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Vancouver's Olympic CODE:

The 'Cultural Olympiad Digital Edition' Creates Legacy and Celebrates Identity

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The Cultural Olympiad of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games has curated a digital exhibition called *Canada CODE* (Cultural Olympiad's Digital Edition), which is providing a gateway to Canadian identity.

Through online digital technology, CODE provides a space where "audiences and artists can connect, create and collaborate," (VANOC, 2009) in showcasing what Canadian citizenship means to those who live in both the city of Vancouver and Canada.

This paper showcases the underlying themes of one of VANOC's CODE projects, called *Canada CODE*, which is a digital, online showcase for photographs about Canadian identity. I discuss the campaign and consider the motivations to showcase Canada in this way. I will build on Maguire et al.'s (2008) analysis of the IOC's

Screenshot from Canada CODE

'Celebrate Humanity' campaign, which has been instrumental to the IOC's aspiration to promote the values of Olympism throughout their work. Moreover, I will discuss how virtual networks and communities provide a unique and informative glimpse into contemporary Canadian culture. This will be achieved through an analysis of *Canada CODE's* aesthetic footprint, from which I outline some of the difficulties that arise when trying to visually and digitally represent a culture. These difficulties arise, in part, from Canada's geographically vast territory and its being constituted by a diverse and multicultural population.

Mega Events and Identity Production

Mega events are important to host cities for a number of reasons, not least of which is because they provide a global forum through which local identity, culture and tourism can be promoted. In doing so, cities expect to draw positive attention, in order to capitalize on tourism revenue. It is particularly important for host cities and countries to provide favorable representations of their city and, in this increasingly technological world, the Internet and virtual representations become even more important. According to Roche (2000), mega events are best understood as "large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events, which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance" (1).

Thus the development and promotion of the host city is bound up in broader processes that increasingly reflect both globalization and sportization (Maguire, 2008). According to Maguire et al. (2008) the modern Olympic movement is shaped by "wider global flows of people, finance, media images, ideologies and technologies" (2042). Through the promotion and utilization of modern technologies such as the Internet, people are now connected and accessible to one another instantaneously in ways that they never have been before. In this technological age, thoughts and ideas are shared over digital networks in seconds, in ways that transform modes of communication and sociability. A good example of this is the SMS text message, which has developed its own gramma and where such applications as Twitter have enabled new forms of sharing news.

However, images and identities also become more complex, as people journey through virtual spaces and develop multifaceted identities within a multiplicity of cultures, without leaving the privacy of their own homes. Some key social categories have been brought into question by such transformations, not least of which is the public/private divide. The blurring of boundaries between public and private has been particularly visible on various occasions recently, related to Facebook, which initiated a change to its privacy settings in 2009 (BBC, 2009).

Their action caused widespread concern among its user community, many of whom have prescribed to a level of privacy that they deem to be acceptable. This blurring of boundaries also extends beyond national borders, which can now be transcended, ignored or forgotten by travelers and onlookers who navigate through virtual spaces. In this virtual environment where information and flows of information take on an even more significant role, bricks become pixels, the tectonics of architecture becomes informational (Novak, 1995 p 4). Nunes (2006) describes a 'virtual world' as a closed, comprehensive, and self-contained globe. He contends,

> there's plenty of territory to discover, but ultimately all meridians lead full circle. Yet for those wishing to engage, the concept of a virtual world is only possible within the material and experiential processes that situate this topography within a "global

> imagination" of the internet as a space of flows: namely, a network of interconnecting servers and the potential for a user to reach this site from anywhere at any time. He highlights the fact that in "form, structure, and practice, the Web is both globally expansive and locally situated (78).

It situates users in a global space of flows, yet it articulates a lived space of idiosyncratic practice, one defined more by the potential for linkage than the actual connection. This causes experiences to move beyond the physical and the tangible and increasingly links the personal to the global; the private to the collective.

Sports and sporting events like the Olympic Games play a significant role in connecting groups of people. Sports, as elements of society, are social constructions that are given form and meaning by people as they interact with one another. Nauright (1996) has argued that sport,

> is one of the most significant shapers of collective or group identity in the contemporary world. In many cases, sporting events and people's reaction to them are the clearest public manifestations of culture and collective identities in a given society (69).

According to Kallus (2001), traditional understandings of spatial experience have often failed to recognize the users of space and their functional, social and emotional needs. We seldom know who the people populating 'real' spaces are, why they are there and what they are doing. This absence of knowledge becomes even more complex when we examine virtual spaces and embodied engagement within these cyber worlds. By creating the Canada CODE campaign, VANOC has attempted to link together sport and the collectivizing elements of the Internet. It has also articulated Canadian identity to those who have never physically visited Canada or thought much about what Canadian identity means. The site is targeted towards two specific groups of Internet navigators, those who consider themselves Canadians "…curious to know more about this project, or an international visitor curious to know more about Canada" (CODE, 2009).

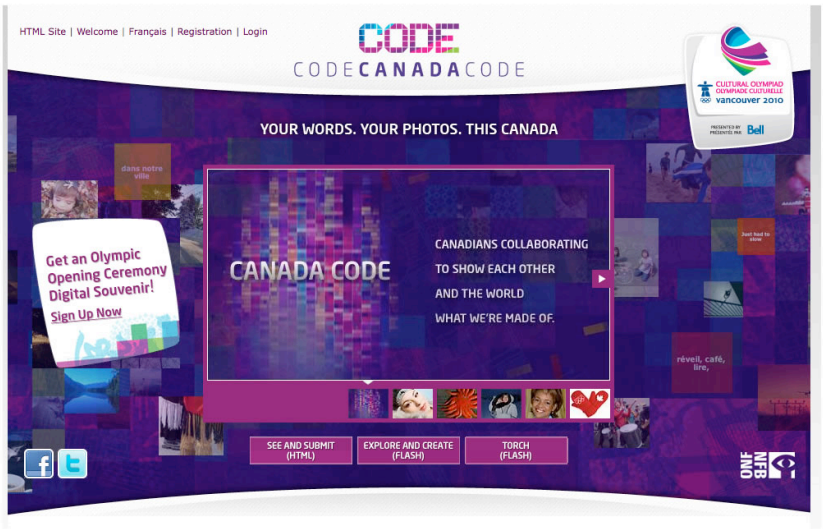
Yet, how one interprets the content of the CODE may vary considerably, to such an extent that one may contest whether anything distinctly or meaningfully Canadian is actually communicated. Part of unraveling the complexity of these texts and images involves the understanding of the curatorial process within CODE. For instance, user-generated content that is uploaded to CODE is monitored by a VANOC administrative body.

Those who wish to upload images and prose must register their details on the website and accept VANOC's statement of use policy. In order for an individual to actively engage with the site (upload and modify content) they must become a member of the site and create an individualized profile. Membership is monitored (though it is ambiguous as to who exactly does this) and can be terminated if one is suspected of being under the age of nineteen and/or not supervised by an adult, or if one's use of the website "breaches any applicable law in Canada or violates any right of any person" (CODE, 2009). VANOC does not guarantee the

monitoring of all of the content on the site nor does it specifically endorse the content. However, upon uploading content to the site individual's provide VANOC with permission to use and modify their content for the purposes of endorsing the Canada CODE, VANOC, the Cultural Olympiad, the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games or the Olympic Movement generally (CODE, 2009).

activities usually take precedence. Upon loading the Canadian CODE website – which operates as an external, stand-alone site – users are then presented with a mosaic of colours, a unique melody of abstract images and neatly organized squares that, once accessed, provide snippets, vignettes and interpretations of what it means to be a Canadian.

screenshot from Vancouver 2010 Canada CODE website



Navigating citizenship in Virtual Space

By 'clicking through' VANOC's website homepage, browsers can enter the CODE website after selecting the 'Celebration and Ceremonies' icon listed under 'Spectator Guide'. Already this is an achievement in historical terms, as ensuring that cultural activity remains prominent within an Olympic Games website can be a challenge. This is because the cultural activity of an Olympic Games period is not often the highest priority for the organizing committee, where the sports

The content of this site is comprised of user-generated information, both text and image, where Canadians are asked to share their experiences and stories. Moreover, navigating through the CODE is unlikely to be the same experience twice. The experience of interacting and manipulating the content provides a contemporary alignment for what could be described as an interactive art project. According to Hill (1998) a "plethora of cultural and social codes reinforce the superiority of art over the everyday, of contemplation over distraction" (3). It is through the navigation of this virtual space that boundaries and pathways take on a significant role. For the way in

which boundaries are spatially perceived – as fixed or fluid, empty or active – has an affect on how users appropriate space as well as identify with the space (Hill, 1998). From this perspective the CODE represents a highly subjective, fragmented collection of accounts of Canadian identity.

A number of questions arise from this mode of articulating culture. First, one may ask whether it is really representative of what being Canadian means today. As noted earlier, the curatorial management of the content means that stories unaligned with what VANOC considers to be, perhaps, 'celebratory' are omitted from this exhibition. To this extent, the CODE is an apolitical form of Canadian identity, or at least only political views that do *not* challenge the Olympic message are likely to be published by VANOC.

Alternatively, one may also ask whether identity within CODE is fundamentally different from offline Canadian identity. Clearly, the demographic of users who utilize digital space is different from those who may find other means to express themselves. The age, gender and ethnicity of digital populations is always different from offline distributions, despite attempts to address the digital divide. In this sense, the CODE reflects only the identities of the Canadian online community and, in particular, those who are able to upload content from their computers to the website, which can be a challenge for those with limited levels of digital literacy.

The experience of moving throughout virtual space and specifically the space designed and created by the CODE project is significant. It is through one's engagement and participation in the project that the subjectivities of the Canadian experiences are formed and reproduced. Yet, how should one talk about movement and navigation in digital worlds, compared with offline environments or physical space? De Certauau (1988) in *The Practice of Everyday Life* describes the importance of the experiences of those who physically utilize the city space. In his chapter on "walking in the city" he describes the significance of the "ordinary practitioners of the city" those who walk about the city, those who live "down below, below the thresholds at which visibility begins," (93).

When examining the significance of the CODE one must acknowledge the specificity of the participants and the variability of the digital experience. The resulting exhibition also only consists of those individuals who chose to upload their photographs and thoughts as well as the visitors who become voyeurs in the fragments of private lives put on public display for the digital project.

The images and words shared on the CODE's site take on meaning as people interact with them, click on them and ponder their importance among the various other photographs and options they could have chosen. In this light, the reading of space can be viewed as an interactive activity, wherein the computer operator "shifts from the role of the consumer to that of the producer," (Eagleton, 1983). The virtual navigator creates their individualized impression of what it means to be Canadian based on what is presented on the site as well

as their own personal navigational experience while visiting the site. Yet, they omit to portray the stories of those who prefer to remain private.

Understanding how people experience citizenship and identity in contemporary Western countries, is a challenging activity. In Canada where multiculturalism is celebrated and officially acknowledged through constitutional legislation, the process of creating and maintaining both an individual and a collective identity is complicated. Wieviorka (1998) contends that modern subjects, from this point of view, "maintain a paradoxical relationship with collective cultural identities. On the one hand, they may wish to be able to participate, and to be identified with a specific collectivity, a memory, a language," while "on the other hand, subjects are reluctant to be over-dependent and cannot accept being uniquely what the group orders them to be, or the identity assigned to them; they refuse to yield, or even restrict, their personal freedom as the price to be paid for their collective identity," (7). They wish to belong on their own terms and provide just enough information to be considered part of the collective, yet maintain an individualized identity beyond that which they shared with the on line project. The complexity of representing a Canadian identity is evident in the vast array of images presented in the CODE as is the difficulty of selecting only a few photographs/images to represent such a diverse group of people who extend over such a large geographical space.

In *The Archeology of Knowledge (1972), Foucault* addresses the concept of identity and the challenge of locating one's sense of self in an increasingly globalized culture. For Foucault, identity resides within a complex set of social relationships and is always evolving and being subject to change and validation through normalizing processes. In the context of the CODE, the identity that someone chooses and the images they select to represent their concept of Canada at a particular time and place are subject to temporality and the context from which the photo was taken. In addition, the selection may convey a particular feeling they had both while taking the photo as well as when they chose to upload it into the CODE web site. The CODE furnishes Canadians with an opportunity to validate their representations of a Canadian identity with others who may share similar experiences, images and memories. Yet it also provides others, those who do not consider

screenshot from Vancouver 2010 Canada CODE website

themselves to be Canadian, with a glimpse of what Canada means to those who live there. When De Certeau (1988) describes the Wandersmanner,

> whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it…the networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other (93)

Here, the author describes the experiences of the everyday person, arguably those who the CODE aspires to represent. For de Certeau the 'Wandersmanner' is important in that the city space would not be as embedded with meanings had the walkers not taken the time to engage with the space and make decisions about their routes of navigation. Similarly, the CODE would not be as effective were it not bound to discourses that are connected to the spatial, temporal and historical contexts from which they emerge.

Thus, Canadian identity is malleable, fluid and ever changing. There is no singular image of Canada, which is a country with a unique collection of "ethno-racial compositions" (Hier et al. 2006). The CODE reflects the values of multiculturalism, tolerance and appreciation for different cultures. Indeed, one of the most visual representations of Canadian culture often reproduced in national propaganda is the image of a cultural mosaic (images placed together like a patch-work quilt), an image that is both embedded and replicated in the CODE's virtual aesthetic.

The CODE represents certain dimensions of Canadian identity, such as its complexity and fragmented, dynamic quality. There is no single or collective understanding of what it means to be Canadian. To this extent, navigating the virtual world coheres with how identity operates in the physical or 'real' world, where there are pathways and boundaries to identity claims.

For those who call Canada home, the imagined community provides the mode of connection rather than the physical geographical environment and this is where digital spaces excel. Hooks (1989) describes home as "that place which enables and promotes varied and ever changing perspective, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference," (22).

Despite the fact that content is managed within the CODE, its privileged position - along with the expectations of an Olympic Games to convey identity - ensures that its content provides some articulation of Canadian Identity. The CODE represents a subjective self in a country that prides itself on individual expression and values the opinions of the culturally diverse people that populate both real and virtual spaces.

For those who wish to understand Canadian identity the CODE endeavors to promote the Olympic movement's ideals of inclusivity while celebrating multiculturalism and embracing collective difference. According to Maguire et al. (2008) de Coubertin spoke about the issue of

athletic colonization and the potential of the Olympic Games to connect people through shared experiences of sport. In 1931 he stated, "If one wishes to extend to natives in colonized countries what we will boldly call the benefits of 'athletic civilization,' they must be made to enter into the broad athletic system with codified regulations and comparative results, which is the necessary basis of civilization" (De Coubertin, 2000: 704). The CODE has similar aspirations and connects people through the cultural elements of the 2010 Olympic Games as well as through a shared Canadian experience. More specifically, *The Cultural Olympiad's Digital Edition* (CODE) is sharing with people from all over the world, what it means to some, to be a Canadian, albeit in a codified form.

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