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4-8 November 2009

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Film & Sessions Programme

'Winnebago Man' -
Director Ben Steinbauer Interveiwed

Arts Documentary -
Sophie Fiennes

Imagining Reality -
Albert Maysles

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Opportunities for young people at Doc/Fest

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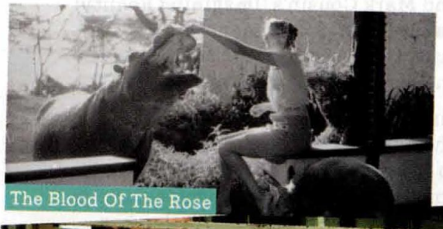

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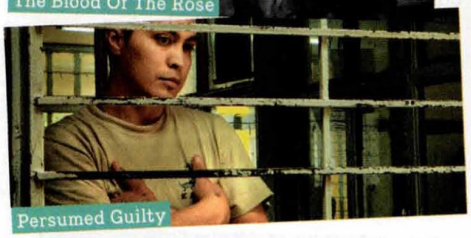

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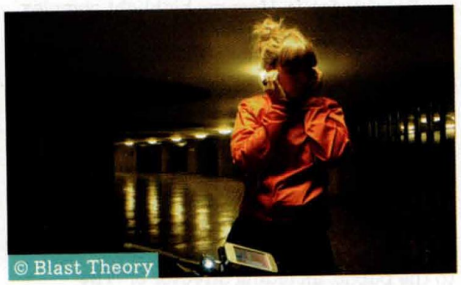

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PERVASIVE GAMES

CASE STUDY BY MATT ADAMS (BLAST THEORY)

There is a widespread recognition that certain games might be considered art works, but it is more debatable whether games intrinsically are an art form. In the same way that film and video have been used by artists for many decades without usurping the broader commercial stream of cinematic production, artistic games will probably remain distinguished from the mainstream by a focus on aesthetics, hybridity and intellectual and emotional subtlety. However, one of the artistic and commercial strengths of cinema has been its readiness to maintain a dialogue between artistic or experimental work and the mainstream, through festivals such as Sundance and independent cinemas with bold programmes. Despite efforts by, for example, The Independent Games Developers Association[1], this exchange is still pretty rudimentary in games.

Over the last decade, a generation of game makers has emerged who are not only combining diverse aspects of game design but are busy mixing games with genres such as installation art, performance and documentary. Serious, political games such as '911 Survivor', 'Escape from Woomera' or 'World Without Oil' all use real events to transform our expectations of play. This essay is a personal reflection on three works by Blast Theory – 'Desert Rain', 'Day of the Figurines' and 'Rider Spoke' – as examples of, respectively, ethics and decision making, social dynamics in pervasive games and user-generated content.

During 1998, Ju Row Farr, Nick Tandavanitj and I were working with the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham on a new project called 'Desert Rain'[2] that would be set within a virtual environment that was video-projected onto a screen of falling water spray. We reflected on the epistemological crisis wrought by the 1991 Gulf War in which the real, the virtual, the fictional and the imaginary had collapsed into one another. To dramatise this collapse, we wanted to immerse the audience into a world that was disorientating and ethically loaded. We gradually realised that we needed to create a game in order to do so. Games give large numbers of people a motivation to interact, a readily understood means to do so and a highly varied landscape to explore that allows each player an almost unique experience. That so many computer games had been made about the Gulf War – sometimes using simulation engines provided by the military themselves – only made the prospect of placing our audience inside a game world even more alluring.

In 'Desert Rain', six players at a time enter a large factory or gallery space shrouded in darkness. A performer greets them and briefs them about their "mission," which is to find their target and then help their team mates to escape from the virtual world within twenty minutes. Each player then enters a new space and enters one of the six cubicles. Inside they stand alone, facing a water screen, standing on a tilting platform to navigate. The player holds a swipe card with the name and face of their "target" marked on it. They steer around a night time desert landscape searching for their target, exploring bunkers and talking to their team mates via headsets. Once they find their target, their immersion in the virtual world is rudely disrupted by a hooded performer emerging through the screen of water spray and giving them a new swipe card. Then, as the clock ticks down (announced on the headsets by a hidden performer), they must search for the exit.

The ethical challenge in 'Desert Rain' is whether you are willing to help other members of your team rather than simply save yourself. Because the players are physically separated from one another and may never have met before, there is a temptation to abandon the weaker players and head for the exit alone. What none of the players realise is that as they exit the virtual world the piece is not over; instead they must climb through a long corridor filled with tons of sand into a hotel room. There, as a group, they watch video documentaries on the hotel TV featuring each of their "targets", who turn out to be real people. Many players attest that, when standing in the confines of the room as the testimony of participants unfold, the consequences of their own actions in what had previously seemed 'merely' a game become uncomfortably tangible.

When engaging with an artwork, we are also invited to make decisions about how the work is operating. We must choose what is salient, explore possible metaphors and reference points, and balance our emotional and aesthetic responses with intellectual or conceptual ones. Given the enormous breadth of this process, games must expand the range of available decisions for a player, not just when considering the game as a whole but as an intrinsic part of the game itself. Might it be possible to introduce new kinds of decision-making in which ethics or even politics played a part?

Games set goals. Given their functional and convergent nature, goals seem to militate against artistic expression. Especially as games carve goals into sub-goals and micro goals ever downwards into shards of the readily apprehensible: reach the door, jump the gap, solve the code, collect the gold. However, as online games have developed it has become clear that for these games to be truly compelling even the most elaborate long-term goals are not enough; they need a social dynamic. Even 'America's Army '– an army simulation game centered on shooting – establishes clans of players, and it is these that provide the motivation for play. As one player told me: "If I don't go online tonight, I'm letting the clan down." To date, however, these social structures are ways of organising gameplay, not of engendering it. A number of players with a range of skills may be required to complete a task, but the tasks themselves are physics-based battles.

Can multi-player games with developed social dynamics set goals that are tentative, mercurial and metaphysical? 'Day of the Figurines' is an SMS game for up to 1000 players in which the stated goal of the game is to "help others," but the actual goals are negotiable and subjective so that what is success varies from player to player. It is

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set in a small decrepit English town over the course of a single day. Players explore the Multi Storey Car Park, the pubs, the Canal, the Underpass and so on by sending text messages. Players can chat with one another, have a small set of objects (such as leather wristbands, cups of tea) and can complete tasks such as liberating animals from the Rat Research Institute. Players' health deteriorates through interactions with the environment, and they must complete missions to restore it.

Over the course of the 24 days of the game, players must also work out why they are in the game and decide for themselves what helping others might mean. This is especially complicated once a small force of Arabic-speaking soldiers arrives in the town and things start getting violent. To be alive as dawn rises over the town is in some sense to have "won," but there are no celebrations or rewards for this and – given the long duration of the game – players need to have found some other reason for being there long before this if they are to have engaged fully. In denying what might seem a precondition of any successful game – a clear understanding of what players have to do – 'Day of the Figurines' invites players to think about and discuss their reason for being there.

Given that games over the last decades have been defined by technological development, the rise of mobile devices as games platforms provides a fascinating possibility. These new devices are highly personalised, ubiquitous, intimate and focused on communication. What kinds of social relationships might we explore when games are created on platforms of personal identity?

'Rider Spoke' is a Blast Theory project from 2007 for cyclists with a handheld computer mounted on their handlebars. As they ride through the city wearing headphones, they are asked questions about their life and invited to choose somewhere in the city to answer each one. When they find a place they like they stop and record their response. That recording is then "stored" at that location. The second aspect of the experience is to cycle around searching for other participants' answers. Hundreds, even thousands, of answers are recorded over the week or two that the project runs in each city.

When inviting participants to contribute to a work in this way, we must make several crucial decisions about who can speak, what can be said and in what ways what is said might be meaningful. 'Rider Spoke' has been described as a game built on user-generated content, a

phrase that has three major problems. "User" suggests that people are utilitarian inputs to a system, "generated" posits that they produce things through some basic process (think of a random number generator) and "content" is an awkward and ugly syllogism for the ways in which the public contribute. For these reasons I will use publicly-created contributions to describe how 'Rider Spoke' invites its audience to create the work itself.

Most of the best known examples of publicly-created contributions such as YouTube work on the principle that the vast majority of content will be rubbish and that various systems need to be in place to weed out this rubbish. Typically this involves ranking and voting. In 'Rider Spoke', we established a high threshold to participation (you must cycle through the city), a strong sense of mood (through the design of the interface and music), reciprocity (the female voice of the game speaks personally and revealingly) and context (the participant's choose where to record) to increase the likelihood that what is recorded is meaningful. As a result, we have found that there is almost no rubbish created by participants in 'Rider Spoke' whatever. Much of the content is repetitive and some of it is awkwardly expressed, but in its given context it is almost always meaningful and heartfelt. Often it is moving and compelling.

'Rider Spoke' uses the intimacy of personal communication devices to give each particular place used in the work a meaning. While existing on the outer edges of games design it, along with 'Desert Rain' and 'Day of the Figurines', perhaps points towards games in which participation has many layers of complexity. While visual art has explored social configurations within the gallery, pervasive games can pose questions via new social relationships in the wider world. If they can draw diverse groups of citizens into playful real world encounters that also pack complex emotional, conceptual and intellectual concerns, then pervasive games will have achieved their full potential.

[1] www.tiga.org
[2] 'Desert Rain' was a collaboration with the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham. It was first shown at the Now 99 Festival in Nottingham and was subsequently shown at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Riverside Studios in London, Tramway in Glasgow, Industrial Museum in Bristol, KTH in Stockholm, Digital Summer in Manchester, Las Palmas in Rotterdam, Former Red Star Parcel Office, in Middlesborough, Artspace in Sydney, Typografie in Prague and Festival Escena Contemporanea in Madrid. More information is at www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_desertrain.html

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