# frictiOns — the software-surface-rubbing game

## A case study on experimental film and smartphone culture

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## Abstract

Smartphone usage has drastically changed the way images are produced and contemplated, creating thus fertile ground for a virtual environment blurring information exchange with entertainment. In the experimental film *frictiOns*, virtuality and interaction have been reconsidered under an analogue perspective.  Disobeying assumptions on device and virtuality by challenging the concept of surface and interface. An analysis of art games and the binome (i)phone-entertainment, examines the prospective of users as players, highlighting cultural determining factors such as flattening and soft power.

## Keywords

game art; interactivity; surface; interface; analogue; soft power

## Introduction

*frictiOns* is an experimental video-project based on the principle of (sliding) friction between digital device (iPhone) and filmic "subject". The flat surface of the smartphone is held and slid against objects in order to produce images as a result of physical contact between environment and device. The filmic strategy constitutes a reflection undermining the shared and accepted norm of how a smartphone device is supposed to generate images. The film is divided in three parts; "death", "purgatory" and "paradise". Each filmed in considerable length of time from one another, in causality and imminent improvisation. "death" portrays a dead moth (*apamea anceps* of the *noctuidae* family) trapped in between the windowpanes of an airport boarding area. "purgatory" has been filmed by sliding the iPhone against the honeycomb-carved structure of a cardboard installation, and finally "paradise" reveals the images generated by pushing the iPhone's surface against a supermarket shop window.

*frictiOns* came into being triggered by the desire to see if and how, the causality of the single episodes created by chance; in three separate settings but united by the same principle of "surface against surface", could somehow relate to one another within a single narrative. Both the film's creative process and final result combine analogue and virtual elements evolving around the idea of surface in its literal term, and surface as interface. The rubbing technique and the filmic device have been considered, in their game-like aspects. Specific reference has been made to interactivity and entertainment as part of a political strategy dissipating the boundaries between work and leisure. The focus has been put on a *smartphone culture* encouraging users to be active players.

## I. The Art Game

Art and games have been influencing each other since the beginning of the 20th century starting with the Dadaist movement, soon to be followed by the Surrealists and the Situationists. Respectively, each of these movements introduced strategic aspects of games to redefine the performative process of what an artwork had to offer and/or could be. "Game Art is any art in which digital games played a significant role in the creation, production, and/or display of the artwork. The resulting artwork can exist as a game, painting, photograph, sound, animation, video, performance, or a gallery installation" (Bittanti, 2006).

The International Art scene became even more aware and celebrating game art with Feng Mengbo's *The Video Endgame Series*, at the 54th Venice Biennale, "a series of acrylic on canvas paintings in which he combined images of China's Cultural Revolution (1966-76) with his own childhood memories of 8-bit console games" (Buttler, 2015, p. 285). Art

can thus be displayed through game elements and even staged as a game in a myriad of ways. However, *frictiOns* represents neither a game of art, taking inspiration by game elements to create a visual and critical artwork, nor an art game attempting to produce a proper virtual game environment so as to tackle critical-ethical questions through the players experience (see Sharp, 2015, pp. 21-49).

By using the friction mechanic as a filmic strategy, *frictiOns* attempts to challenge the concept of surface and the politics of image production when considering smartphone devices. Games, be they analogue or virtual, embrace a broad spectrum of definitions and characteristics. The analogue gesture of sliding the iPhone against different surfaces the way a toddler would, recalls an analogue game element contrasting the symptomatic virtuality attributed to the device. On the other hand, the device itself, as means of production, is identified as the perfect union between entertainment and information. A union elevating the user to a constant (active) status of performer exchanging, generating and above all exhibiting content.

The different aspects constituting games may focus on several elements: the artifact created by the game developers; the set of rules with which the players interact with the artifact; the outcome; the displayed narrative; etc. In his search for a definition of games, author Jesper Juul analyzes time-space and productivity aspects by recalling Roger Caillois's definition, according to which games are separate in time and space from the surrounding world as well as unproductive (Juul, 2005, p. 35).

Both aspects are disputable according to Juul. Time-space "isolation" however, is relevant for *frictiOns*, with reference to how it engages with the smartphone device. For there is no time-space separation between the "real" world and the game setting in creating images with the "surface against surface" technique. Most importantly, the smartphone device represents specifically the triumph of having finally overcome the distance between communication and leisure, private and public, work and play.

Juul argues against the validity of the time-space aspect, simply by making the example of mail played chess games, where everyday life and game activity can continuously overlap (ibid, p. 35) Likewise, the device can in the case of *frictiOns* be engaged at the rubbing game while at the same time receiving messages, e-mails and calls, in an overlapping simultaneity between game and work life.

## II. The 'i' is small and has it all

The attempt to shed light into an information technology, *smartphone philosophy* culture, promoting users as players is at the core of the experimental film herein analyzed. "Differences between outside and inside, far and near, physicality and virtuality, image and body, all

shrink - this is how digital images more and more seem to act and function." (Grau, 2011, p. 350) The "shrinking" principle of interactive media, is represented for *frictiOns* by its quintessential manifestation in the global digital culture: the iPhone. This device represents a powerful and unique combination of information technology and design. "Eventually the media player, the calendar and the book and video screen configuration, so similar in form but still diverse in use were united by Apple into one object, the iPod Touch, introduced in 2007, which incorporated, music, photos, video-games, and productivity software" (Kahane, 2015, p. 102).

The *all in one* principle as referred to by Kahane (and so successfully marketed by Apple) would determine economic and political aspects of modern life far more than we could have ever predicted, not only because the device would soon be dramatically identified with its surface (software) but, mostly because communication was quickly to be blurred with entertainment. The binome phone-(game) entertainment had already proven successful long before the "revolutionary" iPhone came along, as it was the case for the Nokia 3310 Snake Game *(*1997).

"In spite of popular belief Apple was not the first to introduce an all in one media player. Sony already came up with it in Clié in 2000. The Clié was an acronym for creativity lifestyle, innovation, and emotion or communication, link, information, and entertainment" (Kahane, 2015, pp. 102-103). The i prefix symbolizes a market dominance scheme constantly attempting to mould lifestyles under the guidance of what Joseph Nye referred to as *soft power* (Cheok, 2001, p. 250), a term describing the relevance of cultural determining factors in world politics. Transferred to the present-day Japanese culture, Cheok argues the country to be "software and service-economy" oriented. "Japan has accordingly reinvented its identity through *soft power* in a globalized modern society" (Cheok, p. 251)

*Soft power* has therefore united apparatus and user in perpetual interaction relying mostly on the inclusive functionality of its *all in one* character*.* The latter is, in reference to the concept of surface, to be considered in its twofold nature. On the one hand, all the action takes place on the surface of the device, so to say "on" and "in" the interface of the smartphone. Secondly, in terms of circulation and networking of data, the *all in one* interaction facilitates what Martin Hand refers to as the *flattening* of culture (Hand, 2008, pp. 24-27) The idea of *flattening* is not only beneficial to the lowering of hierarchical power structures, but also to the relation between digital production and cultural values within a global economy. Blogs, (live)chats, social media, smartphones etc., all operate under the same denominator: interactivity. "In the case of the brand, producers and designers intend consumers to "send objects back" with their preferences and practices now inscribed within them" (Hand, p. 27).

Similarly, we could draw a parallel with interactivity in new media "as part of a contemporary art movement, to create a fertile ground for digital texts/stills, sound-objects, noise, textures, 3D objects, and digital video, to merge into different combinations where "meaning develops by chance, experiment, and well-directed strategy." (Grau, 2011, p. 351) Grau refers to the ever-increasing aspects of immersion and interaction as the *active spirit*, "where the combining user, becomes the new source of art and meaning" (ibid). The experience of the user is hardly to be separated from interaction and participation, hence the beholder of the device is also the generator of content. We are required as wells as expected to "send something back". The plea for a role as active players has transformed in established behavior. The perpetual "call for action" with which companies and designers operate, is determined by given sets within which interactivity is bound to take place. For there is a relation of forces determining the structure of the technical artifact "the machine involves a "supple and transversal" alliance that defines a "practice", which is at the same time a physical procedure and a social strategy (Sauvagnargues, 2016, p. 201).

The physical procedure of actively exchanging with the device, combined with a *soft power* social strategy celebrates a game like virtual culture inextricably uniting information and   entertainment. The multiplicity of smartphone functions has determined new temporalities, influenced filmic techniques and deepened perceptions of immersion. The *shrinking* between the far and the near, of materiality and virtuality as above stated by Grau's depiction of digital images, are vital to the idea of (mis)using the iPhone's camera lens in the hypothetical assumption of it being a sovereign "toy", moving against the surface of objects in the attempt to "feel", to produce images as the result of friction mechanic between environment and device.

If the function and interactivity of the device are "flattened" in the interface, so is the distance between device and (filmic) subject. The perspective of image production relegates the virtual properties of the device to a mere mechanical component where the interface becomes simply the "face". A surface without interaction, yet a surface of (analogue) action.

### III. The player is the shooter, is the killer, is you

The need to document and expose everyday life in its broader sense, through the staging of images, has become symptomatic of how we conceive contemporaneity as well as corporality. Interactive media has affected the visual-sensory perception of how images are to function. The active part of the interaction presupposed by smartphone devices, dangerously flattens the relationship between information, communication and entertainment; between social and personal, thus confusing the friendliness of interfaces with the intimacy of private lives. As above suggested by Sauvagnargues, the "machine" shares close

alliance between physical procedure and social (cultural /political) strategy. Harun Farocki was one of the first to notice that image-making machines and algorithms were poised to inaugurate a new visual regime. Instead of simply representing things in the world, the machines and their images were starting to "do" things in the world" (Paglen, 2014).

How a satellite or a robotic computer system, breaks down received information and analyses a Mars-landscape or a minefield, are certainly to be understood under Farocki's term of operational images. Similarly, interfaces, their guiding imperative of interactivity and inter-connectivity, the very physical engagement between human body and device, create in their own way "operational images". *frictiOns* can in this scenario be regarded as an act of disfigurement (indeed a form of violence), as an attempt to go against the operational aspect of generating and processing images. Most importantly, it (re)introduces a basic analogue game principle as the main strategy in engaging with smartphone devices. "We need an understanding that can assess the materiality of play as much as that of the ideas or the objects themselves. A game can produce meaning or perhaps better stated, experience" (Sharp, 2015, p. 105)

The game experience cannot be separated from the production of meaning. Equally, the device cannot be separated from the production of many active *i*(Phone)-*scenarios.* The focus is put here on the hegemonic imperative of doing. The user is the player because the device itself, is the game the user is expected to "play".

In his provocative piece, *The Squalid Grace of Flappy Bird*, Ian Bogost provides a disdainful eulogy of the *Flappy Bird* game, stressing the attention on games as devices and their operational aspect. "Yes, we "play" games like we do sports, and yes games, bear "meaning", as do the fine and plastic arts. But something else is at work in games. Games are devices we operate" (Bogost, 2015, p. 1) The repetitiveness of action in *Flappy Bird* creates expectations of a breakthrough that in fact never occurs. The game is ironic in its simplicity and perhaps it was specifically the denied achievements and variation in game strategies that made it appealing to users. For, repetitiveness does have a numbness effect on players, absurdly overlapping a hypnotic state with ongoing, "unproductive" action. The game is stripped of all elements and centered on the operational aspect. The latter is significantly important in terms of identification and affect as it is particularly the case for game wars. Antje Ehmann's and Harun Farocki's critique on the experience of games and wars, emphasizes the overlapping of the player's role with that of the attacker. In their analyses they refer to Paul Virilio's critique of war images being produced and broadcasted "to put us in the place of the attacker, to offer every television viewer the point of view of the general in the field, and to make us believe that war is merely a technological process". (Ehmann & Farocki, 2011, p. 26)

This is especially relevant when we think of war themed games but, it also takes us back to the "gaming" aspect of interaction as previously analyzed in the *all in one* principle of smartphone philosophy. "Video games are wildly diverse in their formal grammar, but in the specific gaming genre known as the first-person shooter (FPS), a gaming genre invented in the 1970s and perfected by Id Software in the early 1990s with games like *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom,* there are several formal conventions that appear over and over" (Galloway, 2006, p. 57).

The viewer is put in the position of the attacker and thus bound to act and not to contemplate. The first-person shooter, as recalled by Galloway, delineates a narrative of action inextricably linked to the power of the first-person's perspective (see Galloway, pp. 62-64). The player is the "attacker" in the same way the user of smartphone devices is requested to actively participate in the provided virtual environments.

## Conclusions

In the game of *frictiOns*, the virtual body (in this case the device) and the material body (of the user) interact in a new dialogic form, highlighting spatial relationships between the physicality of the device and the physicality of the environment. As far as the process of image production is concerned, the present video-project aimed at analogically manipulating the quintessential representation of mobile operating computer systems, by purposefully trying to deprive it of its virtual functions.

The surface of the s*martphone no longer operates under the dictate of soft power.* It has transformed virtuality in a game of mechanic frictions. The "call for action" presupposed by smartphones has been transformed into a movement of trivial repetitions. Thus, no longer relying on the virtuality of the interface but generating content (producing images) in considering the body of the iPhone as an object independent of the virtual functions it is invested with.

Hence the *all in one* principle of the smartphone has been substituted with the analog repetitiveness of the rubbing gesture. In this sense, *frictiOns* represents an opportunity to reflect on the game-device binome by forcing analogue actions operating on the supposed virtuality of the device. The user is still the player; however, the type of action has changed. It finally ceases to "obey" the interface and consequently doesn't need to interact in virtuality but in the reality of boarding areas, windowpanes and cardboard installations.

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