Chapter 4

Site-Specific Performance, Narrative, and Social Presence in Multi-User Virtual Environments and the Urban Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This chapter brings together the practice-based creative research of artists Charlotte Gould and Paul Sermon, culminating in collaborative interactive installations for urban screens that investigate new forms of social and/or political narratives in site-specific urban environments. The authors’ current creative practice looks specifically at the concepts of social presence and performance and attempts to bridge two remote locations either virtually (using online virtual environments such as Second Life) or in the physical space through mixed reality techniques and interfaces that allow the public to direct the narrative and creative outcomes of the artwork.

INTRODUCTION

Through practical accounts of four recent projects by the authors, “Urban Intersections,” “Liberate Your Avatar,” “Picnic on the Screen,” and “Zombie Nation,” presented by “Hub”; an innovation space and pop up gallery, which aimed to support the regeneration of the City of Salford funded by the University of Salford, Arts Council England, and social enterprise fund Unltd.

The authors will explore the impact of interactive works for urban screens on our communities and our environment and evaluate how these works can contribute to a sense of citizenship,

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in our globally networked, multi-ethnic cities. In our urban environment, we are surrounded by strangers, observed via surveillance cameras, and linked through the digital infrastructure to cities across the world. We project multiple identities in real and virtual space. Can interactive works promote civic responsibility, collectivism, creativity, and responsiveness, as well as new ways of engaging with each other and public space, or do these urban screens merely contribute to the Orwellian dystopia of societal control?

In 1974, Richard Sennett argues in the *The Fall of Public Man* that the city of the late Twentieth Century promoted individualism and blurred our view of our economic and social conditions (Sennett, 2002). Paul Virilio described television as one of the biggest promoters of individualism and suburbanism (Virilio, 1997). The first large-scale urban screens in New York functioned purely as advertising space and there has been much discussion of our media withdrawing us from our communities and promoting insular behaviour. With the development of social networking has this all changed? Does the new generation of public urban screens and digital networks offer a new egalitarianism for the twenty first century? Scott McQuire (2009) argues that digital media networks have decentralised traditional media hierarchies in that the majority now have access to instant media production, our mobile phones give us access to mobile Internet, photographs and filmmaking so that the public can film key events on their phone and upload content for professional broadcast, competing with Reuters. In this way, as Scott McQuire describes, we are experiencing a new relationship to time, space and identity and he states that “dimensions, boundaries, scales and borders have become increasingly contested” (McQuire, 2009, p. 48).

The first part of this chapter will look at how new communities are being developed and through social networking people are communicating across the globe, real time, and at regular intervals. Asking if the new digital networks and public screens offer a heightened collectivism, is this empowering, or is it merely creating a greater sense of alienation? What does this mean in an environment and culture where the virtual and real merge and how do we construct a sense of community, place, and identity in this state of ‘co-presence’ as described by McQuire? Does this merging of physical and virtual lead to a greater state of connectedness?

In the second part of this chapter, we will reflect on the discourse on ludic interfaces and the discussion on urban play introduced by Gunalan Nadarajan at ISEA 2008 as a panel in the conference proceedings. Here the discussion was centred on the importance of play to engage and give multi-ethnic communities a sense of commonality. Richard Sennett talks of the importance of ritual and play in the formation of public culture and argues that sociability is neither predefined or natural. How then can we offer a framework to promote this (Sennett, 2002)? The authors will look at how interactive artworks offer the public a framework to contribute to cultural content through the creation of the participant’s own individual narrative.

Urban screens have been installed across the world and in eighteen cities in the UK, funded by the BBC and Local Authorities; aiming to address local communities so that the screens reflect something of their respective location and community. These systems are governed by civic control and regulations so in this context how far can the public shape their content? The majority of the programming on the BBC Big Screens is news and sports related and some of these screens have now been taken over by private corporations with much of the content focusing on advertising.

Andreas Broeckmann argues that any medium can be used as a tool for propaganda and stresses the importance of using the Urban screens in a democratic way, offering access to content development by the public and not merely using the screens as advertising space (Broeckmann, 2009).