

MZ: What kind of maps will be used in the actual game?

LL: The map will be borrowed from various sources. We have a few options: we may use an obsolete map of Central, because Central has been re-developed for many times. If you pick up a map from 20 years ago, you would find at least one or two streets that no longer exist. The other option is just to use a map of another district in Hong Kong, say, Kwun Tong. Actually the information on the PDA set shows only the player's position in the city and the destination with a dot. It is kind of abstract and looks easier to handle. The map, with streets and buildings, will make the situation more complex. The whole point of the game is to have the two players – one on the street, the other giving out instructions based on the map – negotiating with each other.

MZ: It's interesting that there is a whole body of theories behind your project. I think one of the most difficult things for a project like this is how you make the theoretical thinking come through in the game. How do you make the players, who are totally engaged in the game, also reflect upon some of the critical aspects of the work?

LL: That's a very important question. To be very certain, people who are involved in the development of this game, of the four of us, at least three of us are very conscious of the theories, in various degrees. But the theories are just there to give us the incentives, to help us set up the general framework; we do not want to turn the game into a theory-loaded animal. We do want to put down enough rules so that when the players finish the game, they can talk to us about the experience, which is the minimal condition for the game to work. The game is rather open-ended. We really don't know whether this will end up with a very meaningful discussion, but this is part of the plan.

MZ: So the discussion session is an important part of the project.

LL: Yes. Also we do not believe in just preaching the theories, but engaging people in dialogue, providing them with the experience so they can draw their own conclusions. Hopefully each person will discover something different within the framework.

The designing process is a dialectical one. We have to hold onto the theories, and yet be ready to let go of them. Our ever changing configuration of the game has moved more and more towards what it means to play a game. There are many phases in the design process. At one point, we wanted to turn the whole project into a drama, with players taking different identities, which is also a metaphor or allegory of society reality we wanted to critique. But then we realized that this wouldn't make sense, because the physical content of the game was just to get from one point to the other points. Who cares if she is a terrorist, or someone else is a secret police? Over-stuffing the game with representational meanings simply wouldn't work.

So we said, "Let's just make the game as simple as possible." At that point, we felt more at ease. Then we thought about how the game could generate more discussion and negotiation, how we should condition the game so the players would discover how the buildings, the roads and bridges are affecting the way they walk. This led us to bring back the idea we had very early on in the process, which is the use of maps. The idea of a map has always been on our mind, but for a while we didn't know how to integrate it. If the players can still get to the destination with a wrong map, then the game will be considered a success because it tells us how arbitrary and how ineffective maps are; how maps don't always control us as we think.

The main challenge is on the technical side. If it's raining, reception is bad. Also there is a few seconds of delay in the signal reception. At one point, we found that problematic. But then we thought, if the 5-second delay is constant, we could actually turn it into a usable factor of the game. Within those 5 seconds, some major decisions could be made either correctly or incorrectly.

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MZ: How important is the technology in this project?

LL: It is important in both positive and negative sense. The whole point of using a PDA is not to reproduce what the Blast Theory people did. We decided to use technologies available to consumers, i.e. PDA, rather than playing with advanced technology. The question is: what are some of the things the tools used by ordinary consumers can do that we are not encouraged to do? In a sense, it's to subvert pre-defined and de-limiting consumer usage for a product.

In the development process, we also realized that in order to play this game properly, PDAs are in a way too primitive. We felt very much bound by the PDA sets. At one point, I was making a joke – or perhaps this will not be a joke if we can re-do the project in Microwave in a few years – that we really ought to do live-transmission of the players walking on the street in such a way that audience in the City Hall can see the four players and become more engaged. This is only possible if we have satellite reception.

We also thought about how to question the nominal use of maps. For those who know Central district well, many buildings are actually connected. You can walk through the buildings from one to another. The map of Central – showing only ways to walk along the streets and bridges – does not actually tell you how everyday users actually navigate. So how important maps really are? In what ways does a map help us or mislead us? We thought this would be a great point for the game. But then we realized that reception is only possible outdoors. So again, we had to give up the idea.

We are embracing technology, playfully. It is helping us, but we also realize how limited the tool is. There is a kind of irony here. In the Microwave festival, we want our art work to involve as much technology as possible. The marriage between art and technology is very much in the agenda. In reality, when it comes to actual practice, a lot of the artworks have to be trimmed down due to limited resources in technology.

*Mediazine is an electronic magazine on new media arts edited by a group of young local artists and scholars, launched in October 2005.

