Funware shared Artist in Residence proposal

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Outline of the concept underlying the work

Centralised social networks have become inescapable tools for every day life for nearly all of us, but to date, there is little critical engagement which explores these systems from within.

We propose a game which playfully examines the nature of the data being collected for marketing purposes. We wish to share knowledge and raise awareness about privacy issues by both engaging players with gameplay, and in parallel, documenting our experiences of working with the layers of API's, development policies and EULA's in the manner of a quest of scientific discovery.

Fundamentally, we wish to explore the tolerance these networks have to support reflective work such as software art. In this way we aim to spread positive ideas using a mass media channel, instead of remaining in a small niche of specialists and already convinced communities. We make use of the data the user (and his/her friends) owns to create the game world, underlining the value, importance and quantity of this data.

Everything produced during this project will be licensed copyleft.

General outline of the scope of the final work

"You are 4.3 billion kilometres away from the nearest human, what would you like to do?"

The final work will consist of a text based multiplayer game, inside or closely linked to one or more social networks. As a player, your world is empty except for fragments of data, objects relating to your past/other life - but seen through the distorted lens of the game world. Players gradually become aware of increasing complexity, characters appear you may recognise - are they real friends? Information is substituted or modified in subtle ways, is it possible to remember what was ever real in the first place? We will seek game mechanics for gaining a deeper understanding of the information made accessible via these social network platforms.

The work is text based, to give us a chance to develop rapidly and focus on the content instead of the graphics, which tend to use up a lot of development time. The work is ideologically linked to the "web 2.0 suicide machine" but instead of seeking out confrontation, it explores the limits and nature of these social networks from within, slowly pushing the boundaries of what is tolerated by the companies that own them, carefully documenting this process as we go. The documentation of the process forms a big part of the work, especially because we do run the risk of getting banned.

Outline of the research and development plan

The project involves 3 parallel research and development aspects: content development, technical realisation and documentation. In no particular order:

- Story writing
  1. Development of the game world
  2. Development of the game script (quests, characters, interactions with items, interactions with bots, possible interactions with other players)
  3. Development of a "storyboard" script
- Research on Facebook and other social gaming platforms
  1. The APIs
  2. Research the policies and rules associated with these APIs

- Document the research and development process
    1. Create and maintain a blog
    2. Maintaining a Code repository
    3. Maintaining a wiki for content development
    4. Maintaining communication channels for user feedback
- Developing and researching the frameworks needed
    1. What languages/tools exist?
    2. Create our own FLOSS platform/toolkit - targeted at reuse by other artists/projects.
- Visualisation of the information gathered inside the game:
    1. Realise, from the players perspective, a transparent view on what information is accessible to the game and which information it is using.
- Bots
    1. Research the AI element
    2. Researching how we can create confusion about whether or not a player is dealing with a bot or a person (ELIZA effect[1]).
- Fitting this into a game world
    1. Researching text games
    2. Building or reusing a text based game engine
    3. Playtesting[2], making the feedback loop as short as possible: releasing often, collecting feedback, making sure it is easy to add new content, try out new ideas and change things.

Motivation for why you would like to work in the context of this particular residency as well as an overview of your interest in the technologies mentioned above

We are interested in the Funware residency because the format of sharing a residency between 3 locations is really good. It would give us the chance to work on this project for a longer period of time, and in different contexts. We've worked like this before, during the Metabiosis project[3], with residencies at NIMk, Waag Society, and Sign, and found this format to be very productive. On top of that, the three residency locations are fantastic. It has been a very positive experience working with NIMk and Piksel in the past and we'd love to work with all teams involved (more details in planning paragraph).

Our interest in the technologies involved in social gaming are their pervasiveness, their lack of transparency, their methods of engaging users, their ability to harvest user data – bypassing the privacy policies of the platform they use, the strange shapes online socialising takes on in some of these environments, the lack of rebellion and the lack of alternatives.

Indication of your planning divided between the three labs

We want to propose a distributed and networked production approach, in which the three of us work together remotely most of the time, and plan several sprints at the 3 labs for intense development and feedback with NIMk, BALTAN Laboratories and Piksel. The remote collaboration would take place during the period June – November, and at regular intervals (quantity depends on time and budget) we get together at one of the labs for a highly concentrated 1 week burst of activity to reach the next milestone in the development of the game. Content development, technical implementation and documentation all happen side by side. We would like to start in Bergen, to kick start the project in a tech-savvy, FLOSS powered, activist environment. The very critical middle part of the project we'd like to develop in BALTAN laboratories, getting feedback on content and gameplay. The final stage would take place at NIMk to take full advantage of the experience and know-how present there when it comes to archiving, documenting and exhibiting.

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ELIZA_effect
2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Playtest
3 http://metabiosis.kuri.mu/