

# **Situated Drama: Psycho-geography as Resource for Art**

## **Position paper for the Space, Place and Experience in Human-Computer Interaction Workshop**

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Location aware technologies make possible new interactive experiences of situated drama and narrative (e.g Benford et al 2004). Riot! was developed by Hewlett Packard Labs, Mobile Bristol and two local writers Ralph Hoyte and Liz Crow. It was described as an interactive play for voices and set in Queen's Square, a large Georgian public space in Bristol, England. It utilised hand-held computing technology and the Global Positioning System (GPS) to trigger audio files representing a riot that had occurred in the square in 1831. It was made available to the general public in a three-week long research trial. Participants were issued with a small back-pack containing an iPAQ Personal Digital Assistant (PDA), GPS receiver and headphones. 700 people tried out the experience from which there were 563 usable questionnaires, 30 semi-structured interviews and four in depth ethnographic case studies (Blythe, Reid, Wright and Geelhead submitted). This paper focuses on three of the case study participants' understandings of the Riot experience and the degree to which this was a situated drama.

## **Making Sense of The Experience**

The case study participants were recruited through opportunity sampling, all names and some identifying details have been changed. Before Riot! the participants were interviewed about their attitudes to the city, art and technology, they were also shown the publicity generated for Riot! and asked to describe what they would expect to experience based on the poster. Using a headphone splitter a researcher accompanied each participant through the Riot! event and asked them to think aloud (Dix et al 1998) as they went along. In addition, immediately after the experience participants took part in a critical reflection interview and five months later they were asked to write an email account of what they remembered about their Riot! experience. Tony was 35 years old and worked as a teacher in a primary school. He lived with a lodger in a terraced house in Bristol. Joe was a close friend of Tony, he was also 35, worked in the public sector in the Midlands but visited Bristol most weekends in order to see his girlfriend Eva. Eva was a 27-year old youth worker who rented a flat share in Bristol with a friend. These three were all known to the researcher and formed a friendship group,

There were a number of very different sense making activities in play. One was understanding the locus of control: how do I interact with this technology, how do I start a file, how do I stop a file, how do I replay a file if it has faded away. A second was understanding the technology: how does this work? Are the files

beamed down from the satellite or are the files inside the ipaq? A third was interpreting the story, the world of the play. What is happening in this story, what was that noise, did they just throw someone out of a window? A fourth was understanding the felt lives of the characters, trying to imagine what they went through. This kind of sense making involves entering the world of the cultural artefact on its own terms, doing what the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge called suspending disbelief.

The suspension of disbelief is a concept still used in the teaching of English Literature even though it was authored almost two hundred years ago. It refers to the act of poetic faith where readers temporarily accept, for example, the existence of supernatural characters. The phrase is still in use because it resonates with a particular activity in the processing of fiction. However, it is potentially misleading and has been widely criticised. No-one suspends disbelief to the extent that they start believing that they Ryme of the Ancient Mariner is a historical account. What the suspension of disbelief actually refers to is the acceptance of conventions in a particular poetic world or cultural artefact. If for example, we are watching Hamlet we do not object that there are no such things as ghosts, in other words we accept the convention of the genre and the media we are engaging with, we enter into the rules of play.

Riot! begins with outdoor crows scenes but also included scenes set in drawing rooms or locations far off Queen's square. Eva was perturbed by the inclusion of indoor scenes in Riot! alongside those set in the square itself. This shift in convention took her out of the drama, the audio world, and compelled her to focus on herself: Eva " *you've just had the experience of being inside the crowd that's rioting. And then you have to say no, I'm just standing in Queen's Square in 2004 listening to a headset and this is a sketch of something that happened in that house there that I'm looking at.*" She thinks she has understood the rules of play until the moment she realises a scene is set indoors, then her understanding of the rules must be revised. Eva comes to this creative conclusion. Eva: " *So I reckon if we walk past the houses we'll hear what's going on inside them maybe. Maybe that's the idea. There you go. Yes. This is the crowd looking at them.*" This then is a new convention for her, a new rule of play, once she has made this link she is much happier to engage with the indoor scenes. Eva engages creatively with the text actively developing a new interpretative rule. The other participants were far less willing to actively engage in this way.

## **Degrees of Embedded Interaction**

Joe paused by a poster which was advertising a concert. He had been expecting it to be related to Riot! and was somewhat disappointed that it did not. There was often frustration when files were not tied to particular landmarks, Tony: " *I don't understand why, right in the middle, you've got that big statue which is probably the most prominent part of the square, why not, when you walked up to it, did it not trigger something?*" But for these participants there was a more general mismatch between audio and visual feedback. Eva: " *It's a bit surreal[...] there's*

*a guy playing Dabble over there and there's two women just giving each other a hug when they met each other over there. It's quite strange because on one hand I'm imagining a riot but then you've got just people... it's a bit eerie, a bit strange.*" There were visual appeals in Riot – the space was incorporated in the design. One of the authors, Liz Crow, spent a lot of time wandering around the square looking for ways to incorporate the space. Where the environment could be related non-directly, this was particularly engaging. Like many of the interviewees Tony spent time looking very closely at the trees growing around the edge of the square and wondering if they were old enough to have been there during the riot. Similarly, Eva heard a file where fire spreads out across the rooftops her gaze moved along the buildings as if she were watching the fire spread. For Eva the indoor scenes worked less well because they required the visitor to ignore what they were seeing altogether.

## **Discussion: Filling in the Gaps**

Technical difficulties persisted up until the launch of Riot! and into the trial. It was possible to get stuck in the loops either through a problem with the ipaq or a bug in the logic. It was also possible for a file to start and then fade away or jump altogether. GPS drift meant that files, which were meant to play when users entered certain locations, might actually be triggered up to fifteen metres away from the target. Previous interactive dramas have encountered the problem of GPS drift and recognise it as a design challenge. This has been such a difficult challenge that some interactive drama projects abandon GPS altogether in favour of self report in order to convey location (Benford et al 2004). The Riot! premise partially explained the chaotic nature of the files but nevertheless, fade outs, jumps and repetition caused considerable frustration for these participants. These kinds of problem may be considered as traditional usability problems with the interface. Tony was amazed at the technology and yet and at the same time deeply unimpressed. This is reminiscent of Cooper's concept of dancing bearware. Dancing bears are impressive because they can dance at all, not because they can dance well (Cooper 1999). McCarthy and Wright (2004) describe a similar world of "broken technology" where things almost but don't quite work – just before the transaction is completed at the online wine store the computer crashes.

Tony and Joe relied on mobile phones every day to organise their working and private lives. When confronted with a mobile technology that they could not quite trust, there was something more than disappointment. Tony: *"Here we are now, entertain us." We want it now and it's got to work and if it doesn't work, we don't care how flash it is, it's just bollocks*". Eva was prepared to re-examine and re-invent her sense of the experience. Eva was initially confused about the chronology of the events when a character started singing a song about the Bristol riots. Eva *"He was singing about the Bristol Riots so had we jumped forward in time?"* She supplies some back story to explain it. Eva: *"You'd get camp fires with people making up songs and stuff"*. In critical theory the word "text" can refer to words, images or music. In reception theory the experience of

a text is a “gestalt that is both of us and not of us” Davis (2003). Eva supplies an explanation drawn from her own life and not the text and makes a richer experience. Eva supplied a further metaphor to that of an interactive play for the experience, that of a “*treasure hunt*”. Over the stated meaning of the experience – the interactive play, she overlays the metaphor of a game, in order to make it more enjoyable and meaningful to her. What Joe and Tony perceive as failings of the text Eva responds to more creatively – engaging with it and bringing to it aspects of her own experience in order to “fill in the gaps” (Davis 2003). Indeed it is in the gaps that the play comes most fully alive.

## Discussion

The location of the play in the square where the actual historical events had taken place was important. It seemed to have more resonance and to matter more to people who were from Bristol. People began to look at a series of familiar markers in the landscape with different eyes, the square was in this sense defamiliarised (Shlovsky 1986). For Shlovsky defamiliarisation is one of the most important functions of a work of art, art makes us look again at the taken for granted, at our everyday assumptions. Although there was some frustration with the technology and this nascent art form, no-one who experienced Riot! could see Queen’s square in quite the same way again. The Situationists of the 1960s attempted to disturb what they termed the psychogeography of public space by, for example, disrupting public sign systems and maps. Location aware mobile technologies offer more creative possibilities, opening up the psycho-geography of public space as a medium for art.

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