

Proximity and Alienation: Narratives of City, Self, and Other in the Locative Games of Blast Theory

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Abstract

This chapter is concerned with detailing key instances where location-based mobile media have been used to make connections with relative and complete strangers. The focus, in the first half of the chapter, is on how these issues have been developed in the locative gaming projects of the UK media art collective Blast Theory. Particular attention will be given to *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003) and *Rider Spoke* (2007), with further references to a number of other projects. In the second half of the chapter, these experimental projects of Blast Theory are read against the work of three different theorists (the philosophers Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Alphonso Lingis), each of who has, in their own way, sought to critically engage with and rethink our understandings of community, social interaction, and difference.

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“As I weave along the streets, stability is what I crave.”¹

“To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself.”²

Keywords

Alienation: alienation (along with the closely related term, estrangement) concerns the idea of something being separated from or strange to something else. Alienation forms a pivotal concept in Marxist philosophy (e.g. we are alienated from the products of our labor insofar as we experience these products as commodities). It is also used by sociologist Georg Simmel as a way of making sense of the direct impacts of processes of modernization and industrialization on personal experiences of urban life and interpersonal interaction in shared public city spaces.

Other: A term used to refer to a person that is different or distinct from oneself and from those one knows about. The Lithuanian-born French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas famously stated that the self, in both a psychological and a philosophical sense, is only possible through the recognition of the Other. The concept has been immensely important in feminist and post-colonial theory. While it has been used (perhaps most famously by the Palestinian literary theorist Edward Said) to highlight a negative reaction between Europeans and Anglo-Americans from those they have dominated, it can also reference the potential for positive encounters between self and Other, between peoples of different races, classes, and religions.

Proximity: The fact or condition of being near or close. Proximity can refer to nearness in abstract relations, such as kinship, but the dominant meaning, and the sense in which the term is used here, now refers to nearness in space or time. For the sociologist Georg Simmel, what characterizes modern urban life is increased physical *proximity*, which tends to lead to a greater sense of *alienation* rather than increased social interaction.

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with detailing key instances where location-based mobile media have been used to make (or encourage) connections with relative and complete strangers. The focus in the first half of the chapter is on how these issues have been developed in the narrative-based locative gaming projects of the UK media art collective Blast Theory. Particular attention will be given to *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003) and *Rider Spoke* (2007), with further references to a number of others, including *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant* (2009) and *Day Of The Figurines* (2006). In the second half of the chapter, these experimental projects of Blast Theory are read against key (poststructuralist) philosophical deliberations on community and difference in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, and Alphonso Lingis.

That these projects are designed as games is important in this context. Locative games are significant in that they can lead to transformed understandings and experiences of place and everyday life: they serve to remind us that “places are constructed by an ongoing accumulation of stories, memories and social practices;” they encourage a questioning of the “too familiar” routines of daily life; and, they expose us to “new ways of experiencing place, play and identity,” and social interaction.³

Alienation and Urban Life

This investigation of mobile phone as a device for connecting with others unfamiliar to us is set against a backdrop of a long tradition of conceiving of city life as profoundly alienating.⁴ For instance, in the pioneering sociological work of Georg Simmel, large-scale urban development is seen to have wrought profound changes at the individual level that affect both individual psychological experience and how we interact with others. As Simmel famously writes, “one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd.”⁵ Nowhere is this loneliness more evident, for Simmel, than when in a crowd:

The feeling of isolation is rarely as decisive and intense when one actually finds oneself physically alone, as when one is a stranger, without relations,

among many physically close persons, at a ‘party’ on a train, or in the traffic of a large city.⁶

Such situations, according to Simmel, constitute the very epitome of “loneliness in togetherness.”⁷

Moreover, for Simmel, this uneasy mix of proximity and alienation as a result of the individual’s close encounters with the mass (alienation *in* proximity), led to the internalisation of a variety of strategies to manage encounters that had hitherto been unnecessary. So, for instance, following the rise of mass public transportation systems in the nineteenth century (such as the bus, train, and tramcar) there emerged a need for new ways of gazing at and “consociating” with other urban dwellers for extended periods without speaking or communicating.⁸ Erving Goffman coined the term “civil inattention” to describe this process. As Goffman writes:

What seems to be involved is that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present [...] while at the next moment withdrawing one’s attention from him as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design.⁹

This conception or theme of city life as characterized by alienation and insularity is also evident in the later work of the American sociologist, Richard Sennett. According to Michael Bull, Sennett was writing of a New York pre iPods and mobile phones, and describes it as a “place of indifference,” of strangers passing by without any interaction.¹⁰ Cities had become “places in which the urban subject fell silent.”¹¹ As a result, Sennett argued, “there grew up a notion that strangers had no right to speak to each other, that each man possessed as a public right an invisible shield, a right to be left alone.”¹²

In the context of this chapter, Simmel’s account of these interactional processes is especially interesting for its emphasis on tensions between loneliness and togetherness, alienation and proximity. As Jensen explains, “the co-existence of nearness and remoteness” is considered by Simmel to constitute a key feature of human relationships.¹³ The significance of this for urban life and our experience of

others is that, “while we think strangers are disconnected from us,”¹⁴ in fact our experience of “strangeness means that he who also is far is actually near.”¹⁵ What this suggests, in short, is that our experiences with and of strangers can be read two ways. Whereas for some critics, such as Sennett, city life is characterized by anomie and alienation, for others, such as Iris Marion Young, the city is understood as a “productively heterogenous space.”¹⁶ It is a space in which it is possible for an urban dweller to take pleasure “in being drawn out of oneself.” To approach the city in this way is to understand that other meanings, practices, and perspectives on the city are possible and which can lead to opportunities for learning and new or different experiences.¹⁷ According to this more positive, outward looking view, “the urban subject is open to encounters with difference/s that are not only ‘tolerated,’ but can be a source of pleasure.”¹⁸

What of the role of technologies, such as various forms of mobile media, in this scenario? One of the persistent anxieties about, and charges against, mobile media is that they can have deleterious effects on social cohesion and engagement in the public sphere.¹⁹ This perspective centers on the idea that use of these devices contributes to an understanding of “an individual as an isolated island in public,”²⁰ through what David Morley describes as a form of “psychic cocooning”²¹ in which mobile users “can escape their immediate situation and interact with only like-minded persons.”²² For instance, in his book *Sound Moves*, Michael Bull describes modern mobile media, such as iPods and mobiles, as “technologies of separation” and argues that they enable subjects to “retreat from urban space” by “neutralising it,” thereby enabling the urban citizen to “remove themselves” from the “physicality” of urban relations.²³

And, yet, just as I have noted two quite different and conflicting perspectives on urban life, it is important to be mindful of the many contradictions associated with mobile media and contemporary uses of them. As Michael Arnold argues, paradox and contradiction are at the center of our understanding and usage of mobile media technologies. In this sense, Arnold argues, they are very much “Janus-faced” technologies, “always and at once pointing in different directions.”²⁴ they facilitate independence as well as co-dependence, lead to a greater sense of vulnerability while also providing reassurance, facilitate social proximity at the same time as allowing greater geographical distance, blur the public and the private, and so on.

In line with such reasoning, a central assumption in this chapter is that, just as mobiles can be used to reinforce existing social networks (connecting known with known), they also have the potential to open up new social and interactive possibilities (perhaps through connecting known with unknown, and stranger with stranger). Given this, it is valuable to ask how “innovations in mobile telephony” are, and might potentially, be “reconfiguring urban encounters”²⁵ – especially urban encounters with strangers? It is this precise question that I am interested in exploring here in relation to the narrative locative games of Blast Theory.

Narratives of City, Self, and Other in the Locative Media Works of Blast Theory

Blast Theory is an internationally recognised art group based in Brighton, England. Led by Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr, and Nick Tandavanitj, and with a long-standing collaborative relationship with the Mixed Reality Lab at Nottingham University, the group’s work, in their own words, “explores interactivity and the social and political aspects of technology.”²⁶ Many of their projects have sought to pose and explore “important questions about the meaning of interaction,” both technological and interpersonal, and especially its limitations.²⁷ Many are also specifically focused around the use of mobile and locative media technologies.²⁸ Two of these projects are discussed in detail below.

Uncle Roy All Around You

The first of Blast Theory’s narrative locative games to be examined here is *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003). This project is significant in the present context for the way that it makes questions of trust in strangers and confrontations between strangers a central component of the game play. *Uncle Roy* emerged from collaboration between Blast Theory and Mixed Reality Lab. It is a game that involves online and street players, as well as passers-by and, at strategic moments in the game play, paid actors. The ostensive aim for street players of the game is for them to journey through the streets of a city (London in the first run of the game) in search of an elusive figure called Uncle Roy. Clues are provided to the players at various stages. Online players of the game can follow and interact with these street players, providing assistance or

hindering their progress. As the game's developers explain, "the core artistic theme of the work is trust in strangers – be they remote players, Uncle Roy or passersby."²⁹

This issue of trust in strangers is explored in quite explicit ways at various strategic points, often in ways that "deliberately push the boundaries of interacting in public settings,"³⁰ and, at crucial moments, where game participants are asked to take "apparently risky decisions."³¹ One of the key navigational tasks of the game is for players to locate Uncle Roy's office. Once located, players enter and there they find a postcard lying on a desk and on which is written the question, "when can you begin to trust a stranger?"³² Players are asked to write their response to this question on the card; they are then told to take this card with them and leave the building. Once outside, they are instructed to climb into a waiting limousine; a stranger (a paid actor) also enters the car. With the two passengers on board, the car pulls away from the curb and drives off.

During the ride, the actor [the "stranger"] asks them [the game player] a sequence of questions about trust in strangers, and tells them that somewhere else in the game another player is answering these same questions. Finally, he [the actor/stranger] asks them whether they are willing to enter a year long contract to help this stranger if ever called upon. If they agree, he asks for their address and phone number, the car pulls up by a public postbox and the player is asked to post their postcard – addressed to Uncle Roy – to finally seal the contract.³³

What is striking about *Uncle Roy* is the way that it can be seen to engage with what Jacques Derrida has called "the foreigner question" and the challenge posed by "the law of absolute, unconditional hospitality."³⁴ As Derrida writes, "absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner [...], but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other," without any expectation of reciprocity.³⁵ For the participants of *Uncle Roy*, who were surveyed upon completion of the game, this call for "absolute hospitality" as played out within the confines of the game invoked a range of feelings both negative (with some players describing feelings of uncertainty, mistrust, and, in at least one case, a heightened fear of strangers, whilst playing the game) and positive (with other participants reporting positive interactions

with strangers).³⁶ Such polarised reactions would suggest that *Uncle Roy* is successful as a form of “tactical media,” the task of which, as artist Krzysztof Wodiczko explains, is to assist in the process of communication between strangers but also “to inspire and provoke”³⁷ – even if this means “provoking” by discarding these media. As Blast Theory’s Matt Adams explains, in projects such as *Uncle Roy* (and those related to it, such as *Can You See Me Now?* and *I Like Frank*), “[A] powerful, high tech, communications device lies useless and unusable at the emotional apex of the experience. The bathos that this provides is critical to the experience.”³⁸

***Rider Spoke* (2007)**

Rider Spoke is a mobile interactive work for cyclists, again developed in collaboration with Mixed Reality Lab. It debuted in London in October 2007. Participants of the game use a bike (either their own or supplied to them) that is then fitted with a handlebar-mounted Nokia N800J, an earpiece, and a microphone.³⁹ Each rider is given an hour to explore the streets of London at night “guided along the journey by the voice of Blast Theory co-founder Ju Row Farr.”⁴⁰ The first spoken instruction to riders, delivered by Farr in a “calm and measured [...] style and tone reminiscent of a psychotherapist,”⁴¹ asks them to seek out a quiet and appealing location where they can record into the device a name and a description of themselves. This recording – and its location – is then logged for other riders to listen to if they encounter that same location. Following this, participants were, as Jason Farman explains,

prompted to either “Hide,” which allowed them to find a location related to one of Farr’s prompts, such as “Find a place that reminds you of your father and record a story about it,” or “Find others,” which allowed users to “seek” other people’s narratives located throughout the city.⁴²

In some respects, *Rider Spoke* is the polar opposite of *Uncle Roy*: physical isolation⁴³ and quiet contemplation, rather than direct social interaction in a shared public space, are key; moreover, “there are no competitors, [and] the pace is decidedly slow to match Farr’s soothing tone of voice.”⁴⁴ These choices accord with a key aim of the project: commentary on the establishment and sustenance of interpersonal intimacy via mobile devices.⁴⁵

Despite these apparent differences, there are also clear discernible thematic consistencies between the two projects, particularly with respect to the central role of strangers in both. In *Rider Spoke*, the stranger is engaged in a number of ways.

The first and key form of interaction with strangers is through voice: “the piece asks participants to perform the tension between the voice and asynchronous forms of communication.”⁴⁶ In Farman’s analysis, he is specifically concerned with how, in *Rider Spoke*, the use of voice via mobile phones serves to “establish “embodied connections and a sense of presence between interlocutors.”⁴⁷ What this encouraged, in the words of one participant, was “a disconnected intimacy with a total stranger” through the sharing of recorded stories.⁴⁸ While the communicative process employed was intended to be asynchronous, the “sequential unfolding of the event”⁴⁹ became vital to the overall user experience. As *Rider Spoke*’s creators explain, as a participant listener-recorder, one cannot expect to give or listen to a “confidence” and then “provide something rigidly formal straight after.”⁵⁰ Rather, the whole process encourages the swapping of confidences with strangers, with people who are otherwise unknown to you, because “anything less than another confidence of some kind would be seen as accountable.”⁵¹ Commitment to this “intimate stranger” is also asked of each player when, at the very conclusion of the experience, they are prompted by the narrator “to make and record a promise.”⁵²

Secondly, interactions with strangers – or, more precisely, the *figure* of the stranger – were also evoked through instructions such as that which asks riders to seek out a flat or house with a window that could be looked through, one that they would like to enter, and to record a message explaining why.⁵³

Thirdly, whilst *Rider Spoke* “sought to solicit ‘a sense of isolation in an otherwise crowded city’”⁵⁴ – an aim which, in itself, presents a fascinating commentary on the work of Simmel, discussed earlier – two-way interactions with bystanders were clearly crucial to the overall experience of the work. At times, participants were cast as performers with bystanders serving as their spectators. At other times, the reverse occurred, “in that riders transformed bystanders into performers by presenting what they saw to others.”⁵⁵ In this sense, *Rider Spoke* not only engages “the tension

between the categories of presence and absence,”⁵⁶ it also offers a powerful commentary on the tension between public and private as enacted in public space using a communication technology.

In the following section, I explore in greater detail the narrative structures of these (and other) Blast Theory works, before drawing out their implications for an understanding of these engagements with strangers and the Other.

Narrative Structures in Blast Theory’s Locative Games

At one point in the “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” Roland Barthes asks, “Who is the donor of the narrative?”⁵⁷ That is to say: who is the author, the main contributor, the driver of the narrative? These are deceptively difficult questions to answer when considering the narrative composition of Blast Theory’s location-based games. On the one hand, in the provocative *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant* (2009), in which players are asked to identify with one of two former terrorists, the game follows a very detailed pre-scripted narrative developed by Blast Theory that requires significant levels and forms of “compliance”⁵⁸ on the part of the participant for its success. *Day Of The Figurines* (2006), in contrast, is a very different style of game: it is an SMS-based “pervasive game” that places players in a post-apocalyptic imaginary town and encourages gameplay over a much longer time period with the intention that it will be integrated into participants’ daily lives.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, like *Ulrike*, *Day* also follows a quite strongly pre-scripted narrative, albeit one that is complicated by multiple temporal narrative layerings.⁶⁰ On the other hand, *Uncle Roy* contains some pre-scripted elements, while *Rider Spoke* has “no background scenario or overarching metanarrative,”⁶¹ and what is offered to participants by way of narrative fragments in both of these games is intended as scaffolding – or “stage directions”⁶² – around which the larger narrative threads of the game are woven by players.

The difficulty in answering Barthes’ question in relation to Blast Theory’s work is further complicated by the extensive behind the scenes work that goes into each game in its very unfolding. Thus, while it is acknowledged that each Blast Theory project is a “co-production of players and behind the scenes staff,”⁶³ the role of the latter is

significant in terms of its influence in managing the narrative fragments that are received by players in each game, such as text messages in *Rider Spoke* and *Day Of The Figurines*, and how this information is filtered and then fed back into the gameplay – a process that is variously described as “recalibration,”⁶⁴ “orchestration,”⁶⁵ and “customisation”⁶⁶ of the game. It is a process that differs subtly but significantly from project to project, but is always performed with the overall objective of each game in mind: experimental sociality in the case of *Day Of The Figurines*, for example, or communicative ambivalence, alienation and encounters with strangers in the case of *Uncle Roy* and the closely related *I Like Frank*.

In the context of this chapter, what is especially interesting about the narrative organization of many of Blast Theory’s projects, especially *Uncle Roy* and *Rider Spoke* (but also others, like *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant* and *Day Of The Figurines*), is the way that pre-scripting or cues and “recalibration” or “orchestration” of the narrative are developed in strategic ways that encourage or force encounters with strangers (the “Other” in the specific case of *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant*). In order to deepen understanding of how this process occurs, it is valuable to turn in greater detail to Roland Barthes’ essay on the structural analysis of narrative.

In this essay, Barthes distinguishes between two component parts of, or “units” within, narrative. These are what he calls “functions” and “indices”. “Functions” correspond to “a functionality of doing,” while “indices” correspond to “a functionality of being”.⁶⁷ That is to say, the first determines what happens within a narrative, while the second creates the mood of a narrative. Barthes goes on to suggest that these larger units of “function” and “indices” are both composed of two further “sub-classes of narrative units”. The operations of these various “sub-classes” are instructive in understanding the role of the stranger/“Other” in Blast Theory’s work, and therefore warrant careful explanation here.⁶⁸

Within the class of functions, Barthes argues, there are “cardinal functions” and “catalyzers.”⁶⁹ The former, cardinal functions, “constitute real hinge-points of the narrative (or of a fragment of narrative).” The latter, catalyzers, serve to “‘fill in’ the narrative space separating the hinge functions.”⁷⁰ To use the example of *Rider Spoke*, a “cardinal function” might be the request “Please will you tell me about your

father?”, whereas a “catalyzer” could be the process of each player seeking out a quiet city location to record information about who they are.

The class of indices, meanwhile, is also composed of two sub-classes. On the one hand, there are “indices proper,” which Barthes describes as “referring to the character of a narrative agent, a feeling an atmosphere.” On the other hand, there are “informants,” whose role is “to identify, to locate in time and space,” often via the inclusion of “pure data with immediate signification.”⁷¹ To use the case of *Uncle Roy All Around You*, “indices proper” could refer to the sense of suspicion (the very “atmosphere” that Barthes gives as an example in his text) that is created as the game player is asked to get into a waiting car with a stranger. Meanwhile, in the same locative game, “informants” could include either the pre-scripted elements that set the scene for the game, or perhaps the items that are included, and which players encounter, in Uncle Roy’s office. A good example of the interplay between these two – “indices” and “informants” – is provided in Blast Theory’s description of the fictional world encountered by players in another of their games, *Day Of The Figurines*: “Special events unfold, a fete, an eclipse, an explosion, the overbearing presence of an army that affect the health and mood of its inhabitants.”⁷²

Crucially, as Barthes goes on to point out, any unit can belong to two different classes simultaneously. To again illustrate via the work of Blast Theory, a phone call in *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant*, for example, can, to adapt Barthes’ words, act as a catalyzer to the cardinal notation of choice (determining a specific course of action *within* and *commitment to* the game), but it is also, and simultaneously, the indice of a certain atmosphere (fear, anxiety – or perhaps reminiscence in the case of player responses to instructions in *Rider Spoke*). “In other words,” Barthes writes, “certain units can be mixed, giving a play of possibilities in the narrative economy.”⁷³ Many of Blast Theory’s narrative-based locative works set out to deliberately exploit this “play of possibilities” for strategic purposes. My particular interest here is in the significance of these narrative devices in how they “catalyze” in another sense – namely, the way in which, at crucial points, participants are drawn into interactions with relative or complete strangers, either in the form of passers-by who are unwittingly enrolled in the action of the game, or in the form of paid actors who play key roles within the game.

Proximity and Alienation, Community and Otherness: Nancy, Agamben, Lingis

In the final section to follow, I want to read these projects by Blast Theory against key (poststructuralist) philosophical deliberations on the notion of community and difference, specifically by Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, and Alphonso Lingis. This serves a twofold purpose. On the one hand, these philosophical deliberations make explicit many underlying themes in the mobile media projects discussed above, as well as offering a robust critique of these projects. On the other hand, the experimental interactions with strangers explored in the work of Blast Theory provides a basis for responding to, and further reflecting on, the more abstract and equally speculative philosophical reflections on difference and otherness.

In turning to the work of these three philosophers, it is clear that while there are key philosophical differences distinguishing each thinker's body of work, there are also key points of convergence. One of these, and the area of principal concern here, is their responses to the concept of "community" and the need to radically rethink how this concept is to be, or could potentially be, reconceptualized. While each of the three thinkers employs their own distinct and preferred terminology – for instance, Nancy writes of a "workless community," Agamben of "coming community," and Lingis of "other community" – all are committed to rethinking the concept of community in ways that are unrestrictive, inherently unstable, and open to difference and otherness. Each approach to rethinking community in these terms has a bearing on the present discussion of mobile media and strangers and, therefore, each is examined in turn below.

One of the more striking departures from more traditional ways of conceiving of community is that developed by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Inoperative Community*. In this book, Nancy is very suspicious of various attempts throughout Western history to conceive of community as a form of communion. For Nancy, community is not communion. This is because community as communion is constraining in that it suggests a "monolithic form or identity" that suppresses difference and promotes "exclusionary practices."⁷⁴

According to Nancy's own reformulation of community, as Georges Van Den Abbeele explains, "community," such as it can be described using this term, is not a community of subjects, nor is it a "communion of individuals" in a sense that might suggest a "higher or greater totality (a State, a nation, a People, etc.)."⁷⁵ More particularly, community is not the product of work, it is not an *oeuvre*: "one does not produce it."⁷⁶ Rather, for Nancy (following Bataille), community is what is "'unworked' (*désœuvré*)."⁷⁷ He writes:

Such communities are described as "workless" because its members are not brought together through a shared work, project, or set of interests, or lived experiences. Rather, it is the mutual recognition of the finitude or radical otherness of its members [...] that is the foundation of the workless community.⁷⁸

Moreover, community should not be thought of as a *thing* that can be actively created.⁷⁹ The idea that community is formed through bonding or commonality is problematic for Nancy. This is because community evades encapsulation. Any attempt to "capture" community will fail as "community" cannot be fixed, actively produced, or reproduced as "it differs with each 'occurrence/presentation'."⁸⁰

There would seem to be some clear similarities between Nancy's conception of community as "unworked" (*dés-œuvré*), and certain aspects of the projects of Blast Theory discussed above. For example, Blast Theory's locative games share an interest in the temporary and in temporary "community" (or, in Nancy's terminology, in the "in-common" and "being-in-common") – especially as an "eruption or explosion of unimagined sociality," to use the architect Cedric Price's phrase.⁸¹ Community, for Nancy, "necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called 'unworking,'" referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work," and which, because of this, "encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension."⁸²

However, a key difficulty in drawing comparisons between Nancy's philosophical formulations and the projects discussed above relates to the way that technology is used to enable but, more crucially, *maintain* various forms of social interaction. In each case, technology can be seen to provide a "scaffolding" of sorts around and from

which “community” might emerge. This runs counter to Nancy’s conception of the “workless” community which is against the idea of community as something that is “objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects).”⁸³ This issue notwithstanding, what can be said about Blast Theory’s projects is that they do “open up opportunities for potentially transformative encounters with ‘The Other’.”⁸⁴ In *Uncle Roy All Around You*, such opportunities are a core to the experience of the game, as players interact with passers-by, street players, those playing the game online, and, most dramatically, through the encounter at the end of the game with the stranger in the car, who asks a series of probing questions, including whether they are prepared to make a commitment to help a total stranger. The potential for “transformative encounters with ‘The Other’” is even more explicit in *Ulrike and Eamon Compliant*, in which player-participants learn of and are encouraged to identify with one of two notorious former terrorists.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s approach to thinking about community shares some of the same traits as the approach taken by Nancy, described above. Like Nancy, Agamben considers contemporary conceptions of belonging, togetherness, community to be misguided and inadequate.⁸⁵ In response, Agamben sets out to establish “new articulations” or conceptualizations of community that escape from formulations anchored in, or oriented towards, exclusion and inclusion, violence and negativity, substance and identity.⁸⁶ Echoing Nancy’s notion of a “workless community,” Agamben argues that “a true community can only be a community that is not presupposed.”⁸⁷ Rather, “true” community is one that remains open to the Other. In this sense, what he is proposing is still very much a “coming community:” a community deferred, a community yet-to-come, a community of and for the future, a community *in potentia*.⁸⁸ Central to this future-oriented conception of community is the notion of “undecidability.”⁸⁹ That is to say, those things which are to come are not “inevabilities” but “(im)possibilities,”⁹⁰ and much depends on us: “the coming community *might* happen if and only if we do not let slip away certain opportunities and it *might not* happen if we do let them slip away.”⁹¹

Central to this concept of a “coming community” is communication and the importance of communicating with the Other, with those who are in some way

excluded. This lies at the heart of Agamben's critique of community. For Nancy, a central problematic in existing conceptions of community is the notion of communion, or what he terms "fusion-into-oneness." For Agamben, a similar but slightly different problem is at stake: what is betrayed in, and obscured by, existing understandings of tradition and community is "the 'sayability' of language."⁹² Agamben's argument is that tradition is not about "belonging to this or that group, nation, soil, God, class, or municipality."⁹³ Rather, tradition "passes on the plain fact that we can speak and hence can be open to other speakers."⁹⁴ This emphasis on the potency of language, of communication, and of the ability to communicate *with others*, is a key feature of many Blast Theory projects. Central to *Rider Spoke*, for instance, is a communicative commitment to an "intimate stranger" in which riders are asked to perform their own personal acts of enunciation as well as submit to what Nick Couldry terms the "'obligation' to listen" to the enunciations of others.⁹⁵

A similar set of concerns – otherness, difference, and the importance and potency of communication – motivates the work of the American philosopher, Alphonso Lingis and are encapsulated in his notion of "other community." Lingis conceives of "other community" as that which is beneath what he terms "rational community." "other community," he writes, "recurs, it troubles the rational community, as its double, or shadow."⁹⁶ With strong echoes again of Nancy's notion of a "workless community," Lingis argues that this other community "forms not in a work, but in the interruption of work and enterprises."⁹⁷ That is to say, it does not form through having, or in producing, something in common. Rather, it forms through "exposing oneself to the one with whom we have nothing in common."⁹⁸

According to Lingis, "other community" manifests itself to us as an imperative to "expose oneself to the other."⁹⁹ Lingis conceives of the imperative to be open to otherness and difference, which is central to his notion of other community, as worked out in ways that are thoroughly embodied and multisensorial. He writes:

One exposes oneself to the other [...] not only with one's insights and one's ideas, that they may be contested, but one also exposes the nakedness of one's eyes, one's voice and one's silences, one's empty hands.¹⁰⁰

As if in direct reply to Derrida's question "what happens when our eyes touch?,"¹⁰¹ Lingis suggests that, by turning to face another, you "expose yourself," you open yourself to "judgement, to need, to a desire of the other."¹⁰² Thus, driving this multisensorial, phenomenological engagement with those around us is a belief, for Lingis, that "to recognize the other is to respect the other."¹⁰³

Like Agamben, Lingis sees communication as crucial to any exposure to, and recognition and respect of, the other. Communication is understood, here, in an expansive sense to include various technological prostheses *and* various "techniques of the body" (to use Marcel Mauss's formulation). Lingis writes: "We communicate information with spoken utterances, by telephone, with tape recordings, in writing and with printing [... and] with body kinesics – with gestures, postures, facial expressions, ways of breathing, sighing, and touching one another."¹⁰⁴

And yet, whatever the mode, communication, for Lingis, is always agonistic; that is to say, it is always a "struggle against interference and confusion."¹⁰⁵ On the one hand, it can function as a "continuation of violence" by other means. On the other hand, and more positively, Lingis argues communication "finds and establishes something in common beneath all contention"¹⁰⁶ – "discussion turns confrontation into interchange."¹⁰⁷ Crucially, though, as Lingis sees it, a key challenge is to recognize that in order to communicate with another, "one first has to have terms with which one communicates with the successive moments of one's experience."¹⁰⁸ These theoretical considerations of language and its possibilities for "interchange" are clearly evident in many of Blast Theory's locative works, from *I Like Frank* and *Uncle Roy*, through to *Rider Spoke*. In the last of these, for instance, the gameplay is built around the combination of particular technological prostheses (bike, phone) and particular "techniques of the body" (riding, walking, speaking, listening) to encourage communicative interaction and interchange with others, both proximate (passers-by) and distant (other players).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the narrative games of Blast Theory, and the uses that they have made of location-based mobile media to prompt (and provoke) connections

with relative and complete strangers. The desire for such interaction, I have argued, is deeply embedded in the narratives of each of these games, and can be seen through the complex ways that these narratives are either established in advance of gameplay or managed throughout it, and via a structuralist analysis of the narrative elements that compose these games. Building on this analysis of narrative structure, in the final part of the chapter, I argued that it is thus possible to read Blast Theory's work as exploring and testing new and future communicative terms of (and for) engagement between strangers. Each of their projects discussed in this chapter explore fleeting and unstable forms of social interaction (Nancy); each speaks to the future possibilities and potency of communication (Agamben); and, each explores this issue of "exposure," recognition and trust between strangers (Lingis) in ways that are simultaneously playful and thought-provoking.

In key respects, the game format of Blast Theory's projects is key to their success. Gameplay serves a vital mediating function. It provides an appropriate form for the exploration and expression by Blast Theory and Mixed Reality Lab of provocative (and at times controversial) experiences and themes, while at the same time permitting the maintenance of a playful distance in relation to these themes and issues.¹⁰⁹ The fact that location-based games tend to blur where the "magic circle of gameplay begins and ends"¹¹⁰ can be a powerful mechanism for prompting players' to further reflect on, and engage with, the themes and issues these projects raise. Equally, the playfulness that is inherent in the design of Blast Theory's narrative-based locative games enables both the player-participant and the "stranger" who encounters them (passers-by, other players of each game) to gain their own "playful distance" – a process that the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko sees as crucial in fostering a "healthy curiosity" and, ideally, "communication and closer contact" between both parties.¹¹¹

Therein lies the real force of Blast Theory's work: the deliberate and systematic creation of "uncomfortable interactions as part of powerful cultural experiences"¹¹² that challenge our understandings of distance and proximity, otherness and identification, alterity and mimesis, disconnection and connection.

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Endnotes

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