' (1961) agon/ alea divide of play is the idea of play as ontology.

If we asked, "What makes play meaningful?", the question already contained several assumptions: that play serves a higher purpose, that there can be a deeper meaning behind play, that there can be meaningless play and that there is a qualitative difference between the two. However if we take play itself as the core of our enquiry and subject everything else to it, play will generate forms, rules and meaning from itself. As Huizinga said, play is

> *its own course and meaning. Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is 'over'. It plays itself to an end. (Huizinga 1980, pp. 8-9)*

Therefore the ontological qualities we find in play—self-formation, agency, generativity —provide us with a fundamentally different approach to thinking than rational, transcendental or mystic approaches. Moreover play as generative ontology might alleviate postmodern cynicism.

However, as Sutton-Smith (1997) has shown, the problem with play is its ambiguity, and as soon as we set about to analyse and define play we lose what kept us fascinated. This is an issue for anyone who wants the game to play the player: interactivity understood as cause and effect restricts the potential of play; for example when we create simulated game 'worlds' they become finite 'scenes'; when we program the control of a character in a game we limit the performative agency of a future player. So rather than developing more complex interaction based on cause and effect, we need to think of different play: open structures that make use of human agency, cultural diversity and collaboration; where rules are self-generating during play. And rather than within these rules, play might happen around its borders. At *Mindplay* we heard about interventions with audiences (Sheridan and Bayliss) that provoked spontaneous play; new ways of programming for live improvisations (Garavaglia), and new structures for interactivity (Chang).

In addition to open play structures, different play can also be developed through a user-centred approach, a reciprocal relationship between designer and future audience. The creative force here shifts between the designer's intention and audience members' experiences (Waeckerle), and is at its most dynamic in collaborative play situations (Reiser). In that way it readdresses the traditional artist / audience role division often found in early digital media artefacts (Fitton). However it is important to remember that the needs of users keep changing. Ravenscroft reminded us at *Mindplay* how our definitions of gameplay need to keep pace with users and their involvement; and although traditional stereotypes of game audiences still linger in

contemporary gaming culture (Corrigan), these no longer hold true (Gaitanou, Moore and Marlow). Instead, audiences are now more diverse, better informed, and willing to take on a more creative role. The need to meet the requirements of these new audiences provides a chance to expand conventional notions of interactivity and to explore different play (Pearson; Mansilla, Dohrn and Salim).

4 Conclusion

Mindplay tried to capture a moment of resurgence of play in Western culture that sees the commodification of play, but also the great amount of social and cultural innovation resulting from it. *Mindplay* aimed to provide a lively forum where diverse artistic and theoretical approaches to play in digital media environments could be exchanged, core issues be reflected on and new questions raised. It also provided the opportunity for delegates to engage with play in practice, disseminate research in progress and exchange peer feedback.

Since it has been argued that digital media technologies have not reached their full potential yet (Stein in Lunenfeld 2001, p.205), it is our call to explore where we can take play within digital media environments. However we need to be mindful of how we go about this. Our creative output as well as the technologies we use have ethical and ideological implications that will change our selves, our communities and societies. The question of how we play in digital media environments is vital.

The following selected papers highlight the conference core themes: Dovey observes the emergence of an aleatory subject that attacks the epistemology of a rationalist discourse in 'How do you play? Identity, technology and ludic culture'. Moschini calls for a shift towards user-centred practices in game design to address the needs of new audiences in 'Designing for the smart player: usability design and user-centred design in game-based learning'; while Keay-Bright focuses on the engagement of a special user group in digital media environments in '*Reactivities*©: autism and play'. In '*Ere be dragons*: heartfelt gaming', Boyd Davis et al. report on the development of an innovative pervasive game that involves live heart-rate data and location-sensitive media technology, while Miskelly and Fleuriot show community-based approaches to the use of location-sensitive media in: 'Layering community media in place'. Chang discusses how, by drawing upon the experiences of diasporic societies and cultural diversity we can expand our concepts of interactivity in: 'Exploring interactivity: user ability and the Chinese diaspora'; and finally Nolan reflects on the use of play strategies in open design workshops in 'Building magical realms: responses to pervasive and locative media technology'. We hope you will enjoy the ideas and projects presented.

Acknowledgements:

The Mindplay Team would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for their generous help and support: The Shoreditch Building, The Community College Hackney, Alisar Alkhersan (Events Manager), Zoe Hind (Metro New Media), Joan Austin (City Edge), Dorothea Hackman and Tim Sokolow (The Community College, Shoreditch), Dr. John Gabriel and the professional and technical support teams within the Department of Applied Social Sciences; the Media, Culture and Communications Research Capability Fund; the Mindplay Advisory Committee;

Estates, Systems and Services.

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Notes

[i] The anthropologist Tambiah also observes two orders in societies: causality (common sense, objectivity, logic and linearity) and participation (collective rituals, archaic symbols, oral traditions and magic in culture and psyche). In digital media environments we make us of causality to enable participation. This reveals how strongly we still value participation (Tambiah in Davis 1998, p.174).

[ii] Even self-actualisation and mind development has entered the digital media market with biofeedback games such as *Freezeframer* (http:// heartmath.com/freezeframer/) or *Journey to Wild Divine* (www.wilddivine.com), the use of E-meters (aka lie detectors) by the scientology church, mediatised addresses of new age gurus such as Ron Hubbard (on video) Maharishi Mahesh Yogi or Rem Prawat (weekly podcasts).

[iii] *Mindplay* did not aim to elevate play onto the level of the mind to the detriment of physical in- teraction. This thinking that follows the Cartesian mind/ body split however still lingers in discours- es in the digital media field, a prominent example

being Hans Moravec's *Mind children* (1988) that rates information as superior to materiality.