unexceptional.net
Drafted for *Second Person Shooter*
Robert F. Nideffer, Summer 2005

Overview

unexceptional.net is a mystical realist journey catalyzed by a series of interconnected events related to sexual infidelity, political conspiracy, and spiritual transformation where you get to play a supporting role to the main character, Guy. Guy is a rather non-descript, fat, balding white dude with a shaved head and a goatee. He is anal obsessive, overly sensitive, emotionally distant, unnecessarily pessimistic, morally righteous, and occasionally perverted. He is also an avid game player, an aspiring game designer and comic artist, and a fairly competent hacker. Guy has just recently found out that his long-time partner is having an affair. This discovery launches him upon a series of quests, that you participate in, in effort to gain insight into the nature of his partner's relationship.

The unexceptional project draws on the traditions of comics, graphic novels and computer games in order to create an environment that crosses boundaries between pop culture, fine art, and social critique. It also blurs the borders between "real" space and "virtual" space. The game has been developed as a net-centric, multimodal, pervasive action adventure RPG accessible via GPS enabled phones, the Internet, and a 3D game client. The main gateway to the game is through a Web portal designed by Guy, where he keeps a Blog documenting his daily trials and tribulations. He links to his comics, Web-hacks, and games from the Blog. Guy also provides running commentary on issues as his dramatic experience unfolds. Guy's life is utterly out of control, and you attempt to help him regain a sense of stability.
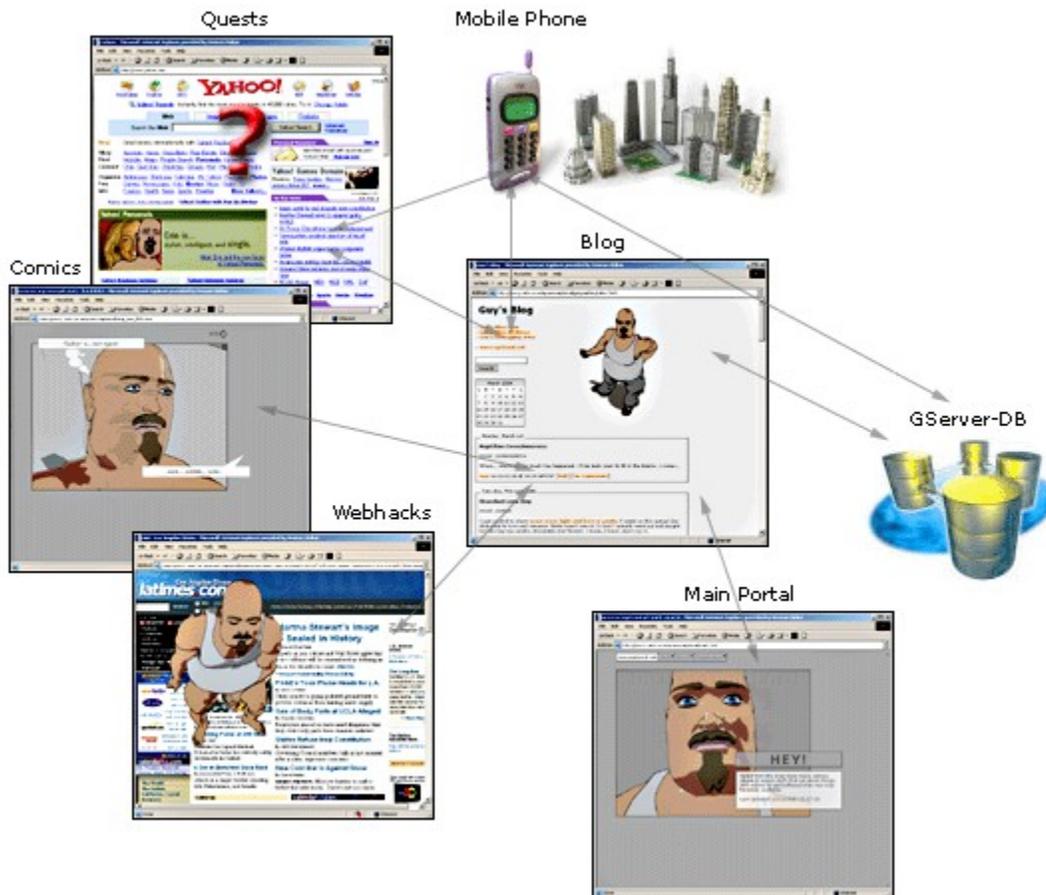

Figure 1: GPS and Web Interface

For better or worse, Guy's the kind of friend you like to have because he gives you and your other friends something to talk about. But unlike cults of personality built up around "live" celebrities where people must fantasize a personal connection to the star, Guy actually *can* reach people on a personal level. Moreover, he can do so on a non-human scale, because there's nothing to prevent him from carrying on thousands of intimate relationships at once, since for all practical purposes he's nothing but a highly scripted, automated and dynamically updated interactive database.

The overall narrative arc entails: 1) an introduction to Guy as the crass, angry, resentful, cynical and curmudgeonly fellow that he is by nature; 2) the catapulting of Guy into a period of crisis linked to discovery of his cheating partner Betty and her love for Dick in the midst of terrorism, war, and homeland insecurity; 3) Guy's vicarious exposure to Betty and Dick's disturbingly co-opted and corrupted Eastern mysticism; and 4) Guy's neurotic compulsion to achieve enlightenment… whatever that may mean. To achieve enlightenment Guy must go on a series of Web and GPS-based quests to find special objects that will help open all seven of his major "Chakras," the energetic centers of the body according to Buddhist doctrine.

High Level Goals
Key objectives of the project include: 1) using unexceptional.net as a testbed for deploying custom designed and freely distributed software that takes advantage of everyday communication technologies such as Blogging, email, 3D gaming, and mobile telephony in order to enable anywhere anytime access to heterogenous game worlds; 2) implementing the game infrastructure in such a way that it can be used for alternative content development and deployment; 3) facilitating ease of content creation through provision of a Web-based "World-Building Toolkit"; 4) sharing the results in the public domain through Internet distribution, formal exhibition in fine art contexts, professional conferences and events, and publication; and 5) exploring novel forms of individual and community interaction.

Figure 2: Guy Playing With Himself In Full-Blown 3D

Example Game Scenarios and Interfaces

A Web surfer stumbles into Guy's portal on her PC and decides to create an account in order to become a registered player. Account creation requires her name, email, mobile number, and password. She now gets sent an email from Guy, and is forwarded to his Blog which contains a single post providing context for the game about to unfold. The post also gives her the first quest, and provides a link for downloading Guy's recently released mobile phone game, "Dick Hunt". She downloads, installs, and launches the phone game.

When she starts the application, the entire game world – terrains, structures, characters, statistics, inventory, quest – gets built for her based on her geolocation. The game now continues endlessly in every direction due to an algorithmically generated grid-based game layout. Moreover, each grid has a simple coordinate that's stored in memory which allows for identical path and object placement on return. The game also sends her location information to the game server and begins tracking her. Later if she plays without a GPS enabled phone, her advancement can still happen by communicating with other players and non-player characters through an online trading network.

After a minute or so she will recieve an incoming phone call from Guy, allowing her to continue her quest in voice-mode. Guy tells her she's in the vicinity of a secret spot where Betty was rumored to have spent time with Dick. He tells her she must navigate to a particular physical location where she will find information necessary for her to complete her first quest. When she finally arrives at the destination, back in the visual version of the Dick Hunt phone game, she discovers that a virtual treasure object has now appeared in the inventory.

Later she arrives home from work and logs into Guy's Blog from her PC where she sees her updated game-state information as well as her path data plotted as a visual mapping of her movement in space and time. She also now has a Blog-based link to a Web-page associated with the key object that contains critical game related information. Once accessed, her quest is completed, her stats are updated, and a new Blog post and quest are made available. Next time she thinks she may even try the 3D client. But for now, she's had all she can stand (see http://unexceptional.net).

Figure 3: Guy With His Pussy

Author Bio

Robert F. Nideffer researches, teaches, and publishes in the areas of virtual environments and behavior, interface theory and design, technology and culture, and contemporary social theory. He holds an MFA in Computer Arts, and a Ph.D. in Sociology, and is an Associate Professor in Studio Art and Informatics at UC Irvine, where he serves as an Affiliated Faculty in the Visual Studies Program, and as Co-Director for the Art, Computation and Engineering (ACE) Program. He is also directing the UC Irvine Game Culture & Technology Lab, and a related academic "Specialization in Game Culture and Technology." Robert has participated in a number of national and international online and offline exhibitions, speaking engagements and panels for a variety of professional conferences.

Between 1997 and 1999, Robert was employed by the Departments of Computer Science and Engineering at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) where he led the user interface design group of the Alexandria Digital Library project. While there he was responsible for developing distributed, peer-to-peer digital library architectures and production-ready software components supporting organization, publication, discovery, and use of geospatial and other types of strongly structured scientific data. At UCSB he also served as Co-PI on a three year Research Across Disciplines project funded out of the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Research that resulted in the development of a Java-based multi-agent software system shown as part of the Whitney Biennial of American Art in 2002.