The Pervasive and the Digital: Immersive Worlds in Blast Theory’s ‘A Machine to See With’ and Dennis Del Favero’s ‘Scenario’

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses two immersive story worlds between two distinct interactive artworks. Blast Theory’s A Machine to See With (2010) is a pervasive fictional experience that enables users, through the technology of their mobile phone, to become immersed within a fictional crime scenario across a real geographical setting. Dennis Del Favero’s art project, Scenario (2011), by contrast, is an interactive and immersive story that takes place in a 360-degree digital cinematic space called an AVIE (Advanced Visualization and Interaction Environment). This immersive world is a mixed reality environment, a meeting place where five real users and ten digital screen characters converge and interact through the technology of motion sensing. Participants are virtually wired into the immersive world through the performance of their movement. This paper will explore both of these artworks through original interviews the author has conducted with each of the artists.

KEYWORDS

Blast Theory, Dennis Del Favero, Immersion, Immersive Storytelling, Interactive Art Narrative, Pervasive and Digital Technology, Worlds

INTRODUCTION

The immersiveness of virtual worlds is ubiquitous in a digital age. Virtual presence through online activity, such as gaming, shopping, socializing, or any form of communication, merges and coexists a real-life user with a virtual other, dividing selfhood into a relationship of being both here in an actual world and there in a virtual world simultaneously. Theorists such as Don Ihde, Brian Massumi, Anna Munster, N. Katherine Hayles, Brian Rotman and Mark B.N. Hansen have discussed this corporeal split in their respective works and fields of research. This paper utilises these theorists, particularly Hansen’s by considering the role of the body in the immersive worlds of interactive art.

As Hansen asserts in New Philosophy for New Media, immersive worlds such as virtual reality environments, comprise of a negotiation or mergence between that of a user’s body as it becomes enfolded into a virtual dataspace (Hansen, 2004, p. 162). This type of immersiveness, as Hansen notes, produces a “dynamic coupling of body and image, where the body transforms the medium as the medium transforms the body” (Hansen, 2004, p. 186). Within this paper the author adopts Hansen’s corporeal understanding of interactive art to consider two artworks that similarly hybridize the user’s active body within an immersive world to create narrative experiences. These worlds are
Blast Theory’s *A Machine to See With* (2010) and Dennis Del Favero’s *Scenario* (2011). In each artwork a coproduction between a body and a technology forms an interactive world, a world that falls in line with Oliver Grau’s writings on immersion.

In *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Grau states that “immersion is mentally absorbing and a process, a change, a passage from one mental state to another. It is characterized by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening” (Grau, 2003, p. 13). This paper’s particular interest in interactive art, rather than cinema or television as a site for immersion also follows Grau’s reasoning. Immersive media such as paintings, the cinema or television, as Grau asserts, “are delimited by a frame that is apparent to the observer” (Grau, 2003, p. 14), which to some extent leaves the observer outside of it. Interactive art by contrast puts a person inside a world by transcending them from an observer to a user, an active body with agency inside a world. As Ryszard Kluszczyński has noted, in interactive art an artist does not make a finished piece of work that is watched but rather, “produces an area of activity for the receivers, whose interactive actions bring to life an artwork-event” (Kluszczyński, 2010). Consequentially, an experience is co-shaped by a user and an artist. This is the very reason as to why the methodological approach of this paper is similarly co-shaped between the author and interviews with each of the two interactive artwork designers.

**A MACHINE TO SEE WITH**

*Just listen to the voice on the phone. The voice tells you what to do. The voice says you’re playing the lead in a movie. Hide in the toilets, find the getaway car, stake out the bank and take a deep breath. You’re going in.*

The description above is taken from Blast Theory’s website (Blast Theory, 2017), which describes their artwork, *A Machine to See With*. This is a pervasive game that involves a group of users following instructions on their mobile phones. As these instructions are spoken each user must carry them out, mobilising each individual participant across a real urban environment. Within a specific starting point in a city setting and at an arranged time, a participant’s phone will ring. The voice on the phone will then proceed to instruct a user about the fictitious bank robbery they are going on, leading them to real checkpoints and other participants before eventually reaching the doors of a public bank. The immersive fictionality of this experience relies upon the user obeying instructions through the technology of their mobile phone.

The artists of Blast Theory (led by founding members Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj) provide the opportunity for six participants to use their phones as a gateway to an interactive, immersive and pervasive story space, in which they construct a fictional event. Participants give their mobile numbers to the artists when signing up for this experience and are directed to a starting location at a specific time and place. Once ready, each participant receives a series of phone calls from an automated voice, created by the artists from the call-centre software Asterisk. This voice instructs each participant that they are going on a bank robbery and over the course of an hour, the voice phones each participant at sporadic moments, guiding and instructing them on where to go and what to do, with each directive moving participants closer to the targeted real-life bank.

This type of artwork virtually reconstructs the space before participants in which “[t]he city is understood as a cinematic space and the eyes of the participants as the screens themselves” (Treske,
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