

The nature of the experience: understanding the role of the audience in pervasive and locative artworks

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Mobile and portable computers are increasingly enabling interactive art experiences away from desktop PCs and gallery installations. Meanwhile locative technologies such as GPS seemingly allow for more immediate connections to be made between artworks and locations. Pervasive access to networks at increasingly disparate as well as specific locations would seem to present artists with ways of engaging audiences in new and previously unavailable ways.

Many artworks described or labelled as 'interactive' aim to engage their audiences by requiring or allowing for a level of participation. However, central to the character of works which employ pervasive and locative technologies, is the 'active' role of the audience in experiencing them. Audiences are typically expected to operate the devices employed, navigate to locations or to provide content, often of a personal nature, in order to participate.

Too often 'participation' or 'interaction' is seen as an end in itself. Post-modern theories of democracy and inclusion in the arts – and in particular the 'death of the author' (Barthes 1977) and Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) – seemingly create a situation whereby all artworks are becoming more participatory without considering the quality of individual experiences. The term 'interaction' is frequently understood in literal terms, as operating or controlling a system, which, as Claire Bishop notes, sees the argument 'reflected back to artistic intentionality rather than issues of reception' (Bishop 2004: 62). Understanding the audience's role in terms of their 'interaction' or 'participation' may simply reinforce existing relationships with interactive media rather than offering new or heightened levels of involvement. Whatever the level or nature of control offered by an interactive work there remains the issue of how active and willing the audience are in their participation. We can intend 'interactive experiences' which engage audiences but how can we account for the audience's actual perception and understanding of their role? Importantly, how

can the audience's pre-existing attitudes and influences be accounted for and how might these shape their understanding of their role in an interactive artwork?

Constructing roles for the audience

To address the audience's perceptions of their role in pervasive and locative artworks an approach was developed as part of a practice-led doctoral study (Fry 2008) and this paper discusses several of its findings. The approach aimed to account for the role of the audience as it is conceived by the artist, modelled in the artwork and experienced by the audience. This involved the construction of artworks as critical models of the role of the audience accompanied by a set of questions that were put to the audience. Interviews with the audiences of the artworks enabled a comparison of my intentions for each work, with the audience's actual experience and perceptions of their role. This could also include previous experiences that may have shaped the works' reception. Several artworks were produced during the course of the investigation including the two discussed here, *The MAGIC RAY* (2009) and *Blank Map* (2009).

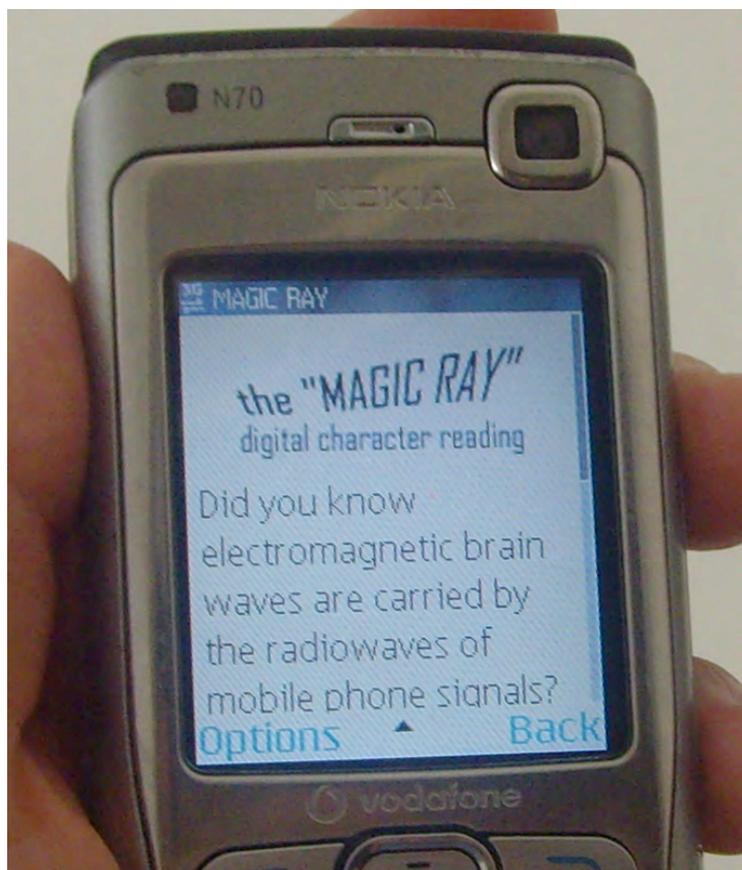


Figure 1. The MAGIC RAY viewed on a mobile phone.

The mobile phone based work *The MAGIC RAY* explores the influence of the audience's prior experiences of pervasive devices as well as their perceptions of the term 'interactive'. Visitors to *The MAGIC RAY* website are told that electromagnetic brain wave data is carried on the radio waves of mobile phone signals. The website claims this information allows *The MAGIC RAY* to provide a reading of the audience's character when they visit the site using their mobile phone. This is not the case, and the readings they receive are simply 'cold readings', statements that most people tend to identify with. A reading 'process' provides feedback that suggests their character is being read. However, 'interaction' in the work is essentially reduced to following a hyperlink on a mobile phone in order to receive a short randomly selected text. By limiting the audience's ability to control or alter the work, the aim was to address the audience's role in inferring 'interaction'. It was anticipated that this would come from cues provided by the work including the description of the system as 'interactive', the use of a mobile phone and their previous experiences of interactive devices/systems.

The MAGIC RAY aims to provide a highly choreographed experience where interaction is limited but nevertheless implied. In contrast, *Blank Map* looked to give the audience a high degree of control over their experience of the work. *Blank Map* does not employ any digital technology or devices but consists of a folded A4 sheet on which are printed a set of instructions. Anyone wishing to participate can download and print their own map from the *Blank Map* website. The instructions include a set of numbered tasks to be completed and then illustrated on the otherwise blank map. The tasks range from depicting specific journeys or places, such as the instruction to 'draw the view from a window', to showing on their map where they would rather be and an abstract thought. The fact that they are described as tasks suggests an intended approach to engaging with the work. It is made clear that these are suggestions for the audience. There is no requirement to complete the 'tasks' or to show the map to anyone and they are free to do with their map what ever they see fit.

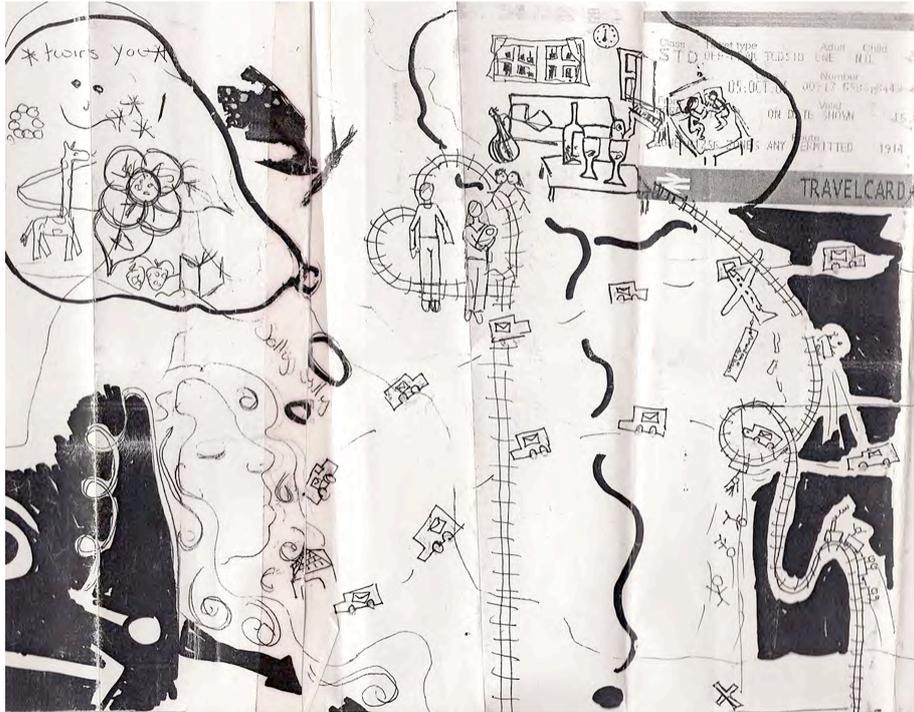


Figure 2. Detail of a *Blank Map*.

The audience has far more control over the work compared to *The MAGIC RAY*. The system's 'code' is not hidden but written in plain English in the form of instructions and tasks. The audience can manipulate the interface in any manner the physical paper allows, up to and including destroying the work itself. While a suggested or intended use is implied, it is the willingness and ability of the audience to act on this guiding influence that is of interest.

Neither works are suggested as ideal or new approaches to the role of the audience and do not represent opposites or extremes of a scale of interaction, participation or engagement. They do however represent two contrasting approaches; from *The MAGIC RAY*'s emphasis on a fictional 'interactive' technology, with limited ability to affect the delivery and content of a choreographed experience, to the apparent freedom of control provided by *Blank Map*'s more open structure.

Understanding the audience's role

Several key questions emerged while constructing the works including: How are audiences influenced by their attitudes to technology? What might suggest an artistic experience? How willing are audiences to be the 'active' consumers that theories of interaction and media consumption describe? What terms and points of reference do

the audience use to evaluate the work and how do these compare to my own success criteria? These questions were not put to the audience directly to prevent my own preoccupations dominating the discussions. Instead, the interviews were structured around a number of more general questions. These were introduced to provide the starting point for a series of detailed discussions in which the audience could raise their own issues.

A large amount of data was produced by twenty interviews, providing a range of interesting, individual and personal accounts of the audiences' experiences. There is not time here to discuss in any detail all the responses given. What emerged from the discussions of both works was the extent to which the audience were looking to understand the work, not only by drawing on their previous experiences, but also by actively trying to understand the role proposed and prescribed by the work.

For the audience of *The MAGIC RAY* the role of technology, as anticipated, was a key contextual factor. Some audiences described *The MAGIC RAY* as 'interactive' because it employed a mobile phone which was seen as an 'interactive device'. Those audiences who described themselves as being less technologically savvy often had difficulties in using *The MAGIC RAY*, with some declaring they were simply 'too old' to understand or participate in the work. Others who had used similar services or systems looked to make a judgement of the work based on its accuracy or articulated their pre-existing suspicion about the central premise. What became clear was that the prior experiences of the audience affected the way they approached the experience from the outset. This went beyond issues of technological proficiency and can be seen in their assessments of how successful their experience of the work had been. For those who did not believe the system to be genuine, success was often described as the fact that it 'made them smile', having identified *The MAGIC RAY* to be a spoof or parody of an interactive system. Those who had doubts about the system being genuine were forced to question the system's veracity and this was commonly seen as a success of the work since it had 'made them think'. For those who believed it to be a real character reading system, the apparent accuracy was an indication of success. There were others who were disappointed by the work partly because of its inaccuracy but also because they had clear expectations of what the work would deliver which were not met. What the diversity of responses show is that the audience's pre-existing expectations and attitudes affected the way they described and perceived their participation.

Where discussions of *The MAGIC RAY* were often focused on previous experiences and expectations, including those of technology and devices, *Blank Map* forced the audience to address more fundamental issues relating to the very nature and level of their involvement. These discussions revealed a set of underlying 'contextualising questions' with which the audience tried to establish what the purpose of the work was, how they could participate or interact with it and the nature of their role.

An unanticipated issue raised during the interviews for *Blank Map* was the way in which the audience felt limited by their confidence in their own creative abilities. Many of the audience described an intimidation at being asked to 'draw' or be what they termed 'creative'. Where *Blank Map* can be seen as an 'open work' (Eco 1989), the audience looked for ways to close down their experience in order to establish and understand their role in it. This involved them trying to anticipate what I might be expecting as an ideal use/experience of the work, or limiting their participation to what they felt was safely within their own capabilities. For some it was simply too 'open', providing insufficient guidance as to how exactly they should engage with the work. For others it was only 'part open' in that either they felt unable to complete tasks such as 'draw the view from a window' or were worried they would misinterpret what was being asked. In other words it was only 'open' to them as far as they perceived and understood what was expected of them. It would seem that my intention to allow for and facilitate participation or interaction was limited by the audience's ability to perceive the limits of their own potential for participation and interaction.

The *Blank Map* audience were given a suggestion of how they might participate in the experience. They were not given an indication of why they might do this beyond the opportunity to experience and participate in an artwork. While the majority of the interviewees described enjoyment in completing the tasks or otherwise using their map, they were generally reluctant to see this as an artistic activity since they did not see themselves as artists. Several felt their maps were not of a sufficient standard to be 'exhibited' let alone described as artworks. There was a common assumption that there was a correct way of engaging with the work and I was frequently asked during the interviews whether they had used it correctly. When told them that there was no right way this often disappointed the audience, several of which wanted me to assess or judge their efforts. Not all of those interviewed felt constrained by a lack of ability and instead described an enjoyment. This also included some who felt liberated by being 'given permission to be creative'. That they looked to me to validate their

activity and efforts is an interesting inversion of what could be seen as typical roles of artist/artwork and audience. That is to say that audiences are often seen to complete works through their active participation, generating meaning or significance. The audience of *Blank Map*, however, largely felt they could only successfully participate if they were able to do so in a manner prescribed by the work.

Conclusions

Whatever the role created or intended, contextualisation can be seen as a key role of the audience. This sees the audience looking to act on the role created for them by/in the work, but also sees the audience looking to assimilate the experience with their existing understanding of the perceived nature of the experience. This activity centres around the following considerations:

- How the work is categorised (What is it? What do I call it? – a game, art or a system).
- The perceived ability to control the work (How do I get it? How does it work?).
- And their role in experiencing what they have perceived it to be (What is my place in it? Am I experiencing correctly?).

These contextualising questions were addressed indirectly during the interviews, typically manifesting themselves as issues of skill levels, age, etc. However the audience addresses the questions their answers can be seen to significantly impact the audience's understanding of their role.

By acknowledging the importance of the audience's understanding of the nature of the experience, artworks can look to expand and challenge existing preconceptions. An advantage of this approach is that it does not treat the issues surrounding the role of the audience as ones of literacy or skill levels. Instead it asks audiences to employ their own reading schemes. It is not possible to intend to produce new or engaging experiences without acknowledging that what constitutes an engaging experience for an audience relies on their pre-existing contexts. The limits of the audience's experience need not place limits on the artwork. Artworks can look to work with the perceived limits by challenging audiences to re-address their pre-existing understandings and create new relationships with artworks. In this way it may be possible for them to create their own new and heightened experiences.

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