



Art as an Expanded Field: The Case of the R/Place Social Experiment

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Abstract. In this paper, we will present the social experiment originating from the website Reddit, r/place, and our findings regarding how this experiment has been analyzed and understood, with three interpretations of our studies that could be associated with r/place. On top of that, we will introduce our art research methodology, “art as an expanded field,” in which r/place will be our subject of analysis, with the concept of artification described by scholar Ellen Dissanayake as our theoretical starting point for such an endeavor. It is not in the interest of this work to thoroughly analyze r/place but to present a paradigm for understanding it and possibly further experiments, as well as present the beginnings of our methodology currently developed.

Keywords: R/Place · Artification · Art as an Expanded Field

1 Introduction

For the most assiduous internet users, Reddit, the website known as “the front page of the internet” [1], is a constant presence. Created in 2005 by two North American college students, the forum-like site has more than 50 million users (also known as “redditors”) that access it daily [2]. Reddit is not uniform by any means, having thousands of subcommunities, called subreddits, created and managed by its users, ranging from fans of a movie series, celebrities, music bands, video games, and even the citizens of a country. Content is also mainly created and curated by redditors, and while it started as an aggregation website of what people found interesting to share at the time, Reddit has evolved to become a self-referential community with its brand of humor and jokes [1].

Introducing Reddit makes itself necessary for setting the stage of our object of study, a social experiment created by the website and executed by its users: r/place. While the Place experiment itself is multifaceted and open to many study approaches, we opt to attempt to analyze it from an art perspective that includes theories such as pixel art, net art, interactive art and artification - a many-sided method which will further on be described as an “expanded field”. We also will focus on certain specific aspects of r/place: its “metamorphosis” over the 72 h of the experiment, as well the isolated drawings and composing symbols of the canvas identified by a user-created project called “r/place Atlas”.

2 When It All Started

Starting as an April Fool’s joke, r/place (named as such by the way subreddits are coined in Reddit, with the “r” prefix) was created as a social experiment in 2017 by software engineer Josh Wardle, at the time working for Reddit, and repeated in 2022. At the time of writing, r/place had its third edition which elapsed from July 20 to July 25. The idea was as follows: a blank 1000×1000 pixel empty canvas in which, over 72 h uninterruptedly, Reddit-registered users could change a single pixel color (or “place a tile”, as put by Wardle himself) at a 5-min interval, out of a 16-color palette. However, during this 5-min gap, another number of users could overwrite the same tile, highlighting the weight of Wardle’s words and the only true “instructions” of r/place: “Individually you can create something. Together you can create something more” (Fig. 1).

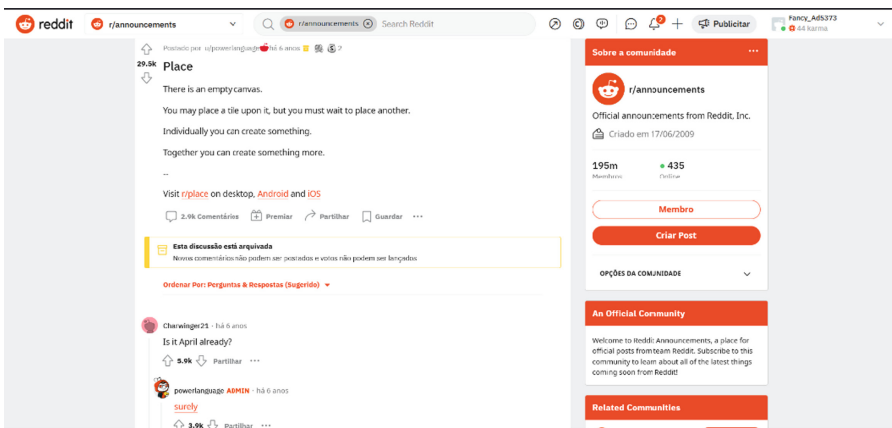


Fig. 1. Josh Wardle’s post with the introduction and instructions for r/place.

Even if a user stayed online during the whole 72 h of r/place, placing tiles precisely at their 5-min interval, they would only be able to place a total of 864 tiles, which equates to not even 0,1% of the total area of 1 million pixels [3]. The insignificance of solitary actions thus highlighted the importance and potential of collaboration.

Still, during the first 24 h what happened was exactly what one would expect of unrestrained actions in an online environment: chaos. The canvas had no sort of visual cohesiveness, with only individual or very small groups of users placing tiles, to initially test the system or create personal works [4]. As pointed out by Wardle himself, the start of r/place looked like something out of a bathroom stall: nazi symbols and penis drawings [5] (Fig. 2).

Yet, despite initial expectations of those following the experiment, participants were able to self-organize in a particular manner [6] to create a canvas that represented what was culturally relevant for the online community at that time, with elements such as memes, jokes, and figures depicting Reddit’s subculture.

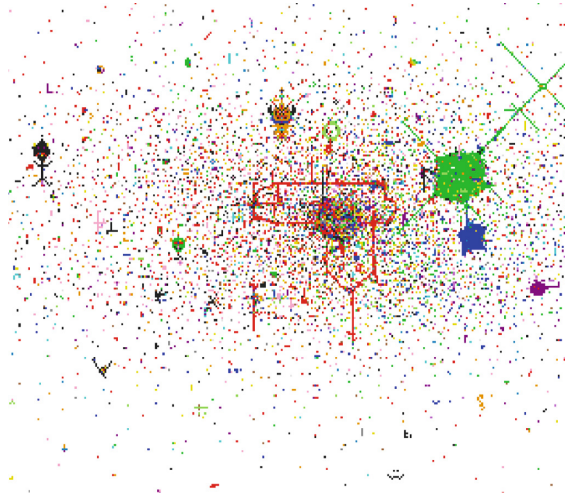


Fig. 2. The first 2 h of the r/place canvas marked by spaced-out unitary pixels, crude drawings, and phallic images.

2.1 Self-organization

What motivated this so-called “self-organization” in the first place, seeing as very disorganized actions marked the first day of the event? The growing absence of “free tiles”, for one: as the number of participants increased, gradually the untouched tiles were disappearing, forcing individuals to either lose their tiles or engage in a collaborative effort to defend their territory, something that would be impossible to do alone considering the technical aspects of r/place. And the other, equally important factor, was simply the desire from Reddit’s online communities, the subreddits, to leave their mark: using the website’s own platform, as well as other means of communication such as Skype, Discord and Twitter, users from a same subreddit could work in an organized fashion so as to make a cohesive visual representation of their community (Fig. 3).

Besides the pre-existing communities, r/place was the birthplace of its own new subreddits and groups that were formed during the event. Worth citing here are two examples: r/TheVoid, a group of users with self-proclaimed nihilistic values that aimed to fill the canvas only with black tiles, and r/RainbowRoad, inspired by the traditional race track from the video game series Mario Kart, tried to spread rainbows diagonally across the canvas (Fig. 4).

As previously established, r/place was not static. In fact, every second, or millisecond, the canvas was suffering changes and transforming itself, with entire areas disappearing or reappearing. Because of that, what is considered the result of r/place, or “the last frame” as it is known by the users, is available at a user-created project known as r/place Atlas [7], a website that displays what is considered by many as the “final” form of r/place.

The r/place Atlas isolates each individually identifiable image from the canvas’s final form, allowing users to interact with them by hovering their mouse cursor and displaying further information about that image and the smaller symbols that compose them, such

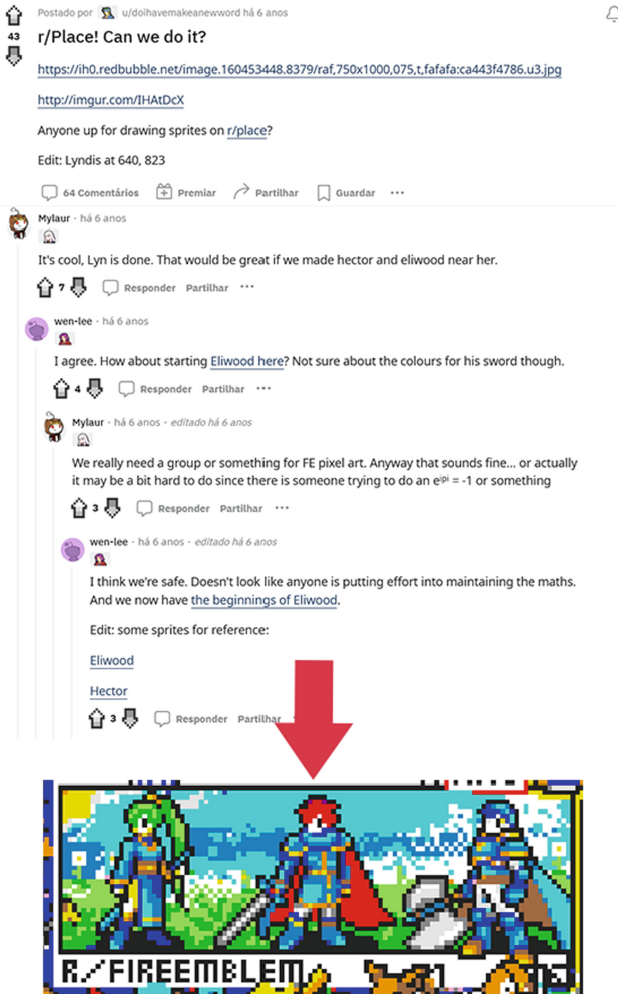


Fig. 3. A post in the video game series *Fire Emblem* subreddit inviting its members to participate in r/place. Below is the finished artwork made by them after 72 h.

as which community was responsible for it, the “attacks” it might have suffered from other communities, how it changed and more. Seeing as more than one million people participated, as well as thousands of subreddits, one that observes the canvas at first glance might not recognize the meaning and cultural relevance of every visual aspect of r/place, so the Atlas works, as its name implies, to bring this knowledge to others (Fig. 5).

By looking at the last frame, it’s noticeable how the size of the images in the canvas is directly related to the size of the community it represents. Meaning that subreddits of countries or soccer teams, for example, have proportionally bigger symbols than those of smaller subreddits, such as niche books or video game series. Concerning this, one of the

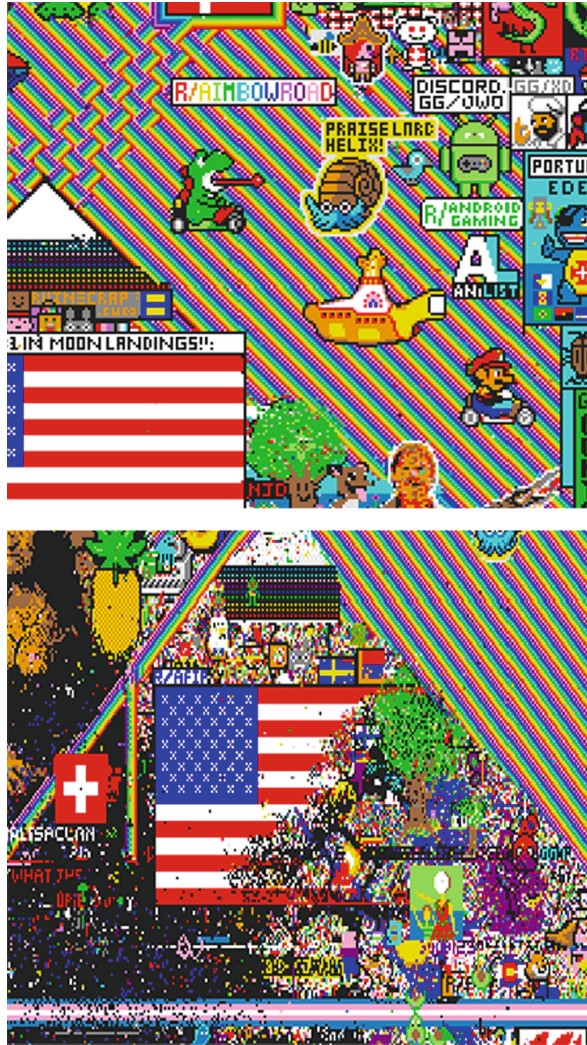


Fig. 4. At the top of the image a depiction of r/RainbowRoad, with their signature and rainbows growing across the canvas. Below is an example of an “attack” by r/TheVoid trying to cover the canvas in black pixels.

most peculiar aspects of r/place was precisely the behavior exhibited by the communities participating: because it was a global event, users had to deal with differences in time zones, meaning that a time period where the majority of members from a subreddit would be asleep or at work implies that their image, or “territory” would be susceptible to vandalizing or even being overtaken by other subreddits with a different time zone. This problem led to many alliances, with some allies forming their images next to one another to facilitate protection at every possible hour.

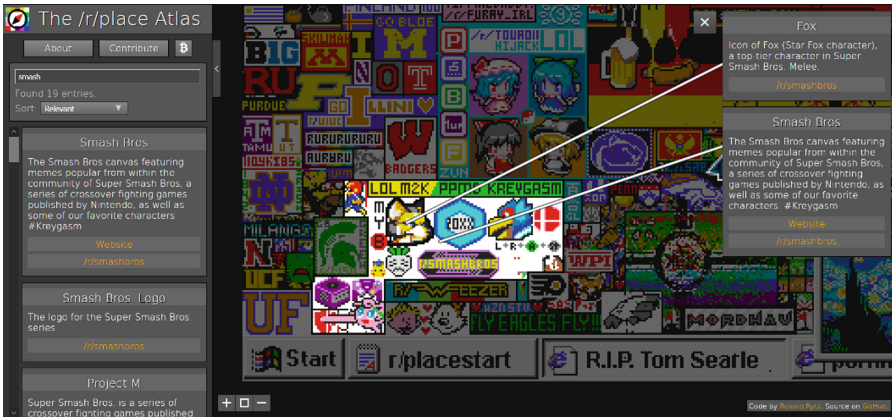


Fig. 5. The r/place Atlas interface. In this picture, we used as an example the image created by the videogame series *Super Smash Bros*. Community to showcase how the website works. By hovering over the bigger picture, the website reveals information about the video game series, what each symbol represents and more.

Not only alliances but rivalries were born – for many reasons – and registered both in the Atlas project and as timelapse videos available on Reddit and other video hosting sites, such as YouTube. One of the most curious rival interactions was between the subreddits of Germany and France. As if to replicate history, intentionally or not, the image representing the German flag started to overtake the image of the French flag, reminiscing the nazi invasion of France during the Second World War on June 22nd of 1940. As to not end on such a tragic note, the communities seem to have reached an agreement, and the space conquered by the German Flag eventually transformed into the European Union flag, as depicted in the figure below (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. The rivalry between the German and French subreddits, as if to replicate history.

Seeing as the total scope of the canvas is 1 million pixels, this is but one of the many tales it has to offer. Considering the restrictions of this paper, it would be impossible to talk about each of them, and we can argue that such varied happenings surrounding this social experiment is but a testament to its magnitude and its narrative potential. For this reason, as well as many others, r/place is studied and analyzed by many different disciplinary fields and approaches, which we'll cover in the following section.

2.2 A Social Experiment with Artification Features

How to define r/place? We have done an extensive literature review to determine how r/place is defined and which terms are used. Our findings are presented here by category: in the Social Sciences, r/place is as a game, experiment, or competition [3, 8, 9]; in the field of Information Technology, it goes by names such as sandbox, collaborative project, collaborative social experiment, mass controlled event, online experiment, and peer-production platform [10–13]; in the Arts (Visual Arts, Theater, Music and Design) understand r/place as a mosaic art [9], crowdsourced art [14] and the action of its users as artistic endeavors [10]. It is relevant to notice that depending on the field, the terms vary, yet they are not mutually exclusive, which shows that r/place is approachable from different perspectives. At this point of our research, we have chosen to refer to r/place as a “social experiment with artification features”.

Specifically in the literature that focuses on r/place under the optics of the Arts, authors understand it either in its complete form [15–17], isolated images and symbols [4] such as those identified by the Atlas project, yet none of these works defines r/place as a specific type of Art related either to a determined style or stylistic movement. Despite focusing on Art - specifically Pixel art [18–21], Net Art [22–26], and Interactive Art [27] - we consider other fields as complementary to our investigation on r/place since only one point of view would leave many blanks to consider, and to solve this problem, is necessary a multi/inter/transdisciplinary approach.

As Pixel Art

One possible approach to r/place is Pixel Art. “Pixel” is an abbreviation of the expression “picture element”, first mentioned in 1965 on image processing and analysis [20]. In digital images, the pixel is considered the smallest component, not to say that all pixels are the same size or even the same format: its size varies from screen to screen. On the other hand, Pixel Art first appeared in work published for the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) [19] in 1982, referring to an image that was scanned and then digitally modified. In the 80s, personal computers with colored displays were becoming more common among the general populace, and the artists of the time started experimenting with the possibilities of pixel art [18].

Nevertheless, if pixels constitutes every digital image, could we say that, as such, every single digital image is Pixel Art? Not reasonably, since pixel art is described as having every pixel visible and intentionally placed [21]. For example, vector images, created by a different method, despite being digital and composed of pixels, are made by manipulating points, lines, and curves, not pixels directly, and low-resolution images might have their pixels “visible.” However, they were not intentionally placed but rather just a result of image processing.

Established these criteria, could r/place be considered pixel art? At first glance, being such a large-scale canvas, one could argue that the pixels are not immediately visible, but that is a matter of size and perspective. The pixels are also intentionally placed, despite being named “tiles”. So yes, we could consider r/place as an example of pixel art, as its entire canvas as a single unit of art or as the canvas being used as an exhibition space composed of other more minor, size-varying Pixel Art.

As Net Art

We could also look at r/place from the perspective of Net Art. The works considered part of the Net Art movement challenged notions of authorship and aesthetics and acknowledged the process, not only the finished piece, as part of the work’s identity.

These aspects are easily applied to r/place, a social experiment without indeed an “author” responsible for it, having over 1 million users participating, has many different aesthetics, and the changes it went through in the duration of the experiment are as equally important to its meaning as it is the last frame.

It is also essential to consider that when referring to “Net Art,” we are also considering many of the other terms and concepts used by many different authors that relate roughly to the same ideas, including Web Art, Digital Art, Internet Engaged Art, Internet Aware-Art and Post-Internet Art [22–26, 28, 29]. Generally, these terms are used interchangeably, even though a more incisive study might point towards some and other peculiarities. Even so, this is not the main topic of this paper and will not be discussed further.

As Interactive Art

The approach of Interactive Art is also a possibility to understand r/place. One research focused on Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) classifies r/place as Interactive Art, in which the public and the art piece form an interactive dialogue with the potential of being unique to each participant [30]. This specific work establishes four types of interactive art: virtual, embodied, tangible, and social, with r/place falling under the last one, social, being capable of encouraging people to collaborate with others and reach complex levels of self-organization.

Although this research belongs to Computer Science, the authors strongly rely on theories from interactive artworks [27]. However, we chose not to include the terms used to define r/place in our literature review above since the work itself is not from the field of Arts.

Which of the above could better understand r/place – Pixel Art, Net Art, or Interactive Art – is not a question we hope to answer with this paper. By presenting these three possible comprehensions under the scope of the Arts, we do not expect to define which is the most well-suited for studying r/place, but rather as possibilities to develop methodologies that can look at r/place as a social experiment with artification features and assume the importance of a broader scope of theories to analyze it.

3 Methodological Proposal to Study R/Place: Art as an Expanded Field + Artification Behavior

To be better equipped to analyze r/place and its branching characteristics, we propose our methodology therefore known as “expanded field.” It is also important to clarify that this methodology is in the process of being developed, so what we aim to present here is but an introduction to its core aspects and, briefly, one of the primary theories that will serve as a basis for this framework of analysis and study. It is not our intention at this time to be applying the methodology in its total capacity to analyze r/place, but to set ground for further developments in our research regarding it and other subjects that we encounter and see to experiment on with this methodology.

Art as an expanded field can be understood as an approach to studying and comprehending art in its many forms from an inter/multi/transdisciplinary perspective embracing different types of knowledge, without undermining the peculiar characteristics that art itself has as a creative endeavor or field of study, and being able to associate art, with the characteristics just described, with varied realms of research such as science, technology, among others. In this first experiment with the methodology, we embrace the concept of “artification”, as described by Ellen Dissanayake [31] in her many works on the subject, as the first step towards the expanded field of art.

Dissanayake describes artification as the noun of the verb “to artify”, that is, “the capacity to make the ordinary everyday experience ‘extraordinary,’ or special,” an ability exclusive to human beings and associated with its evolution over the millennia. Artification is, as such, part of the “making” and not the “result,” turning our attention towards the process of art and its result rather than the finished piece itself. It should not be mistaken for “artmaking” as we know it formally, and instead something else: in Dissanayake words, “artification, unlike ‘art’, may be unskilled, unoriginal and even pedestrian” - the crux lies on the action, the process, and the “extraordinary” out of the ordinary.

We can relate the idea of artification to the r/place experiment: rather than focusing on the finished canvas alone, we observe the process of it, of how millions of users take an ordinary white canvas and transform (or *artify*) it to make it unique for them. Many of the images constructed are, in fact, copies of other artworks: the Mona Lisa, national flags, panels from comic books and *manga*, which one could see as unoriginal or even pedestrian, yet, the focus shifts from their standalone forms, and consider the behavior towards a collective expression, of *making an area of the canvas unique* to them and can see how artification easily meshes with r/place, and how it can be a valuable tool for analyzing it.

Although, as previously established, we do not aim to offer one solution to understanding r/place, and artification is not the only possible way, we present it as a novel way of seeing it and hope to develop the expanded field further to encompass many more fields and theories (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. The last frame of r/place.

4 Conclusions

R/place has yet to end in its last frame, not even in this work. It is a social experiment, collaborative art form, capable of being studied from the perspective of Pixel Art, Net Art, and Interactive Art, as well as from a multi/inter/transdisciplinary point of view that can help reignite studies in the Arts field that interact with science and technology, as well as social sciences, in equal standing. Specifically in the field of Arts, r/place can help dissolve barriers imposed by styles, terminologies, and formal classifications, helping occupy new spaces that consider the process as part of the artwork as well as the entire experience of it.

Moving forwards, our research on r/place is still ongoing. We hope to expand the ways we can analyze it, developing our methodology based on the principles mentioned above, and that it can also be used to comprehend other similar works around the internet, without, in any way, the presumption of being the only applicable methodology for such. To expand beyond online collaborative works and accept all sorts of experiences and processes under the arts, science, and social studies to further what is “to do art.”

Acknowledgements. This research is funded by CAPES through a M.A. scholarship, and by UFPA through conference funding.

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