VIRTUEEL PLATFORM RESEARCH:
BLAST THEORY

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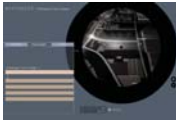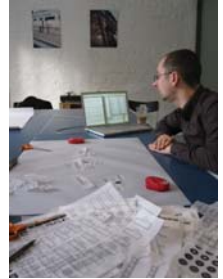KEEPING THE PAST FOR THE
FUTURE: DOCUMENTATION AND
ARCHIVING

INTRODUCTION

How can creative working processes that connect people, institutes, organisations and industry members be documented, contextualised, analysed, and ultimately understood and used in the context of the larger cultural field? Virtueel Platform initiated the Virtueel Platform Research series in 2009, to analyse a select number of case studies with the intent of revealing and understanding particular creative practices occupied with innovative and transdisciplinary working processes. For many such organisations there is often insufficient time or resources to allow constructive self-analysis of processes as the need and pressure for continuing new projects and pursuits takes higher priority and economic urgency. Projects are seldom examined within their own context to be thoroughly self-reflexive, and require the distance of time and objectivity to allow a fuller assessment. In line with the first Virtueel Platform Research study on the Patching Zone (http://www.virtueelplatform. nl/patchingzone), Virtueel Platform selected the UK artist group Blast Theory, with the intention of offering best practices to the cultural sector in the Netherlands through exploring to what extent the group's innovation takes place in relation to their transdisciplinary working process and how their working methods are transferable and useful to other practices. In this way Virtueel Platform establishes links between various different projects and e-culture practices as a way of fostering knowledge exchange between disciplines and sectors.

The artist group Blast Theory from the UK (established in the early 1990s) is an exemplary model for examining a transdisciplinary working process. With partners in various fields, including academic-based science and technology research, industry partners, large funding bodies and cultural institutions such as museums and science centres, Blast Theory has continued to develop an extensive conceptual understanding of who they are as a group, and how they relate and work both internally and with external partners. Furthermore, Blast Theory is innovative not only in terms of the conceptual and technological depth of their projects, but also in terms of their working methods and strategies. The research and context for this case study focusses on Blast Theory as a group and their own experience of collaboration with partners, including their ongoing relationship with the

Mixed Reality Lab (MRL) at the University of Nottingham. This Project Observatory study was made in parallel with Liesbeth Huybrechts' research for BAM in Belgium.[1] BAM is the Flemish institute for visual, audiovisual and media art. It functions as an independent organisation that provides information, and encourages development and networking - both within the visual arts fields and crossing boundaries into other disciplines.[2] Huybrechts interest was foremost in the participatory nature of Blast Theory's projects and her main focus was on their use of cross-over practice and critical tools in the process of creating an artefact and/or experience. As our goals were covering common ground and in order to make best use of Blast Theory's time we decided to collaborate on the interviews; Huybrechts had simultaneously developed an interesting interview and mapping method that would also benefit our research.[3] Two extensive face-to-face interviews were conducted, from which a large portion of the information for this report was composed. Along side the interviews we analysed existing literature and research articles on Blast Theory and used information from their website. The interview sessions shed light on their history, projects, and their internal and external working processes.
The first interview took place with Matt Adams of Blast Theory on December 7, 2009 at Virtueel Platform in Amsterdam, with Cathy Brickwood (Virtueel Platform), Annet Dekker (Virtueel Platform) and Liesbeth Huybrechts (BAM). The second interview took place at Blast Theory's workspace in Brighton, UK on February 5, 2010. Dekker and Huybrechts spoke with Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj, the three core members of Blast Theory. Priscilla Machils was also present and assisted with the mapping methodology.[4] Unless stated otherwise this case study is based on these two interview sessions. ←

1] Liesbeth Huybrechts works for the research group Social Spaces at the Media, Arts and Design Faculty in Genk, Belgium http://www.socialspaces.be (accessed January 2011).

2] http://www.bamart.be/home/index/en/BAM (accessed August 2010).

3] For more information see http://www.interface-our-space.be/ (accessed 13 January 2011).

4] Priscilla Machils worked at the time for the research group Social Spaces at the Media, Arts and Design Faculty in Genk, Belgium http://www.socialspaces.be (accessed January 2011).

1.
BLAST THEORY

Dating back to the early 1990s, Blast Theory is an artists' group led by Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj from the United Kingdom. Exploring and questioning the social, cultural and political facets and influences of technology, the group creates works combining online games, wireless networks and virtual worlds that create experiences for engaging the public in a largely performative and interactive way. Blast Theory's art and research focused interactive projects have been created for gallery, street and television spaces. In particular, their most recent work has centred on conceiving new uses for location aware technologies in public spaces, creating non-commercial content by means of already present technologies.[5]

Moving from an artistic practice that was grounded in theatre-based and largely performative works that engaged and interacted with audiences in the early 1990s, Blast Theory brought technology into their work starting from the idea that it could be used as a tool for having a dialogue with their audience. Through these means they could engage audience members in different ways in their works using technological tools that were becoming socially and culturally pervasive, exploring how these apparatuses engender different kinds of experiences, relationships and forms of communication. Their interest in, and use of technology and its innovative possibilities in the conception of their work has grown from thinking about, "technology as an ideology, as a cultural space in its own right, as a constraint, as a communication," and a communication that is both a medium and a platform, a fundamental element of the way people are, and will talk to one another.

Technology is used because of the group's interest in its cultural determinism, not because of a desire to spend their time toying with electronic apparatuses, although interest in the materiality of their practice varies for the different members. Concentration on the cultural and social aspects of technology is of particular importance to the group. Blast Theory only uses particular

BLAST THEORY

5] Blast Theory http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/about.html (accessed February 2010) and Somers Miles (2010).

technologies in their works when it very specifically and succinctly communicates/facilitates how they are trying to engage the public in a particular kind of experience. Excessive visualisations and gadgets are removed if they will not add to the project and are felt will take away from the participant's experience.

With respect to technical developments for facilitating these kinds of experiences, the audience member (user) is central, and group decision-making concerning the use of technology is led by whether it is accessible to and appropriate for a wide public. The issue of ethics is key in Blast Theory's use of technology, constantly questioning how they can offer experiences that are accessible to many people, that allow them to "speak meaningfully and in their own register," and that don't exclude those without the proper technological skills to be fully engaged.[6] For Blast Theory, this is a political issue because it designates who is and who is not invited or able to participate, and the allowances for what people can "give and take" from the particular project.[7]

Blast Theory's collaborations, associations and partnerships are broad and far-reaching; the three core members are at varying times supplemented by a number of other individuals working on specific projects; the Mixed Reality Lab (MRL) at Nottingham University has for a number of years been one of the key science and technology research partners; industry and technology collaborators from the telecommunications sector have included Sony and British Telecom; funding partners and commissioners have included governmental departments, funding bodies, trusts and associations and cultural sector associates from museums and other arts organisations.

6] Rachel Somers Miles (2010).

7] Ibid.

Image: © Blast Theory

BLAST THEORY: SELECTING THE CASE STUDY FOR TRANSDISCIPLINARY WORKING PROCESS

From the outset of their practice as an artist group in the early 1990s, Blast Theory has created a vast and diverse number of artistic projects. Their focus has been on creating experiences for the public using a whole range of technologies including GPS systems, mobile phones, online interactive platforms connecting computer players and street players simultaneously, and having a large number of collaborators from different fields and sectors. Therefore a survey of their work offers a number of different case study possibilities for examining a transdisciplinary working process. For the purposes of this study the work "Uncle Roy All Around You" ("Uncle Roy"), premiering in London at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 2003 was selected. Uncle Roy was chosen because the development of the work involved a number of different collaborators from various fields, was part of a large funding project that was heavily documented, and because its conceptual development spanned from previous Blast Theory works that subsequently fed into the conceptualisation of future projects. This project was also far enough in the past to allow for some clarity and reflection on its development, but not so far as to lose the nuances of its creation. For Blast Theory each project's concept and development is contingent upon specific content, stimuli and other contextual factors to determine the process in which the collaboration evolves. This makes it impossible for the group themselves to identify a blue-print or established process for transdisciplinary working. But in providing a more detailed analysis of this particular case study on Uncle Roy a general exploration of their working process will be put forward to shed light on the distinct qualities of transdisciplinary working and the insights it provides into creative processes and ecologies of arts and culture.

UNCLE ROY ALL AROUND YOU

Uncle Roy is a mixed reality game played by players in the street of a city, and online by players in a virtual city. The city space of the online environment is a close copy of the actual city space. Finding "Uncle Roy" is the mission of the game, where both online and street players work together to find him. Using handheld computers, the street players are sent on a quest around the city, being offered directions from Uncle Roy

Uncle Roy is a mixed reality game played by players in the street of a city, and online by players in a virtual city.

via the devices. The street player starts by inputting their location using a handheld device, which reveals their personal avatar in the virtual world in direct correlation to their physical location. Online players can then select a street player, enabling them to send private messages to their chosen player including assistance in finding Uncle Roy, and street players can chose whether or not to send audio messages back. During the game after street players have been led to various locations by the messages from Uncle Roy, both online and street players are asked a series of questions concerning their commitment to trusting strangers. Online and street players that agree to make a commitment to a stranger are then matched up and their contact details are exchanged.

Initially presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, the project was also presented at the Cornerhouse in Manchester in collaboration with Digital Summer, and at The Public in West Bromwich as part of Fierce! festival. These presentations differed slightly as backend technology issues were smoothed out, and as other changes were necessary to apply the work to the different city contexts.[8]

Uncle Roy is a collaboration between Blast Theory and the Mixed Reality Lab (MRL) at the University of Nottingham within the Equator Interdisciplinary Research Collaboration. The MRL's body of research rests largely on the exploration of technologies, and Blast Theory's interest and use of technology has been greatly influenced through working closely with them on numerous projects since 1997. When Uncle Roy was created, there was a particularly strong relationship with the MRL regarding creative ideas. Although there still is a creative exchange between the partners, the relationship has in recent years evolved to be more technical and research oriented and less about the premise of the creative idea itself.

Uncle Roy was also created with support from British Telecom, the Arts & Humanities Research Board Innovation Award, and the Interdisciplinary Arts Department of Arts Council England through the National Touring Programme.[9] ←

8] Uncle Roy All Around You . Blast Theory. http://www. blasttheory.co.uk/bt/ work_uncleroy.html (accessed 18 February

9] For more information about Uncle Roy All Around You visit the Blast Theory website: http://www.blasttheory. co.uk/bt/work_uncleroy. html (accessed August 2010).
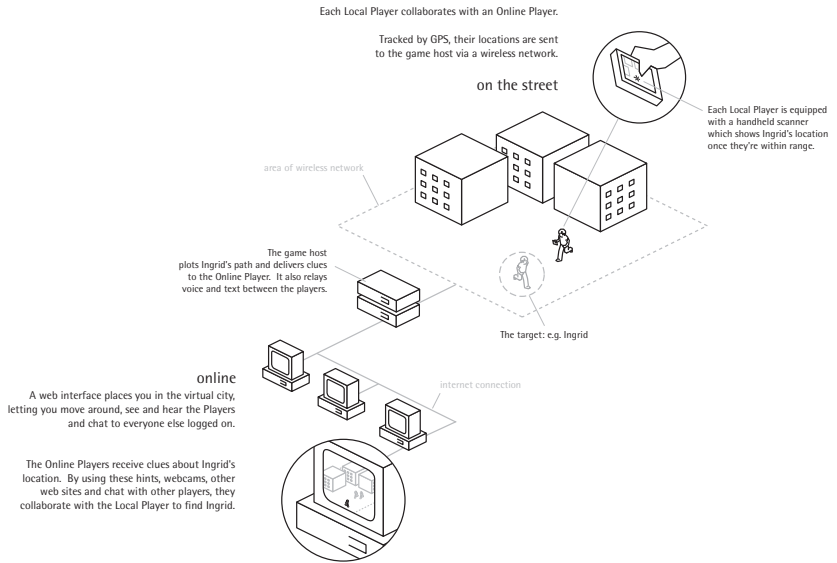
Each Local Player collaborates with an Online Player.

Tracked by GPS, their locations are sent
to the game host via a wireless network.

on the street

Each Local Player is equipped
with a handheld scanner
which shows Ingrid's location
once they're within range.

area of wireless network

The game host
plots Ingrid's path and delivers clues
to the Online Player. It also relays
voice and text between the players.

The target: e.g. Ingrid

online

A web interface places you in the virtual city,
letting you move around, see and hear the Players
and chat to everyone else logged on.

internet connection

The Online Players receive clues about Ingrid's
location. By using these hints, webcams, other
web sites and chat with other players, they
collaborate with the Local Player to find Ingrid.

Image: © Blast Theory

2.
BLAST THEORY
PRACTICE

CONCEPTUAL PHASE

Blast Theory begins the conceptual development of projects in a number of ways; projects are conceived from within the group and then funding is applied for through external bodies; calls for projects are made by various heritage organisations and institutes for which Blast Theory then conceives of a project idea according to the desired criteria and applies in a (semi) public selection process; heritage and cultural organisations and institutions specifically commission Blast Theory; projects materialise within the context of the group's collaborative research programmes with the MRL.

A project's conceptual starting point is contingent on whether it is a specific commission, but the common approach used by the group for all work regardless of how it has been initiated, is to examine the idea from the perspective of the experience they'd like to create, rather than from a purely technological angle. Having said this, as Adams explains, it is a "push and pull" between starting with the technology or with the conceptual idea, and this changes and works differently at different times. Part of their creative working process is to always be acquisitive in terms of techniques and strategies and to be flexible.

The group works in a cyclical manner between conceptual and practical issues. When starting with Uncle Roy for example, Blast Theory had a clear idea of the conceptual landscape they were working with and this was reflected in the documents written throughout the project's creation. During the work's development the group went through a period of losing grasp of the conceptual element when they were working through practical and technical issues such as whether or not they could get participants to walk around the city, whether the PDA (mobile devices referred to as personal digital assistant) worked, whether communication worked between online and street players etc. As happened with Uncle Roy and with other projects, close to the presentation of the project the three core members will sometimes take a step back from the process and revisit the conceptual element again.

METHODOLOGY

Blast Theory employs a number of informal methods and strategies in the conceptualisation and development of their projects. While they have stated numerous times that they wouldn't say they have any coherent or continuous methodology and that working methods are contingent to the specifics of the project at hand, the working practices they use (although varied) exist within a process that attempts to maintain the creative fluidity of a project's development. Any "method" that appears too static, that would possibly hinder the expansion and growth of ideas in any direction, are dismissed or ventured into very warily.

ORAL COMMUNICATION:

Because Blast Theory places the malleability of a work's development as key to their creative process, even almost up until the moment of presentation, they are highly reliant on oral communication as a creative medium, using conversation as a way to develop and flesh out ideas with one another. Referring to the conceptual development process of scriptwriter Paul Schrader who doesn't write anything down and just tells people the story when developing a screenplay, Blast Theory uses storytelling as a way to find the core elements of a project they are working on. For them it enables a space for things that are extraneous or "superfluous" to a story to naturally be removed or "fall away" over time, leaving the core elements. Blast Theory develops this process further by stripping away all the unnecessary information, leaving only the irreducible core of a narrative (hereby relating to filmmaker Stanley Kubrick's "non-submersible units" as key aspects of a work). Their ambivalence towards written documents, because this often leads to a hierarchical structure with the person in charge of writing having more power and control over the process, shows the importance the group attaches to having shared and equal collaboration in decision-making and conceptual/design development.

TOOLS:
WHITEBOARDS AND NOTEBOOKS

While the creative flexibility afforded by conversation that is used to develop projects is integral to Blast Theory's internal working, they do often find a necessity

Blast Theory uses storytelling as a way to find the core elements of a project they are working on.

for textual communication when sharing and describing complex ideas and relations, particularly when they are simultaneously dealing with online players and players in the physical world. For this reason, they have increasingly turned to using whiteboards (dry-erase boards) for this purpose. Using these as a tool allows them to write down ideas and issues they are working with on one occasion (photographing the notes on the board for documentation to be able to return to it later) then wiping it clean for the next session and starting from the beginning. They have also used private notebooks, allowing each member to individually jot down ideas and then type them up and share the ones they feel are important with the group. Abstaining from writing too much down as Adams explains, has "enabled all of us to have equal access to the work. It means that it stays mobile."

COLOUR MAPS

Image: © Blast Theory.

While Blast Theory has a hesitant relationship to documents and uses them scarcely "because of their tendency to ossify and capture your thinking," as many of their projects involve multiple collaborators there is a requirement to communicate progress and activities to external parties. Uncle Roy was a highly documented project and with multiple changing descriptions and multiple collaborators involved, communication was crucial. "Colour maps" were therefore created to visualise the technical code, necessary to link digital content to the location. While it remains a mathematical system, the ability of designers or non-experts to author and update is dramatically changed by this approach.

MRL transformed it further into a tool that could work for the authoring of any kind of location-based experience. A very particular and concrete artistic project was thus able to generate a more general tool (Huybrechts 2010).

VIDEOCLIPS

An exceptional tool Blast Theory used to communicate their ideas was to create an audiovisual compilation of scary film scenes, cityscapes and surveillance film material that they had used as reference when conceptualising the work. This short videoclip Spooky offered collaborators a sense of the ambience they wanted to evoke with the project. With regards to applications and documents, Blast Theory sees this as a 'tangential creative task,' particularly when it comes to creating a document that will procure funds.

TESTING:

During the development process of their works Blast Theory also uses a number of other creative strategies including creating questionnaires, interviews, role-playing exercises for each other, and in developing Uncle Roy specifically experiments were made with paper tests and trails through the city. For example, during a residency at Banff New Media Institute just over a year before the release of Uncle Roy, the three core Blast Theory members each assigned a series of interventions for each other; Ju Row Farr designed a questionnaire and interview for the other two exploring their relationship to the city, with questions such as "when you walk, how close to the building do you walk, where do you put your arms when you're walking, do you look at people?" etc., about how one might feel on city streets. Through this exercise they realised they shared a similar sense of wariness in the spaces they often frequent, adding further to the conceptualisation of the piece. Interviews with external people are also used, largely to inform a works development through exploring broader reference material and to create a space for different issues and ideas to reveal themselves.

As another method used in the development of the technological aspects of their projects, Blast Theory test the characteristics and possibilities of mobile devices. These tests are done through creating a series

Image: © Blast Theory

of interface prototype versions and devices to check whether or not they correspond to the concept of the specific project, and whether they feel the use of these technologies is accessible to a broad public. At varying stages in development the group will bring in public participants to test the devices and possible issues, sometimes using people who have a high knowledge of the technology to allow for concise and descriptive feedback. In this work, they draw heavily on user centred design and user interface design approaches. These exercises and the group's reflection on them enable Blast Theory to try and consider what people in the game play would and would not do (assessing their boundaries), whilst aiming to maintain a mentally stimulating process for participants without making it too difficult to take part.

An example: After a series of workshops in London, Blast Theory realised that GPS was too expensive and the results were not satisfactory. In the Bystander workshop in they experimented with video as a locative medium. For example, a player would see a video clip of a forklift truck going past a shed, in reality the forklift would be standing there as well, enabling the player to make the connection with the shed. However this media proved to be too much a linear medium and it also required large amounts of video material. In the end the experiments led to one of the most important decisions and technical investigations of Uncle Roy All Around You, the choice for self-reported positioning, instead of GPS. The disadvantage attached to the self-reported positioning system – cheating about where you are – was also used as a game element.
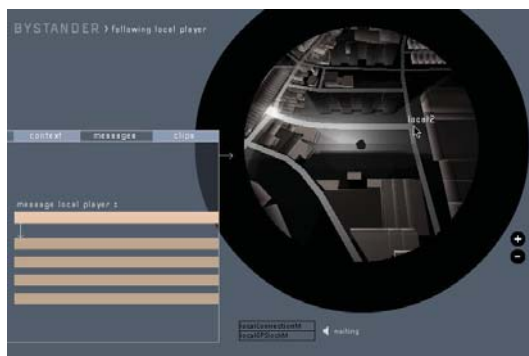
Image: © Blast Theory.

AUDIENCE

User experience and the audience are central to the
conceptual and technological development of Blast
Theory's work. They use audience members to pre-
test games, design projects starting from the idea of
the possible audience experiences they can create,
and ensure the technology they use in their works is
usable and intelligible to as great a number of people
as possible. The audience is not seen as co-creator
or partner in the research process. In this way their
social innovation potential remains limited. Although
they question the social and cultural implications of
mobile and ubiquitous media, they do not actively
try to educate audience members. They refer to
the engagement they create as "publicly created
contributions," instead of "user generated content."
At the same time, Blast Theory's participatory work
makes explicit statements about the position of "the
public." It is important for the group to offer experiences
that allow as many people as possible to as Adams
says, "speak meaningfully in their own register and
increase participation for all." This is specific for a
category of media makers that are sometimes labelled
as "tactical media artists." Tactical media is a form
of media activism, which implies quick interventions
instead of permanent (media) installations. In these
cases the media used is the subject of interrogation,
critique and deconstruction.

Blast Theory questions the politics of interaction by
offering different ways and choices to act in the game.
Most so-called interactive media are not interactive
at all, since they offer little agency to the user through

Although they question the social and cultural implications of mobile and ubiquitous media, they do not actively try to educate audience members.

their design. As Adams states "[We] are bringing social media into artistic practice (...) and assert that these are cultural forms, not just communication devices, not just platforms".

As an over-arching goal and design practice, projects are meant to engage the public above and beyond the technology used. As such, when technological problems occur during a project it can allow interesting things to transpire, often adding to the experience as opposed to taking away from it. As Tandavanitj explains in the context of Uncle Roy, if the PDA being used by a street player would freeze for example, Blast Theory had a back-end system informing them of this, and would then send someone onto the street to find the player and fix the device. Blast Theory used these circumstances as tactics and elements in the game; anticipating but never knowing for sure when these mostly technical failures would occur and the according action should take place. These technical failures enhance the dramatic narrative of the story. Although the game play was extensively and carefully orchestrated, the actual occurrences could never be fixed. Uncertainty in the game itself as well as in the limitations of technology that was used were integral elements of the work and as such strengthened the concept of Uncle Roy. In this way, a technical problem would be incorporated into the game play, with the participant thinking it was deliberate – extending and adding to the game making it more about an experience than about technology or technical difficulties. ←

Image: © Blast Theory.

3.
THE
(TRANSDICIPLINARY)
WORKING
PROCESS

INTERNAL

Image: © Blast Theory.

Matt Adams appears to be seen as the person who directs and writes the bigger picture, the vision and translates that into networks with partners. Ju Row Farr, Adams' partner in Blast Theory and in personal life, translates that into concrete steps. She has a very detailed vision from the beginning until the end of a project. She nurtures the concrete relations; the user experience, the different agendas of partners, the positive and constructive relationships within the team. The third partner in Blast Theory is Nick Tandavanitj, who is the technical brain of the three; he especially enjoys playing around with materials and software. At the time of the project Uncle Roy All Around You Catherine Williams (now named Angad Kaur) was responsible for fundraising, marketing and negotiating relationships with the artistic partners. Helen Kirlew was the administrative and financial director (Huybrechts 2010).

GROUP FORMATION: ROLES

Although the three core members of Blast Theory do not
have set roles each members' individual strengths are
recognised. Nor are these roles fixed across different
projects, but tasks are focused and organised within
projects. Their internal working process is reflected in the
flexibility of their methodologies and the importance of
mobility in the development of their work.

GROUP DYNAMICS

As an artists' group and thereby led by a wide range
of artistic practices, creative ideas and endeavours
from each of the three core members, Blast Theory
has a very different dynamic from that of a solo artist.
Each member brings to the table, and fights for, certain
ideas they want Blast Theory to be exploring. Within
the internal workings of Blast Theory, a large part of
decision-making comes through disagreements and
differences of opinion, with members arguing for
different issues at different moments. In this way Blast
Theory uses its own internal differences as a deliberate
method to generate robust concepts and project ideas.
Next to this they work a lot with "associate artists."
For example in the time of Uncle Roy All Around You
many additional people were to 'act' on the street.
Many of these subsequently became associate artists,
and their input to the experience of 'performing' and
presenting Uncle Roy All Around You became part of
the collaborative creative development process. In
some ways this is closer to a theatrical devising process
than a media or visual arts generator. However, Blast
Theory core members have a very distinct role to that
of associates or other collaborators, and conversely
sometimes this can appear quite subtle, and not
explicit. Blast Theory tend to be quite hierarchical or
perhaps rigidly structured in their adherence to the
integrity of the Blast Theory's artistic voice.

To negotiate between their internal group dynamics and
relationships with external partners, they use a creative
working process involving the concept of "nodes." Each
project will have a number of nodes; conceptual ideas,
questions regarding play, or relationships with partners.
This "constellation of nodes" has individual nodes that
grow and shrink in importance and links between
nodes may strengthen, weaken or cease to exist. Each
Blast Theory member has different perspectives on

these nodes, their meaning and significance within a project, thus influencing the group's internal workings and decision-making, as well as their relationships with external parties.

The collaboration with partners and associates outside of the core group is dependent on a firm commitment to the shared values within the core, otherwise the "idea" might splinter. There is room for evolving a project based on input from others (including audience experience) at pre-designated moments of interaction or piloting.

Image: © Blast Theory.

EXTERNAL

Exploring the external working process illustrates how various people and groups outside of Blast Theory participate in the development of a work, and offers insight into how Blast Theory seek out and work with external partners and vice versa.

Blast Theory frequently collaborates with a number of different groups and people. Regular collaborators from the academic/scientific/research field are Professor Steve Benford and Dr Martin Flintham from the Mixed Reality Lab (MRL) at Nottingham University with different people from the MRL working on a variety of projects. Various industry groups also frequently collaborate, British Telecom being the industry associate in Uncle Roy. The relationship between Blast Theory and the MRL has developed over a number of years since 1996.[10] Following occasional collaborations the relationship intensified when the MRL put in a bid for funding as part of a large six-year interdisciplinary research project called Equator, which included a new project to be developed by Blast Theory initially called "Citywide". Subsequently the project became "Uncle Roy All Around You."

Through their involvement in the production of projects with Blast Theory, the MRL has had a significant influence in the group's increasing interest in technology. Although Blast Theory has had a consistent involvement with collaborators and partners with sophisticated computer literacy, as Adams explains, their exploration, project-related research and use of technology could never have developed so strongly without their collaboration with the MRL.

During the beginning stages of Blast Theory's relationship with the MRL there was a kind of negotiation around how the group would fit within the workings of the Lab and how they could formulate joint interests around projects. The relationship between the production of Blast Theory projects and the research interests of the MRL have significantly led to the development of research interests for MRL members, as well as a large number of published papers and significant contributions to PhD research trajectories. As part of their working relationship there is often an influencing push and pull between the MRL's research interests and the technological elements that Blast Theory explores and then decides to incorporate within their projects. For example, the MRL had a strong research focus on projections of virtual environments on screens in the location of the physical street. As such they pushed for, and strongly influenced Blast Theory to try and incorporate this technological element into their work. After repeated attempts to use this technology, for example using a projection for a presentation of "Can

10] Blast Theory's work with the MRL dates back to a research and development project in 1997, and after their Desert Rain (2000) project was nominated for a BAFTA award the collaboration with the group gained in sig-nifcance for the Mixed Reality Lab.

You See Me Now?" at the Dutch Electronic Arts Festival (DEAF) in Rotterdam, they never found an interesting or fruitful way to use it, and eventually this element was abandoned. Whilst the research interests of the MRL strongly influence Blast Theory's technological explorations and overall aesthetics of projects, if the group feels a technology is excessive, unnecessary or does not add any value or meaning to the experience the project is intended to offer, then it is omitted. When working with people involved in the development of technology, particularly people from the MRL, Blast Theory regards them as "specialists, experts, highly intelligent, highly observant, culturally inquiring people" who ask questions regarding the development, design and use of technology for very specific reasons. Questions and issues raised by these researchers, for example about the limitations of GPS (global positioning system), produce a diverse set of very interesting "metaphorical associations that are entirely the property of this technology." These associations draw connections between the technologies, and for example, the aesthetic design and technological possibilities of the project offering insight into the types of experiences the work is able to offer.

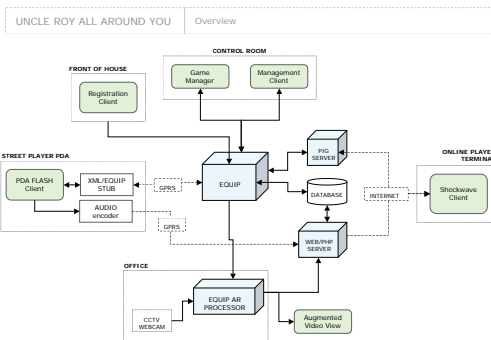Image: © Blast Theory

LEARNING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Through working with technology industry partners in the creation of artistic projects, Blast Theory have been able to push and present mobile devices and technological apparatuses as forms important and useful for the cultural field, such as projects within major arts exhibitions, and for activities and displays for museums etc., and not just

as communication devices or platforms. In this way, it fits "the whole form of social engagement that is happening, artists should be propagating different possibilities for how these things might be. One of them is about asserting complexity." Through working with industry and industry-generated technologies in the production of their work, Blast Theory are showing how these technological forms operate within a cultural sphere, and are in fact cultural forms with immense possibilities. In an article in Vodafone's in-house magazine Adams discusses the ubiquity of mobile phones, their uses, and Blast Theory's increasing interest with this technology:

"As artists, the three of us in Blast Theory have become increasingly fascinated with what changes this tidal wave of new technology brings with it. While some outcomes – which are easily measurable and have revenue implications for telecoms companies - are well understood and frequently discussed, such as the rise in texting, what are the marginal or invisible shifts that are taking place?"[11]

Here industry people are being exposed to the perspective of an artist discussing the multiple creative possibilities of these technologies, pushing artistic practice into other arenas.

Another key perspective shift is in the collaboration between Blast Theory and ethnographers of scientific practice that came from MRL. The MRL as a science-based, technology research lab standing within an academic institution, had guests who would approach and review Blast Theory's work from a scientific perspective in terms of their approach and methodology. This presented a conflict with Blast Theory's approach as an artistic practice that often plays with the possibilities of flexibility, changeability and ambiguity in the conceptualisation and development of their work. For example, Adams recounts, "[ethnographers would come in and say], 'there is a weakness in the project here where we can see that a user is uncertain in their actions.' And we were like, 'yes, uncertainty, totally okay.'" Through the help of interaction designer William Gaver[12], making allowances for ambiguity as a productive resource of design was advocated for. The reluctance science has towards understanding and incorporating uncertainty is complicated by artistic practice that is often hinged on the productive possibilities of uncertainty. Through these collaborations, mutual learning was fostered regarding

11] Adams (2010).

Royal College of Art
Postgraduate Art and Design

12] Gaver was one of the partners in the Equator project, at the time he was connected to the Royal College of Arts in London. For more information about the use of ambiguity, see http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/documents/ambiguity_CHI_2003.pdf (accessed December 2010).

the necessity of uncertainty and changeability in Blast Theory's artistic development, and Blast Theory learnt and could adapt to how a researcher operates and what is required in the context of a scientific discipline. While ambiguity has not whole-heartedly been taken on in the design process by the MRL, this collaboration has helped to facilitate the establishment of a joint language that, as Adams says, "incorporates artistic language into their conception of how systems are in operation." Foremost it also showed the MRL that an arts project can be a vehicle to engage people in real world testing, which makes for a more 'natural' setting than a scientific experiment. Instead of strategically defined experiments, people tend to relate to art projects in a more personal and performative way that can bridge the difference between functional requirements and imaginative experiences.

FUNDING

Uncle Roy All Around You was part of the larger collaboration programme Equator, which was supported through the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), a science and academic funding body in the UK. The explicit goal for the introduction of Blast Theory into the bid was to research the functions of ubiquitous computing in the city. As Blast Theory didn't at the time have a demonstrable scientific reputation, at the start of the project they weren't able to receive any financial benefits. However for Blast Theory the collaboration in Equator was an interesting opportunity as it allowed them to contextualise their work in broader questions about the impact of ubiquitous computing. Additional funds were applied for – unsuccessfully - to the Daniel Langlois Foundation in Montreal (CAN), NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) (GB) and, PRIX Ars Electronica in Linz (Austria). Project grants were received from the "Innovation Awards Scheme" by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (the predecessor to the current AHRC) and from the Art Fund. Within Equator, for a period, the scientists and artists received funding from different bodies. The scientists were supported through the science fund and the artists supported by arts funding bodies. After being in the Equator project for a while, Blast Theory managed to get financial support through the Equator Fund itself, due in part to having established their artistic credibility and quality standard by achieving recognition from established arts funding

The explicit goal for the introduction of Blast Theory into the bid was to research the functions of ubiquitous computing in the city.

bodies. Interestingly, even though Blast Theory was regarded as a small segment in Equator, it became one of the biggest outputs. The EPSRC reviewers appreciated its innovative quality, the public dissemination, its engagement with science, technological drivers, and the amount and quality of research papers that were written.

Blast Theory rarely received corporate sponsorship, despite numerous attempts. As they indicate themselves this is probably due to their lack of ability to speak the language of corporate professionals. Nevertheless they remain positive, because as was confirmed by Adams media artists are especially capable of negotiating between disciplines, since their practice is inherently interdisciplinary which is particularly useful for different fields. It is also worth noting that although it is hard to receive sponsorships in cash for an individual arts project, as opposed to physical buildings or venues, there are many examples of 'in kind' relationships, for example with commercial businesses or media partnerships. ←

4.
KEEPING
THE PAST FOR
THE FUTURE:
DOCUMENTATION
AND ARCHIVING

Through the creation of documents during their project development process, and the documentation and archiving of their work, Blast Theory offers a number of possibilities for making both their past projects accessible in the future, and the methods of their creative working practice available to others in the

cultural field. As will be outlined in the following sections, the group's interest in, and approach to documents, documentation and archiving is an important practice that builds onto our cultural heritage and offers other art practitioners, cultural institutions and organisations conceptual and practical models for considering the accessibility of their work in the future, and a sustained record of the history of artistic practice.

OPEN SOURCE / OPENNESS

Blast Theory's software development and coding approach has been largely non open-source, and the group is self-reflective in recognising this criticism and that they're "not hip at all in terms of the 'software crew'". Adams explains that one of the main reasons for this is that their work started to develop largely before open source discussions evolved, stating that "I think, given the fragmentary and ad hoc software we've developed, we just never gave it serious consideration."

Blast Theory do not release specific game engine codes, Flash interface codes or Shockwave interface codes. As Tandavanitj explained in reference to the Shockwave code that he is embarrassed by the messiness of his coding and doesn't feel there is anything educational or exceptionally useful in it. Nor do Blast Theory consider themselves coders (in all likelihood most of the code would be immensely difficult to read, and is not commented properly or necessarily reusable), but rather aims to make experiences. They suggest though that if someone was to request to see the code and it seemed like it would actually be useful to them in and amongst their non-perfect coding skills, they don't see a reason not to share it.

An alternative to releasing the actual code itself is releasing documentation about it. While they could document the programming better with respect to its architecture for example, a lot of detailed technical information regarding specific bits of software they used and things they discovered, the development process and their experience with it, was recorded and distributed via a large number of academic papers published through the MRL. As well, the technical development that was done at MRL is available and open source.

The group is self-reflective in recognising that they're "not hip at all in terms of the 'software crew'".

Instead of raising questions about being open source, Blast Theory talk largely about intellectual property, specifically with regards to their relationship with the MRL and issues of ownership. At the beginning of this relationship they decided to do without the need for written documents (contracts) and operate on trust, each side owning the parts that they did, working in this fashion as a way to keep the work and their working relationship fluid.

THE DOCUMENTATION AND ARCHIVING OF BLAST THEORY WORK

Blast Theory has an extensive and meticulous documentation process during both the period of creating the work, and presenting it. Here, as Adams states, "those bits of documentation have to do multiple jobs for us – they are marketing things, explanatory tools, and appendices to the research, they act as records" existing beyond the time of the work and testifying to their creative process and practice. Their goal for keeping an archive is partly to show the potential and importance of live art, which is often marginalised due to the ephemeral nature of the work and - in the case of Blast Theory -technically complex, collaborative and conceptually heterogeneous.[13] The documentation and archiving of their work also aims to emphasise that artistic creativity is open to everyone, as they state:

"We want to create an intellectually coherent, powerful argument for diverse practices that refuse the reification of the object, that ignore the speculative economies of the art market and that treat their public generously as equals in a dialogue. (..) We have always sought to distance ourselves from views of the artists as sacred or exceptional and from biographical or psychological readings. The archive can serve as residue of sainted artefacts and a touchstone of this approach."[14]

Another kind of documentation used is video. Blast Theory try to be as playful and creative with it as possible, using it to "give people a whiff of a work," to be reminded of the ambience but not as a set of instructions for remembering how to recreate the work, as Adams states: "I think it's about getting that atmosphere correct where you can imaginatively engage with what it must have felt like to do that or be there." By trying to capture the essence of

13] An impression of the size of their archive: Over the last 16 years we have meticulously archived every aspect of each project: creative notes, correspondence, publicity materials, press, design work, software, production manuals. The archive held by us includes 90 box files, 20 virtual models of cities and 900Gb stored on servers. Because we work in collaboration so frequently archival materials relating to our work are held elsewhere (such as the University of Nottingham), usually for technical or intellectual property reasons. These include logs, messages sent and received, audio recordings, etc. . These notes are taken from a proposal that was used for Legacy, a one-off initiative developed in collaboration between the Live Art Development Agency and Tate Research, 2008. For more information: http://www.tate.org.uk/about/pressoffice/press-releases/2009/17509.htm (accessed April 2010).

MODERN TATE

14] These notes are taken from a proposal that was used for Legacy, a one-off initiative developed in collaboration between the Live Art Development Agency and Tate Research, 2008. For more information: http://www.tate.org.uk/about/pressoffice/press-releases/2009/17509.htm (accessed April 2010).

the performance, a new way of thinking about documentation shows itself that reflects the form of the work or event while at the same time informing the work and serving as a way to preserve 'tacit' knowledge.[15] Documentation is thus regarded as an important aspect of the process, which can be as creative and as challenging as the live event. In this way documentation can be thought of as a form of dialogue, reflection and response which can be used both as a tool in the creative process and as a document containing tacit knowledge.[16] While recognising the value of video, it is still hard "to tell the story of the work," to capture enough material to tell the story well. This is particularly the case since this kind of documentation largely follows only one person around through their experience of a project, with staging minimised as much as possible.[17] Although video documentation is contested, when brought into new contexts it could also lead to a situation in which new performance sites might be constructed.[18] Taken a step further, it implies that video documentation provides for a broader context and could potentially deepen the conceptual ideas in a new – and perhaps unforeseen – way. By trying to capture the intention of the work, the context and the experience (atmosphere) of the players, Blast Theory adds new layers to their existing, but ephemeral performances.

A documentation method reveals something about the creative process during the development of a work, especially in the case of group processes. It is important to recognise that meaning is often constituted through an object and is not solely held within the object.[19] Moreover, analysing these processes will yield a better understanding of the inherent qualities of the work. Due to the live, participant driven, and ephemeral character of their work, when considering the possible future preservation of Blast Theory projects, it is important to focus on its documentation, rather than focusing on the different elements of a specific work, as is the case in traditional conservation practices. It is clear that multimedia artworks are technically complex, not only in their final presentation but also in their production phase. For a recreation of the work it is therefore important to understand the technical choices that were made also in the context of the time they were made.[20] Studying the documentation methods in the case of Uncle Roy All Around You shows that the original technical choices have influenced

15] The notion of tacit knowledge refers to the range of conceptual and sensory informa- tion, ie. all forms of knowledge that cannot be represented: knowl- edge that cannot be fully articulated, ex- pressed in formulas or described in documents (Polanyi 1966). The no- tion of tacit knowledge is not uncontested and often viewed as subjec- tive in conservation it refers to the artists intent and the social and cultural context a work is presented or performed.

16] Dekker (2011).

17] Ibid.

18] This way the ob- ject, the video docu- ment, also can be regarded as a bound- ary object - passing between communities where it faces dif- ferent interpretive strategies in each one. For further read- ing see Greisemer and Star (1989). Massumi (2002) and Leach (2010) take the notion of the object further claiming that the object has its own agency besides be- ing merely a communica- tion / mediation tool. See also Fiona Wilkie (2004).

19] Clavir (2002).

20] Lurk and Enge (2010) have done ex- tensive research into the role of information science in preservation and documentation of media artworks. Win- get (2008b) also argues that more attention should go to the gener- al creation behaviours and methods that are used by media artists instead of focusing on artists intent.

the intention and meaning of the work to a large
degree. Here Blast Theory's meticulous documentation
and archival practice holds significance as it offers
a pathway into conceiving of past projects, holding
this information for future consideration. As their self-
documentation and archiving practice is quite unique
within artistic disciplines, their perspective and methods
regarding documentation could be offered as a
productive exemplary method for other artist groups
and organisations, even participating in a transfer of
knowledge amongst a larger cultural heritage field.[21] ←

21] For more informa-
tion on the value of
artists documentation
methods see Dekker
(2011).

5.
POINTS OF INTEREST

Virtueel Platform is convinced of the unique character of Blast Theory. Its approach differs from others in a number of ways: their collaborative creative process internally as well as externally with different partners and their approach to the working (or more precisely, the non-working of) technology as a performative strategy.

To start with the latter, Blast Theory operates from a conceptual and artistically minded approach and uses new technologies only when it specifically and concisely communicates how they are trying to engage the public in a particular kind of experience. In other words, they concentrate on the cultural and social aspects of technology – which means that at times they incorporate technical problems as part of the game play. This makes the group distinct from most other electronic or media artists.

Futhermore, Blast Theory is composed of a strong interdisciplinary team that finds a common ground through discussion and dialogue. Although the interdisciplinary nature of a team is often regarded as potentially unstable and fragile, Blast Theory are able to turn these challenges into assets, using the risk and productive friction that comes out of the different viewpoints and turning them into positive outcomes. They believe that this is the best way to deepen and bring forward a conceptual framework. The different points of view of Blast Theory and the diverse expertise within the group have made it at times difficult for people to categorise their work, seeing it as performance, theatre, visual arts, media art, gaming, etc.. For Blast Theory this is foremost regarded as a positive aspect, as it enables them to talk to many different people (experts) and audiences with various backgrounds and interests at the same time. Through their connection with outside partners, ranging from university labs to mobile media companies and theorists, they exchange information and continue to build on their own basis of knowledge and practice as well as influencing and provoking change in other areas. It is recognised though that such external relationships do not happen overnight.

The collaboration between Blast Theory and MRL has achieved a maturity that has been built over many years. In general it is acknowledged that it takes six to nine months for all partners to understand the multiple and varied agendas that people bring to a large project. This also means that it is important to convene live meetings or working groups with different expertise and at multiple stages.[22] Although this means that new management skills may need to be learned, the depth of discussion and quality of work will benefit greatly. Although they have only recently started to think strategically about their documentation and archiving practice, the first attempts to organise their work are fruitful. Potentially, the visibility of their practice in documentation could shed light on their creative working process, which in turn could lead to a 'structured' methodology to be used as guidelines. This could benefit both future recreation of their own work as well as give better insight into organising collaborative creation processes for other groups. ←

22] Thelwall (2009).

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Blast Theory: http://www.blasttheory.co.uk
Mixed Reality Lab (University of Nottingham): http://www.mrl.nott.ac.uk
Equator: http://www.equator.ac.uk/index.php/articles/416

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