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Thought Machine

Posted Jan 23, 2011, by Eric Hynes

I found myself in the driver's seat of a parked, dark blue Chevy Malibu, anxiously alternating between the rearview and sideview mirrors, wondering how in the world I got there. The car wasn't mine. I didn't even know whose it was. But that hadn't stopped me from casing it like a common criminal, opening its unlocked door and sitting inside. Why would I do such a thing? Why would I stash my money inside my boot? Why would I, a law-abiding citizen, sit there contemplating robbing a bank?

Because an automated voice on my cell phone told me to.

In [A Machine to See With \(http://www.domain.com/?URL=%2Ffestival%2Farticle%2Fdisrupting-whats-expected%2F\)](http://www.domain.com/?URL=%2Ffestival%2Farticle%2Fdisrupting-whats-expected%2F), a participatory, site-specific work by UK trailblazers Blast Theory, there is no film to see, no space to visit, no performer to engage. It has no physical manifestation whatsoever, other than the behavior of the participant. Via a series of cell phone calls, you're instructed by the voice of an insistent Englishman to walk, turn, look and do. Whether and how you comply is another matter entirely.

"Our interest was in how far we could push people," Blast Theory's Nick Tandavanitj told me after my experience had ended. "To see what they would agree to or be willing to do." I discovered that I was willing to do plenty. Contrary to personal policy, I even answered my phone in a bathroom stall, lest I miss my next instruction. "There's an ideology around interaction, where it's all about audience participation, a world in which everyone has their say," Tandavanitj said. "But we're actually interested in ways in which it manipulates people to think, or to drive them down certain paths."



What seems like a vehicle for vicarious, real world game-play is actually a stealth excuse to learn about evolving human behavior, with the participant's choices informing both subsequent commands and helping to shape a psychological profile. One of Blast Theory's touchstones was French auteur Jean-Luc Godard, and Tandavanitj singled out *Made in U.S.A.*, in which Godard fashioned a political drama about Vietnam out of a gritty dime store novel. "We wanted to make something where we'd tell people it's a heist movie, but we're actually making something that's trying to get people to question how they can be manipulated, and what role technology has in the way they behave," said Tandavanitj.

Perhaps I was too easily manipulated by the remote commands, but I loved walking through my surroundings with a heightened sense of my actions, enjoyed moving through my banal surroundings as if I was on a movie set, my every street crossing another tracking shot. "This town is paper thin," the voice says. It seduced me by narrating my journey in remarkable detail, observing things as specific as the design pattern on a screen door, and a handmade sign in a shop window. Somehow, over the course of the narrative, the real world becomes a fiction, and actions feel like performance rather than consequential behavior.

I liked being the protagonist of my own uncertain narrative, but I dreaded having to interact with other players. At various points along the way the process can orchestrate interactions with others in the system, and somehow this was more terrifying than entering an unknown car, or contemplating a bank robbery. "That sense of the boundary, of who you think is colluding with you in the experience, that's the kind of boundary that we really like," Tandavanitj said. "It's where it gets exciting. Does it stop here, or there, or over there?" Since *A Machine to See With* is ultimately just a prompt, there's no telling what can happen. I'll not give away too much about the ending, but suffice to say that it's open-ended, with the player standing in an ordinary aisle in an ordinary drug store. Stories had already started trickling back from participants. "Some woman hugged a stranger," said Tandavanitj, "and then proceeded to spend the next fifteen minutes choosing skin lotions together."



Photo by Stephen Speckman.

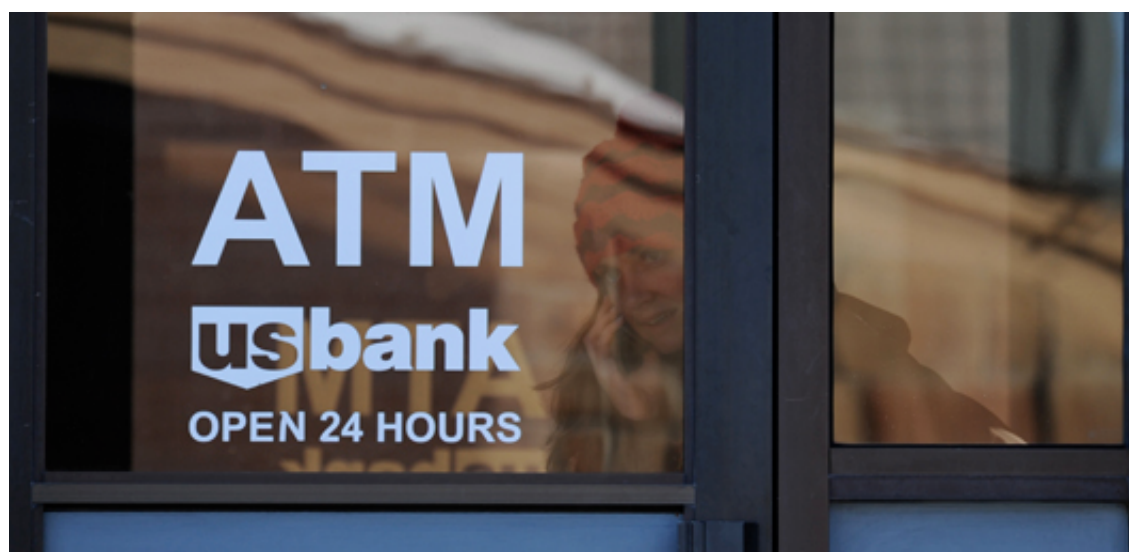


Photo by Stephen Speckman.

On my way back from the conclusion I passed by the Chevy Malibu, which was empty and looked exactly as I'd left it. There were errant Google Maps printouts in the back seat, and the door was still

unlocked. When I stepped back to take a photograph with my phone, a man exited a nearby apartment and looked at me strangely. At first I thought he was part of the game, but he wasn't. He wasn't looking at me like I was a player or protagonist. He looked at me like I was suspicious character. And that's precisely what I had become.

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