“Mission: Mission”: A Social Mapping Game Design

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Executive Summary

Our game adds a race and an element of strategy to the traditional scavenger hunt. Rather than hunt predetermined objects or flags, players hunt for brand logos and protest patches in an urban environment and submit time- and location-stamped evidence of their discoveries. We rely on contemporary recognition technologies to verify player submissions and calculate their effects on the game conditions.

Ethnographic Question

This game seeks to answer the question in what ways the social spaces and mating rituals of Mission hipsters may yet give rise to new forms of resistance, particularly resistance to corporate rule. To do this, it proposes a race in which players identify two different forms of markers in the attire of non-player Dolores Park and Mission users: corporate brand logos and protest patches. Because we anticipate that corporate logos vastly outnumber protest patches, the former team is restricted to logos from Chrome, Campagnolo, and Pabst Blue Ribbon.

The gentrification of San Francisco’s Mission District has been a much-bemoaned socioeconomic process in the Bay Area for at least ten years. In the late 1990s, so the story goes, the .com boom brought highly skilled technical workers to San Francisco in record numbers. It equipped them with high-paying jobs and tantalizing if uncertain stock options. In search of proximity, convenience and sunshine, such “white collar migrants” settled in the Mission, driving up rents and quickly displacing the neighborhood’s prior Latino residents. In the 2000s, even two .com busts could not bring rents down. For 20- and 30-something renters and occasional mortgage-holders, one solution to economic uncertainty was more roommates. A friend or loved one might move into the kitchen or living room, or a single room may be shared by two or more. More roommates means more people in less space.

For the unemployed and partially employed, such as tech contractors, Dolores Park became an increasingly important social space in which to get out of the house, get some fresh air, meet and make friends. Over the course of the decade Dolores Park usage increased dramatically; as of 2010, it is now so crowded on sunny days that there may be as many as 2000 people in the park at once even without an organized event taking place. This has prompted certain neighborhood residents and the City of San Francisco to develop plans for a park “upgrade” that segments and segregates different uses of the park. For instance, according to the plan the dog run and playgrounds may soon be fenced in and separated from the rest of the park lawns.

Those who wish to renovate the park and segregate its users may feel that 2000 young adults can make an intimidating crowd. Well-educated, under-employed young people facing economic hardship have often catalyzed resistance and protest. That said, while contemporary Mission public culture accepts graffiti as street art,
marijuana use, nudity in public and the coolness of creative reuse, many in the community who still have jobs work for major technology corporations that contribute substantially to the narrowing distribution of wealth. Apple, Genentech, Google and Yahoo all run private bus systems in and out of the Mission, each picking up hundreds of employees every day.

Irregular work schedules, relatively few children and a predominance of crowded pedestrian spaces such as Dolores Park give rise to a space of face-to-face encounters within which particular brands and products can become highly valued very quickly (and lose value just as quickly). “Microtrends” are obvious among Mission hipsters: they may revolve around a particular haircut, a combination of colors, a notable texture or pattern. Major “global fashion” brands (Prada, Gucci, etc.) are far from absent, but Chrome messenger bags, Campagnolo bicycle hats and locally-made Nice Collective hoodies are more likely to get positive reviews. However, they’re also relatively expensive; thus they can be used as an index of income and brand consciousness.

Based on a map of “corporate logos” and “protest patches” found during a given time period in the Mission, one might ask such questions as:

- Which occur more frequently?
- What are the key loci for each set? Do these correspond with particular parts of the Mission, of Dolores Park, or perhaps with particular cafés?
- How often do we find corporate logos and protest patches on the same people?
- Are these shibboleths reliable signifiers of political affiliation or leaning? Are there other signifiers in the field that might work better?

While a given run of our game design might produce interesting results on its own, its results become much more interesting once we can collate data from repeated play dates. Do the results vary significantly depending on external events? Do MacWorld or the Anarchist Book Fair skew the results? What changes appear to be taking place over time? Likewise, this basic social mapping game structure could easily be applied to other neighborhoods or require players to find different “markers” than those suggested.

Mechanics

Players will travel through the mission district seeking out markers representative of their respective social class. The inevitable engineering question that arises is “How do we validate a marker”? Also, how are disputes over markers handled? For example, suppose both teams take the picture of a person carrying a protest sign warning of the supposed dangers of GM food products while simultaneously wearing a Chrome messenger bag. Which group wins ownership of this piece of “territory”?

The simplest way to handle marker recognition is to have players moderate themselves. Players can use their cell phones to take pictures of a marker and then post the image to a website or blog. Then, the other players can reply with arguments for or against the piece. These can be the same players in the field that are out scouting for markers or more passive players that are just monitoring the feeds and creating supporting arguments. Based on the debate between the players, a judge or referee player (perhaps the ethnographers?) will decide who wins the argument and update the map accordingly.

While having our own forum or blog would be work well, sites like Twitter, FaceBook, and Flicker could be also be used as a method of posting claims. Some of the benefits of using these sites include user familiarity with the site, automatic alerts to “Subscribers” of specific feeds, and the existence of prepackaged programming APIs that allow integration into apps should we decide to create a standalone application for the game. Even if we do not create a custom game app, most phones are capable of exchanging text and picture information with sites like Twitter without anything more complex or expensive than a text-messaging plan.

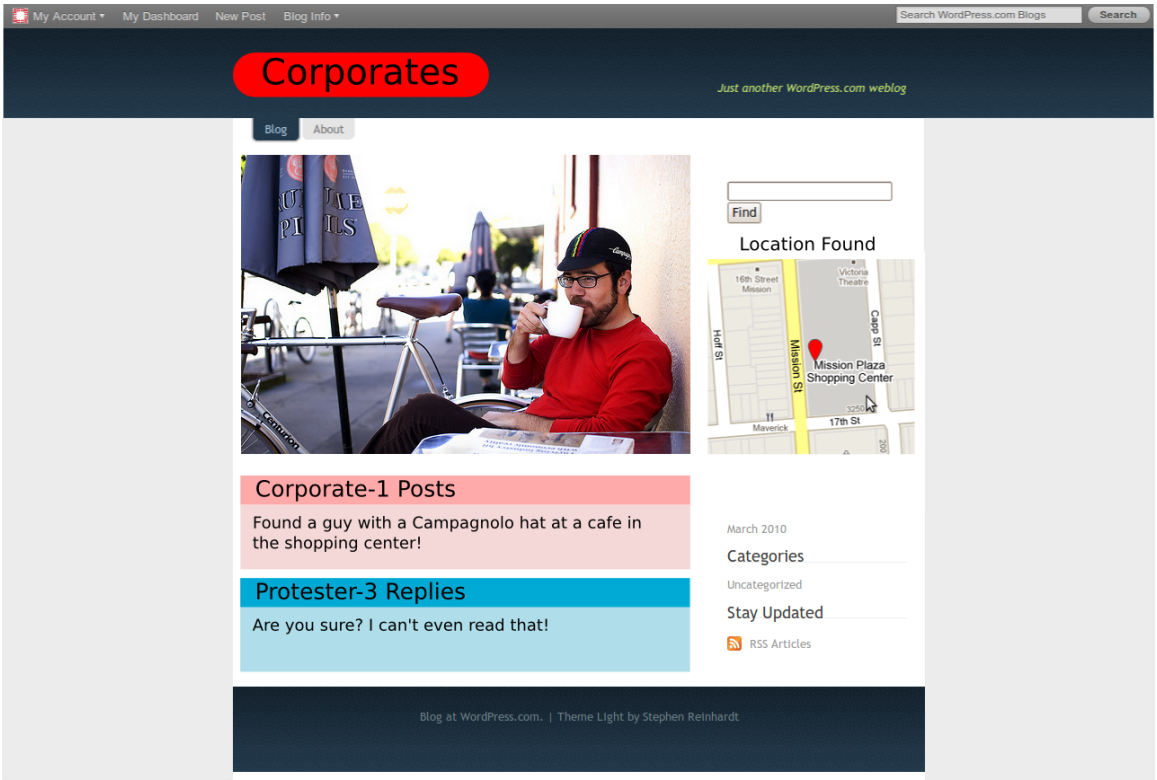
Game Rules

Premise: This is a race game in which two teams compete to control the most territory. To accomplish these goals, players must identify markers scattered through the field of play.

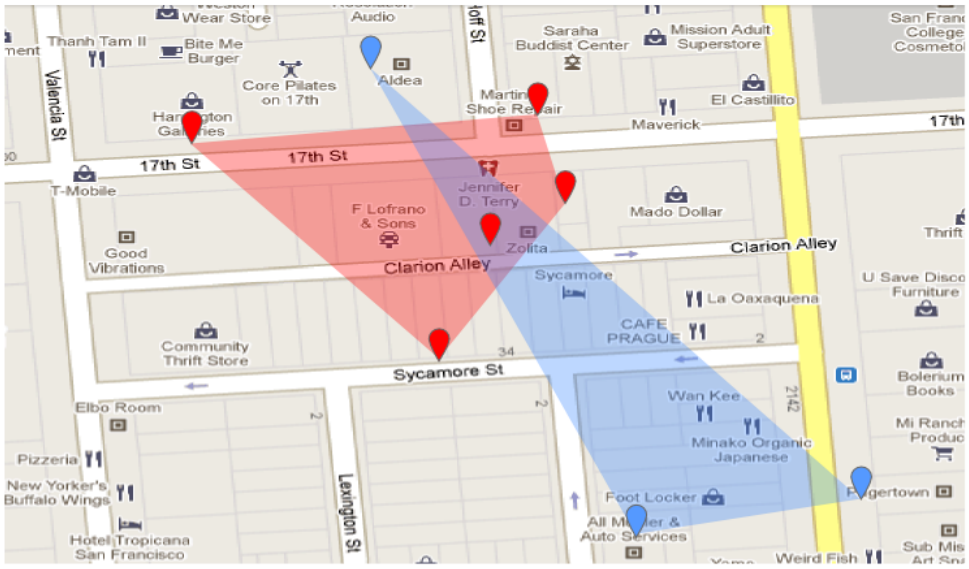
Markers: Markers must be of a type that can be verified by the game server. A marker may consist of a photo of a particular type of object or lettering, an audio recording and text submitted by the player. The idea is that the players are responsible for locating and claiming markers by reporting them.

Territory: Territory consists of the largest general polygon entirely within the field of play that can be described by a team’s markers and that does not overlap any existing team’s territory.

Players: This game is a race for at least two teams of one player each, although it can work for any number of teams and players.



Players post marker pictures to a blog to claim territory.



An example of territory being claimed. The team with the largest area wins.