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A CERTAIN PLACE ON THE INTERNET. REDDIT PLACE

Art research paper

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Abstract

An analysis of the place-phenomenon called The Place from the point of view of cultural, technological and organisational performance as understood by McKenzie, and noting that this phenomenon was a reflection and unintentional simulation of our aspirations in the physical (non-virtual) world. Passing through the cycle of life: birth, growth and death, it remains a digital record symbolising power, war, creation and destruction.

Keywords

r/place, reddit, cultural performance, technological performance, organisational performance

Internet is a new virtual reality in which the ‘analogue’ norms and customs are implemented.

When addressing the topic of human presence in the world of Internet, it is important to distinguish between three realities: physical, electronic and virtual. Physical reality is what surrounded man before the invention of the computer: it is the environment in which human live. Virtual reality is somewhat physical, because it operates on physical units, it is perceived by the human senses in the same way as the real world; however, in the present paper, it means the world happening in virtual space, which includes, among other things, the space of video games, software, as well as the Internet and all the elements it consists of. The electronic world means hardware: all the equipment which enables the perception of virtual world: computers, smartphones, tools used for augmented reality.



Fig. 1. Relationships between the realities in which human live. 1. real world, 2. electronic world, 3. digital world. Author’s scheme.

In the present paper I will analyse the phenomenon-place called r/place from the perspective of cultural, technological and organisational performance as defined by McKenzie.

Front page of Internet

When you type the search term ‘reddit’ into Google, the first link available bears the title: “reddit: the front page of Internet”. On the linked website we can read: “Reddit is home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection.”¹ It is a space where there is a kind of collection and mixture of everything, where every registered user posts their content: photo, music, text, link. Reddit is divided into subreddits, i.e. separate thematic spaces: from those dedicated to travels and technology, through the topics of pop culture and current world events, up to very abstract topics, such as: r/BreadStapledToTrees, r/ChairUnderWater, r/TreesSuckingOnThings, r/MonksLookingAtBeer. Currently, i.e. as of 2021, there are over 2.8 million subreddits, including

1 <https://www.redditinc.com> [accessed: 16 July 2021].

over 130,000 active ones (having at least 5 new posts or comments per day).² It is not only a place, it is also a meeting, a virtual space-time allowing the exchange of ideas and on-line resources.

r/place

On 1 April 2017, April Fool's Day, the following message was posted on Reddit:

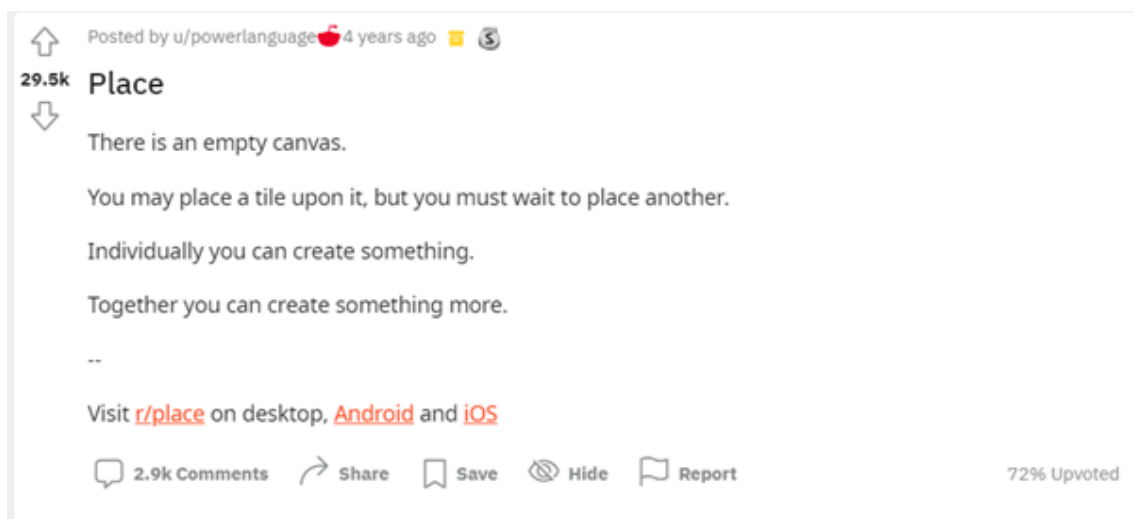


Fig. 2. r/place, announcement of the experiment on Reddit, <https://www.reddit.com/r/announcements/comments/62mesr/place/> [accessed: 16/07/2021].

It was a blank white grid of 1000×1000 pixels, totalling one million squares that could be filled with one of 16 colours of your choice. Anyone with a Reddit account was able to take part in the event between 1 and 3 April 2017. Ultimately, 1.2 million Reddit users decided to participate. The rules were simple: each user could choose an empty space and place one pixel of the chosen colour anywhere on the grid, including where someone had already placed something. This action could be repeated every 5–20 minutes.

Initially, the canvas was filled in a chaotic, random and unplanned way, but as the event went on, many people belonging to particular subreddits started to form specific groups. What we can admire as the final work was mostly created by hundreds of users collaborating with each other. Many elements had to be drawn or processed again as pixels could be overwritten throughout the event. Some images were created by already existing and active subreddit communities, for example the large red square with black text, a quote from the *Star Wars* prequel, placed in the middle of the canvas was created by the r/PrequelMemes group formed to create memes about the *Star Wars* universe. There are also plenty of communities created precisely from the desire to create something in The Place

² Ying L., *10 Reddit Statistics Every Marketer Should Know In 2021 [Infographic]*, 2011, <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/reddit-statistics> [accessed: 16 July 2021].

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– for example r/TheBlueCorner, a group that wanted to paint in blue as much of the bottom right-hand corner as possible, or r/MonaLisaClan, which drew a pixelated version of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*.

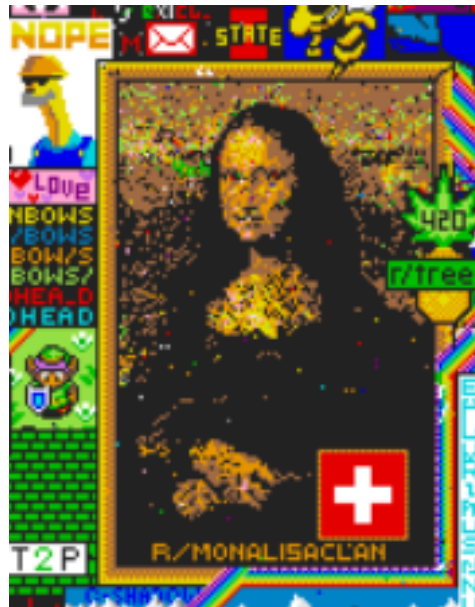


Fig. 3. Mona Lisa by r/MonaLisaClan, <https://www.generalistlab.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final-canvas-from-The-Place-Reddit-Experiment.png> [accessed: 30/09/2021].



Fig. 4. Board with the quote from the Star Wars prequel, <https://www.generalistlab.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final-canvas-from-The-Place-Reddit-Experiment.png> [accessed: 30/09/2021].

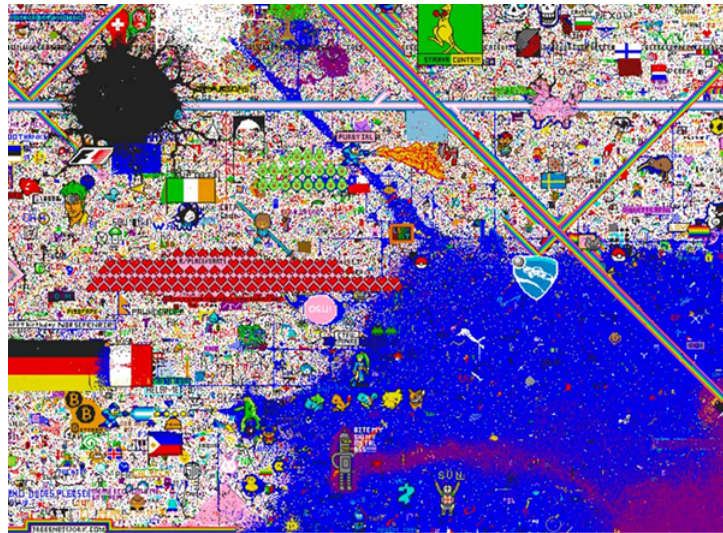


Fig. 5. Blue Corner, <https://youtu.be/XnRCZK3KjUY> [accessed: 30/09/2021].

Users can be divided into three main groups. The first consists of Creators. Their main goal was to create something that was not a mass of random pixels. The participants very quickly realised that in order to achieve this, they had to join forces. They shared common interests, such as video games, Pokemons, sports teams or their country of origin. From on the database created after the event, we can learn that the Germans preferred yellow, red and black, the Dutch preferred orange, while the Australians preferred green and yellow.³ One of the largest flags drawn was the German one, which began to grow towards the small French flag. Despite objections from some users to spare the neighbouring flag (“last time we did... well let’s say it didn’t work out that great in the end”⁴), the German stripes absorbed the French ones.

Participant gathered in groups to create, but also to destroy. A group of Destroyers know as *r/the-blackvoid* tried to paint every pixel black, and one of the users compared this destruction to the invigorating effect of fires on the forest ecosystem and the inherent element of life.⁵ They started their destruction in the middle of the canvas with a single black pixel, devouring all the effects of the Creators’ work encountered along the way.

3 u/Drunken_Economist, *Place Datasets (April Fools 2017)*, [in:] *r/redditdata*, Reddit, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/redditdata/comments/6640ru/place_datasets_april_fools_2017/ [accessed: 21/09/2021].

4 Cuthbertson A., *Reddit Place: The Internet’s best Experiment Yet*, “Newsweek”, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/reddit-place-internet-experiment-579049> [accessed: 21/09/2021].

5 u/zwolfp, *I used to hate the Void but watching the time-lapses I see they’re a vital part of the r/place ecosystem. Like a forest fire making way for new life*, [in:] *r/place*, reddit, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/place/comments/636xjc/i_used_to_hate_the_void_but_watching_the/dfrron8/ [accessed: 21/09/2021].

One of the alliances wrote its own manifesto entitled *We're Your Friends Now. A history of the friendships that made The Green Lattice great*,⁶ which includes treaties, rules of diplomacy, a description of the group, as well as a history of the battles and skirmishes that happened during the whole event.



Fig. 6. The destructive actions of the r/theblackvoid group, <https://youtu.be/XnRCZK3KjUY> [accessed: 30/09/2021].

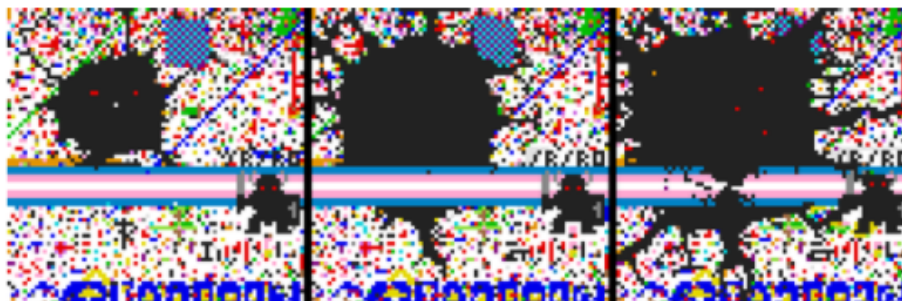


Fig. 7. Stages of creation of the Black Void, https://www.reddit.com/r/RotMG/comments/62vmbg/the_void_consumes_all_xpost_from_rplace/ [accessed: 30/09/2021].

The third faction was called the Defenders. Some of them initially belonged to the group of Destroyers, who tried to paint as large area as possible in blue (r/BlueCorner), red (r/RedCorner) or green (r/GreenLattice). The other participants began to fight these factions by drawing their own elements on the solid patches of colour. The supporters of solid colours retreated and decided to douse the newly created paintings with colours, thus combining different elements into one. In the Defenders group, you can also find factions or individual users who used to clean the existing images of unwanted pixels or helped other groups fight the Black Void consuming everything around them.

⁶ Jojo6311, *We're Your Friends Now. A history of the friendships that made The Green Lattice great. The story of the Green Lattice from Jojo6311, a moderator of the community*, 2017, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qbdTWoXblOBSwp-J8TGBiRBiK8PEFAApWM7zZaDb8MU/edit> [accessed: 21/09/2021].

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During the 72 hours of the event, groups united and broke up, alliances were formed, wars were declared, and the drawn representations of different interests and passions were defended. Timelapse of the experiment can be viewed on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/XnRCZK3KjUY>).

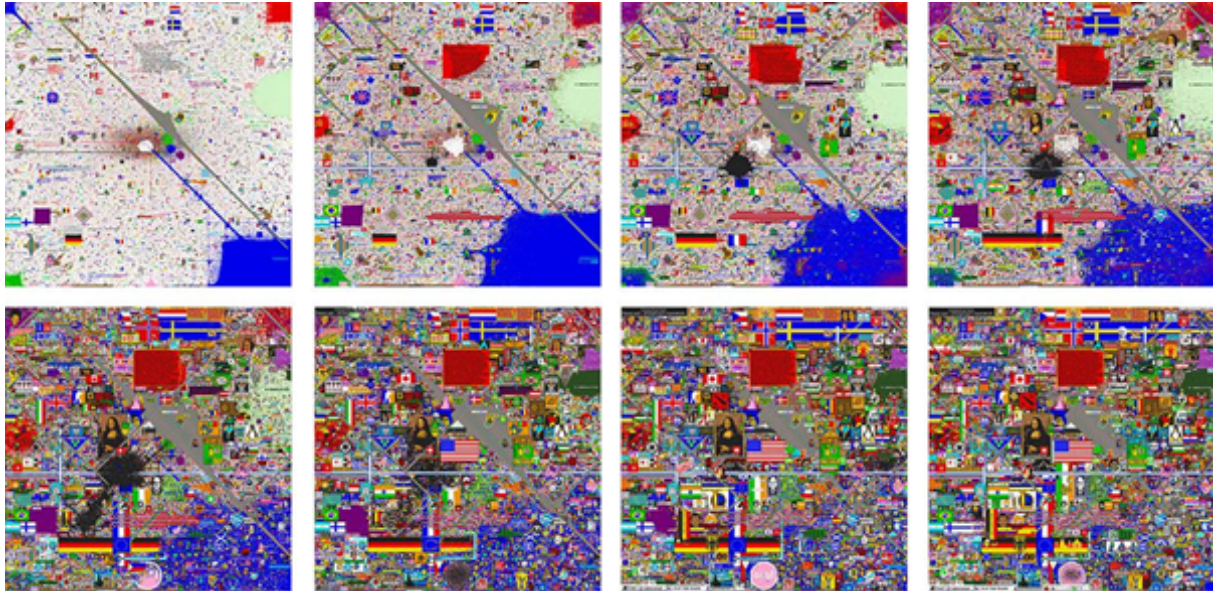


Fig. 8. Stages of the development of r/place, <https://youtu.be/XnRCZK3KjUY> [accessed: 30/09/2021].

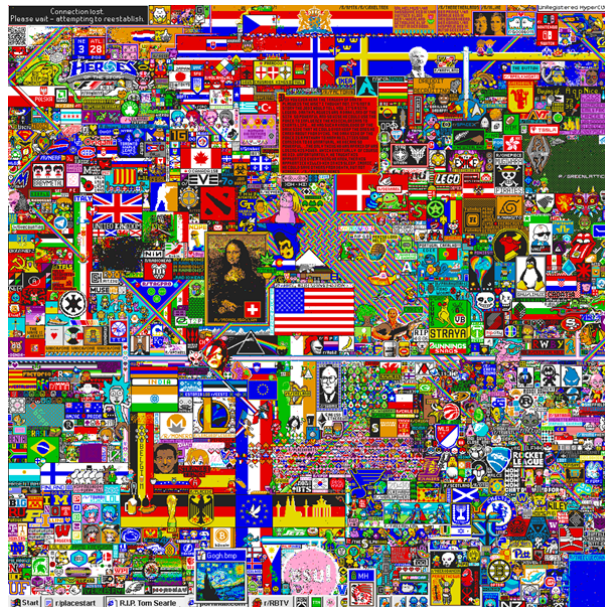


Fig. 9. Result of the r/place experiment, <https://www.generalistlab.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final-canvas-from-The-Place-Reddit-Experiment.png> [accessed: 30/09/2021].

Description from the point of view of cultural performance

The field of cultural performance, defined over the last half century, encompasses a wide range of activities conducted around the world. They include traditional and experimental theatre; various rites and ceremonies, mass events such as parades and festivals; ballroom, classical and experimental dance; oral transmission of literature (e.g. speeches and public readings); folk traditions of rhapsody and storytelling; aesthetic practices of everyday life such as plays and social life; political demonstrations and social movements.⁷

Performance as understood by McKenzie goes beyond the sphere of ceremonies, rituals, music, dance, theatre or film. It has been used by anthropologists as a tool to study rituals, while the sociologists used it to study the efficiency of social interactions. The whole world is one big global performance, and r/place is a phenomenon-place that focuses this global performance like a lens. It was a reflection and unintentional simulation of aspirations from the physical (non-virtual) world.

In r/place, users did not even have a virtual body that could act as a substitute for a sense of presence. Although each of them was represented only by a single pixel in one of 16 colours, they behaved as if they were in the real world: they gathered in groups, formed alliances, fought with other groups, and acted independently without even having a body of their own. Although the whole process took place in the form of a game in a virtual world, human behaviour did not differ from that encountered on a daily basis, in the world of physical reality, both from the global and local perspectives. The site became a lens through which various elements from the physical world passed into the virtual world and created a mini-civilisation. These elements manifested themselves not only in their physicality, like the national flags, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* painting or images of cartoon characters, but also in what drives us to act: relationships, alliances, desires, goals.

[...] physical space determines human, and electronic space is determined by them.⁸

The r/place is a place where users realise their goals, treat it as their personal site, have the possibility to create the world, perform themselves. The Internet is a transposition, a re-writing of physical reality into virtual reality in a different time-space dimension.

The Internet and cyberspace offer new ways of creating identities and new spaces for self representation.⁹

People experience the r/place space as their own, as a world in itself. As time passes, rules and norms are developed and corrected, while the incorrect behaviour is defined. „Perform – or else: be socially normalized”.¹⁰ At the same time, users, stepping out of the borders of the traditional (non-virtual) society and its established roles, move into the liminal zone to play roles in a metaphorical world that only came into existence because they took up the challenge and performed. The players did

7 McKenzie J., transl. Kubikowski T., *Performuj albo... od dyscypliny do performansu*, Kraków 2011, pp. 37–38.

8 Myoo S., *Ontoelektronika*, Kraków 2013, p. 48.

9 Stöckl A., *The Internet, Cyberspace and Anthropology*, *The “Cambridge Journal of Anthropology”*, 23 (2003), No. 3, p. 67, on-line: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23820336> [accessed: 03/08/2021].

10 McKenzie J., *Perform or... Else. From Discipline to performance*, New York 2001, p. 9.

not accept the roles they were arbitrarily imposed on. They acted without a master of ceremony that would guide them through the process of entering into their new roles. These emerged during the process. The longer it lasted, the more the roles became constituted.

According to J. McKenzie, challenge is one of the most common gestures of performativity. This challenge was launched by the creators of r/place and taken up by the users: the challenge to take part in an experiment; the challenge to ask yourself, as a user, what status you occupy in the reddit society, to respond to the existing order, defend it or question it.

As the experiment progressed, users got increasingly engaged in activities¹¹ assigned to particular groups: Creators, Destroyers and Defenders. Just like on the “Forbes” cover cited by McKenzie, which became the starting point for his reflections. We can repeat after McKenzie: “Perform – or else...” you will be thrown out of the borders, your representation will disappear, you will no longer take part in the game.

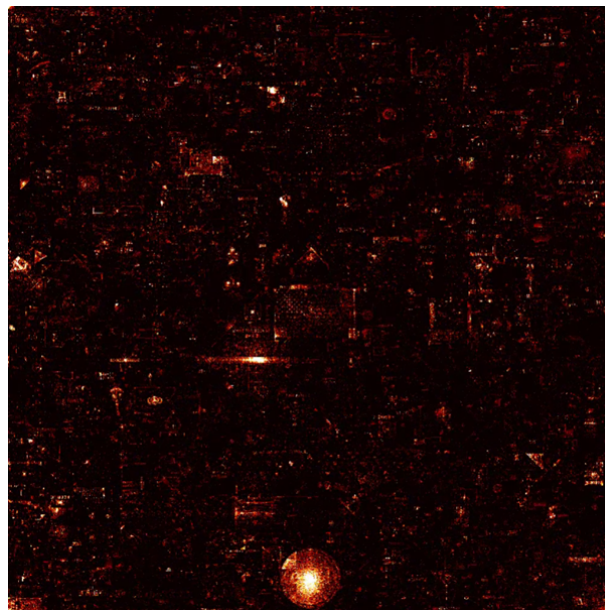


Fig. 10. Map of the activity of r/place, <https://i.imgur.com/a95XXDz.gifv> [accessed: 30/09/2021].

Description from the perspective of technological performance

Body is the primary medium that the performer focuses on and works with, the intrinsic ingredient-tool of performance that is experienced precisely through the body.¹² The emergence of the virtual reality in the Internet, in which the existence of the physical body has been transferred into another

11 Activity Map, <https://i.imgur.com/a95XXDz.gifv> [accessed: 30/09/2021].

12 Wachowski J., *Performans*, Gdańsk 2011, p. 235.

dimension of existence and reality, has caused many areas of life, including art, to move into the virtual world. This process includes also the performance.

According to McKenzie, the technological performance can be understood as efficiency and effectiveness. In this particular case, we can understand it as the efficiency of communication between the different users and its effectiveness manifested in making alliances, conquering space, winning wars and achieving the goals set. This is made possible by the high-performance technology, which manifests itself in “sports cars, stereos and missile systems”.¹³ Technological performance is most evident in devices designed by engineers, technicians and computer scientists in the computer, electronics and telecommunications industries.¹⁴

When we talk about r/place considered as a place-phenomenon, we cannot overlook its technological aspect, which made it possible to organise happen. Here the technology is only the space in which the performance takes place. It is a construction, a space-time continuum, on which the time-space is spread. Humans lose their face and body and are replaced by the graphic representation of the binary code: a pixel. Their being during this meeting is divided into time intervals measured as one second and single pixels. Being here and now is not continuous, it is discrete. Humans are dynamic, different at every moment, changing with every second and every pixel, coexisting with other users.

Description from the perspective of organisational performance

Organisational performance is related to the operation of large enterprises and the management systems that operate there and are geared towards efficiency, productivity and the functioning of the entire corporation. McKenzie mentions the performance management and contrasts it with Taylorism – a vertical type of hierarchy where decisions are made at the highest levels and employees do their work without having a say in how it is organised or done. Performative management is a horizontal type of hierarchy in which the emphasis is put on working together as a team to develop methods of action, and creativity in approaching problem solving so that work can be done more effectively and efficiently.

This kind of collaboration was already assumed at the outset by the creators of the experiment, when they posted the message announcing r/place:

Individually you can create something.

Together you can create more.

13 McKenzie J., *Perform or... Else*, p. 10.

14 McKenzie J., *Perform or... Else*, p. 11.

Although initially everyone acted on their own, trying to discover the specificity of the place, users very quickly gather in groups, and groups formed alliances in which a horizontal hierarchy emerged. They finalised their projects through discussion, creatively responding to changes introduced by the groups of Destroyers or coexisting with other groups of Creators.

The three aforementioned types of performance: cultural, technological and organisational intermingle, together forming a global performance. The performance organised the entire life happening on a virtual world-canvas of 1000×1000 pixels. This is evident in the increasingly effective, efficient world of r/place, where goals were achieved faster and the performance was happening faster as well. Passing through the cycle of life: birth, growth and death, it remains a digital record symbolising power, war, creation and destruction.

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