

PLAYING IN PLACE NOWHERE: CREATING AN OPEN SOURCE COUNTRY

Andrew Y. Ames & Alexia Mellor (WRMC Collaborative)

Through a combination of performance art and game design, WRMC Collaborative investigates the concept of a digital and conceptually open source country through an analysis of our project, Loköenie. Loköenie, meaning “place nowhere,” is a portable and mutable nation whose only fixed location is an IP address. With playful interventions, the work is activated in the physical and lives in the digital, connecting disparate locations in web space.

Corporations are the dominant institution of our time and influence everything from the smallest aspect of our daily experience to the most powerful of governments. Today, corporations benefit from greater mobility and rights than do most people. McDonald’s, Starbucks and IKEA, for instance, are international brands that shape individual interests. What, then, does nationality mean in a corporatized world?

Corporations and governments actively define physical and virtual borders. Surfing between websites is the contemporary equivalent of moving between states or countries. IDs are checked, information is collected, fees are paid, all to gain or restrict access. Despite virtual space’s ability to cross borders and connect people, access is determined by forces in physical space. China’s government has banned Facebook; Google Inc. has restricted access to YouTube content based on local copyright laws and the location of an IP address; corporations maintain firewalls that protect their Intranet and limit employee access to the Internet. For better or worse virtual space, physical space, corporations and governments are intertwined, shaping the collective meaning, experience and cultural identity of place.

Using contemporary technologies and drawing upon art movements such as the Situationists and Fluxus, WRMC Collaborative has created Loköenie, a nation based on open source principles challenging a fixed definition of place. Personal identity is derived less from place of origin, but rather is constructed within a globalized economic, political and cultural climate. Cultures are morphing into a monoculture characterized by urban migration, corporate expansion and technological innovations. Through play strategies, Loköenie integrates aspects of corporation and government to create the possibility of a culture of one’s choosing. With installation, performance and digital art WRMC builds a nation whose citizens are active online and off.

What is Loköenie?

Loköenie exists in three formats: public, private and virtual spaces. The milieu from which it springs is one where media are controlled by corporations and social media sites are replacing town hall demonstrations. Although we may not know our neighbors, we do have 447 Facebook friends. WRMC embraces this format of community building by placing the virtual at the center of where citizens can instigate change. Loköenie citizens, or shareholders, are not asked to relinquish their current national allegiances. The motivation in creating Loköenie is to dispel the notion that identity is bound by place, and to create a nation-state that takes the dominant governing principles of corporate culture and subverts

them to create a parallel culture; a physical and virtual subculture. Citizens are shareholders in this corporate state, responsible to and for the conditions of the nation. Citizens moderate all aspects of the nation: from how and what is governed, to establishing a framework for political freedoms and civic duties. Lokönie provides citizens with a space to govern and act as they see fit, provided they follow WRMC's one rule: changes must be for the benefit all citizens. What is deemed "best" is up for interpretation by the group and reflects the community's shifting concerns and ideals in response to current conditions.

Lokönie seeks to discover whether a country following an open source platform will instigate individual action on behalf of a group. Fascinated by the fact that Facebook has almost twice as many users as the United States has citizens, we question, "does a voice in virtual space hold the same power as a voice in physical space?" Facebook users do not have the right to vote or make changes to the site's format, but they do fervently voice their disgust when the proprietors make updates or alter the rules of use. Many organizations and politicians turn to Facebook to attract voters due to the website's ability to engage tech savvy masses in signing petitions and sharing links with "friends." The corporation of Facebook and other social media sites have expanded their borders and influence beyond simply sharing status updates. Recent uprisings across the globe have turned to Google, Facebook and Twitter to organize protests and broadcast social unrest. "Corporate" is derived from Latin corporatus, and means "united in one body." [1] Lokönie reclaims the Latin meaning by uniting groups of people through a co-opting of corporate structures and forming an organizational principle by which this new national body can operate in public, private and virtual spaces.

PUBLIC

Public performances take an interventionist role with WRMC, dressed as representative consultants of Lokönie, entering into public spaces and claiming an area with our tarp and flag. As consultants we act like canvassers, planting our flag in parking lots and public parks, asking passersby to fill out forms for entering the country. The interventions serve to disrupt the normal use of the space and encourage public engagement, whereas the forms serve as a means of collecting data about participants and their responses to questions similarly found on official US government forms. The forms ask participants for information including Social Security Number, address and weight, favorite song, and a minimum wage they would be willing to work for as a non-resident immigrant to Lokönie. The questions promote the consideration of the underlying agendas of these documents that we are so accustomed to completing. Having filled out the form, visitors are then welcome to enter the demarcated space.

PRIVATE

Private installations take place within the white walls of the gallery. The gallery acts as the temporarily fixed capital or franchise where participants encounter a set of rules that they must follow to enter the work and become the performers. These rules involve taking off shoes for security measures, filling out visa applications, and finally entering the space of the ten foot by ten foot tarp that marks the area Lokönie inhabits. Lokönie performs as a sovereign state which citizens may use as they wish, from a space to read War and Peace, to a place to find peace during war. By placing Lokönie in a gallery setting, we challenge art's role and its potential to actively effect social critique. Further, we challenge the spatial neutrality of the white cube as the gallery sets the stage for the discourse surrounding art as political agent.

VIRTUAL

The URL for the website (<http://lokonenie.projectsoya.net>) is Lokönenie's virtual and only fixed location; its headquarters or embassy where decisions are made and information is stored. The virtual space of Lokönenie is set up to follow an open source model. Open source is generally a production practice, however in this case it is a philosophy that provides access to end product source materials with the possibility of modifying them to benefit the whole. Utilizing MediaWiki, an open source wiki platform, we create a forum for a democratic, self-policing community of citizens with a common interest in upholding a nation-state based upon equal access. Participating citizens/shareholders can download visa applications and census forms for use in public interventions, patterns for making the flag and tarp, and modify documentation on the wiki. All alterations must follow specific guidelines that adhere to the spirit of Lokönenie and its mission to create an open state.

The name Lokönenie, derived from Esperanto means "place nowhere," and highlights the transitory, dislocated nature of our country and our desire to promote a place without geographic, cultural or language barriers. Based on corporate and government organizational principles of duty to shareholders, popular sovereignty, ability to legislate, and flexibility of operations, Lokönenie fosters a multi-national and multi-platform culture. The work is activated in the real world and lives in the digital where disparate locations become connected in virtual space. The public interventions, website and gallery installations facilitate dialog about perceptions of borders, access and territory, as well as how we identify with place as a fluid idea.

The desire to create a neutral space has been attempted before in the physical world. A historic example is the Esperanto-speaking territory of Neutral Moresnet, later known as Amikejo ('place of great friendship'), which was established as a 3.5 sq km sector in between the Netherlands, Belgium and Prussia in the early nineteenth century. [2] Residents introduced their own form of branding with postage stamps, a flag, currency and a national anthem all to instill a sense of national pride and cohesion. Although Amikejo was not successfully incorporated as an independent state, its ideals of a stateless space have persisted.

Play

The creation of Amikejo exemplifies the Situationist principle of psychogeography, whereby one actively shapes and is shaped by physical spaces, resulting in a relationship to place that is constantly evolving and fluid. As the urban landscape continues to grow and nature is increasingly replaced by technology, psychogeography takes on a particular relevance to the ways we understand spatial strategies. In the vein of the Situationists, Lokönenie uses play and experimentation to alter assumptions about place. Whereas the Situationists focused on altering ways of navigating urban space we take this as a starting point and expand our inquiries to include virtual space. We apply and reboot these approaches to blend with contemporary technologies. Pairing the Situationists' mode of creating "situations" with Fluxus' mode of setting up unconventional playful happenings, we produce actions that bend the rules of corporate engagement and political policy, resulting in conditions that are both familiar and unexpected.

Play serves as a point of entry for participants to interact with the work physically and conceptually. We establish rule sets that imitate and simultaneously subvert existing corporate and government systems, using humor to make transparent the governing systems at hand. These rules define how players move through levels of engagement to gain access to Lokönenie. Informed by Huizinga's theory of the Magic

Circle, [3] our rule systems provide a framework to reflect on the familiar contexts of public, private and virtual space. In the case of Lokönie, the portable country acts like an embassy or a multi-national corporation, claiming and taking over an area within one of the three realms. The understood rules and codes of conduct in these spaces are temporarily replaced by the rules of Lokönie, altering the ways participants interact with the physical and social environments. The core of our methodology is based on the principle that understanding comes through action not simply observation. It is this direct participation in the project that we refer to as performativity.

As Judith Butler describes it, performativity takes as its foundation that all social reality is an illusion created from our implicit acceptance of and enactment of codes of conduct and power structures. [4] We perform the various roles society dictates: the role of man or woman, the role of employee, the role of citizen, much like an actor performs the role laid out in a script. Butler describes performativity in regards to gender, but the principle is equally applicable to all facets of social interaction. Once it is understood that everything is in fact performed in relation to pre-determined structures, one can choose to alter either the structure or the behavior in response to said structure. Lokönie co-opts and manipulates existing and recognizable characteristics of corporations and government to perform something new: a hybrid of corporation and government.

The codes of corporate identity are performed through branding. Just like corporations and governments, WRMC has generated a set of symbols to represent and make recognizable the state of Lokönie and its open source culture. The branding is carried through all forms of artifacts used in performances, installations and on the web: official documents, the flag and tarp, and our uniforms. These symbols indicate when participants enter into Lokönie and transcend pre-existing social borders. Ultimately, the branding of Lokönie is synonymous with an open, accessible and sovereign space.

History

The critique of government has been a thread throughout art history. While the addition of corporate critique to the canon is more recent, it reflects the corporation's position as the dominant institution in our culture. Several predecessors have explored these ideas and it is important to note their differing and influential approaches as we further add to the dialog.

Constant Nieuwenhuys, an artist-architect originally involved in the Situationist International movement of the 1960s, envisioned his own idea of a post-capitalist utopia where play was the underlying structure for society: New Babylon. Through alterations in architecture and the creation of "situations," New Babylon aimed to transform daily life by suggesting that urban space and architecture are both, in fact, amorphous and temporary, responding to and impacting human interactions. [5] In 2011 the artist group Benrik introduced their Situationist iPhone application. The app, termed by the artists as the "first proto-Marxist iPhone app," asks members to act out "situations" in the real world that were selected via the virtual, all with the intention of creating an uncommon everyday. [6] Nieuwenhuys and Benrik take as their medium the various social interactions that occur within public space and use play to modify the context or create "relationships" between people that might not otherwise interact. Similarly to both Nieuwenhuys and Benrik, we enlist play as our primary tool to distort social norms and create situations in which strangers come together to create an exchange.

The artist projects NSK State and Refugee Republic also seek their own forms of utopia to challenge socio-political circumstances. The Slovenian artist group IRWIN created NSK State, "the first global state of

the universe” [7] as an ongoing project through which its founders and citizens produce art, exhibitions and a congress to meet with citizens and further link the political with art. NSK State was initiated amidst the cultural and political turmoil of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and along with its musical wing, Laibach, investigates ideas of denationalization through a blend of political activism and art. Refugee Republic (RR) is another example of a multi-faceted project that links art and politics. Like Loköenie, RR lives online and engages people in political dialog through corporate practices. The project calls attention to the migratory patterns of refugees and their economic potential in the twenty-first century by registering itself as a corporation in the state of Nevada (USA) and selling stock shares. [8] The aim is to demonstrate the investment potential and economic value of refugees. RR expands the dialog around migration with their downloadable passports, to show that we are all in some way displaced. NSK State, RR and Loköenie each call upon art as a means to initiate discourse around socio-political critique.

Games offer another method for extending political and institutional critique. NationStates.net allows players to create their own nation based on their political ideals. Originally created by Max Barry as a marketing ploy for his novel, Jennifer Government, the game gained unexpected popularity and has become a powerful tool to experience politics in action. Players debate, moderate and resolve issues as a group through the “World Assembly,” akin to the United Nations. There is no way to win the game, but nations are ranked by the “World Assembly” on items such as economic strength and civil liberties. [9] Both NationStates.net and Loköenie create the terms and conditions as a framework but it is how one plays the game that creates the opportunity to directly experience and consequently critique political policy.

Building upon the dialog of artist as activist, we are developing strategies to expand Loköenie’s impact in private, public and web space. As we continue to develop and increase the technological presence of Loköenie, there are three directions we are currently pursuing: mobile applications, microblogging, and commodity manufacturing. Our first foray into mobile applications will include the use of QR codes read by mobile devices. The QR Codes left at intervention sites function as ports of entry to find our country online. The codes are miniature territories accessible by passports in the form of key technology. Leaving the QR codes extends the intervention as we attempt to redefine physical, virtual and cultural landscape.

Our second expansion includes a microblog where Loköenie’s citizens are encouraged to document and post images of their own interventions into public space. To facilitate this civic service, we are implementing a Tumblr which shows where Loköenie has been and becomes a means to connect participants in a united virtual nation. The virtual nation is mapped out based upon users’ IP addresses which mark their virtual and physical locations.

Lastly, for citizens who would like to perform interventions but do not wish to make their own flag and tarp, we will have available on our website manufactured packaged country kits, complete with instructions and artifacts for purchase. The packaged country further intertwines the ideas of nation and corporation by turning the symbols and artifacts into commodities.

It is our intention that as the citizen/shareholder base increases, they will take greater ownership over the project and play a crucial role in its trajectory. In creating an open source country, we empower individuals to take an active role in organizing a possible alternative. In doing so, a parallel culture emerges through this empowerment that borrows from the corporatized monoculture dominating today and highlights the socio-political issues at play.

Although with Lokönie we turn to virtual space as a possible solution to create an alternative global culture, we are keenly aware of its limitations. Accessibility proves to be one of the most prevalent issues regarding technology as a utopian solution with much of the world still without Internet connection. If decisions are exclusively being made by those with access to technology, how do we provide a platform to hear the voices without access? With Lokönie, we explore how physical and virtual cultures co-exist with the potential of inspiring members to actively contribute to the enrichment of the cultural landscape in both. A culture is created through a shared set of values and goals that are upheld and reflected within the behavior of the group. Cultures accumulate symbols that represent these shared beliefs and serve to reinforce and guide the learned behaviors. Creating a culture in both a corporate setting and a government context is crucial to organizational strategy. Culture, in both cases, is fluid and evolving and dependent upon the individual members to actively participate in its formation. In the digital age, culture is not limited to place.

Extending the ideas of open source we question what a corporate country might look like. Typically, open source is counter to corporate culture where profit is the ultimate driving force. As CEOs and Prime Ministers of Lokönie, we rewrite corporate and government rules through performativity and play, and create a new objective for corporate culture that makes the greater good of the people, rather than profit at any cost, its primary motivation. Citizens of Lokönie engage with our rule sets and enter a space in which they are empowered to instate policy change and ultimately cultivate their own culture online and off. Lokönie as “place nowhere” reflects the globalized culture in which we live and offers an alternative to place-bound identity.

References and Notes:

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