
Age-Inclusive Outdoor Play

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ABSTRACT

This position paper offers a brief overview of the author's past work on outdoor play and suggests some areas where collaboration and further development would be interesting.

KEYWORDS

Outdoor play, location-based games, interactive story-telling, mobile games, age-inclusive, multi-generational, game design.

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Figure 1: Animals on the Edge, 2003



Figure 2: Teenagers from Ponders End Youth Centre in Gunpowder Park, 2003



Figure 3: Preparation for The Big Woolwich Text Game, 2009

1 INTRODUCTION

The author has been involved in designing and running several outdoor play experiences that utilized mobile technology, starting in 2003 with a treasure hunt along the Thames – **Animals on the Edge**. This was an activity designed to entertain and promote communication between teams of players taking part in Nesta [1] Futurelab Design Challenge 2004, sponsored by DfES and organised by Gamelab London [2]. Teams used SMS to text requests for clues in specific locations where they were often required to find a specific character, such as the cook in Pudding Lane, the lion-tamer in Trafalgar Square etc. They texted answers to collect points. Extra bonus challenges were broadcast during the game.

Later the same year, we were commissioned to develop an orienteering project for Lee Valley Country Parks – **Gunpowder Park** - aimed at school groups and park visitors. The brief was to entertain, practise team skills, teach simple orienteering and promote environmental awareness. Three teams from Ponders End Youth Centre in Enfield took part in the prototype event. The teenagers had to find out information about the Gunpowder Park site, using a combination of techniques, including the use of SMS to answer questions and gain high scores. Rangers acted as guides and provided information about wildlife in the area.

Dr Zoogles Bestiary was another mobile treasure hunt sponsored by London Games Festival Fringe [3] and developed in conjunction with Gamelab London and Genius Telecom. It ran over one weekend in Oct 2007. There was no time limit, and some teams who started hunting on Saturday came back on Sunday in the rain to finish. Dr Zoogles was impressed.

Commissioned by Stream Arts as part of London 2012 Open Weekend in July 2009, **The Big Woolwich TXT Game (TBWTG)** [4] was a participatory art project that used story-telling, SMS messaging and location-based gaming to investigate the local area. The brief was to engage the local community with the Woolwich Arsenal site and to enable people to find out about their local history in an entertaining and playful way.

Using mobile technology, TBWTG players took part in a game that invited them to become detectives in a series of murder mysteries. From players' point of view, the game system was realised as a collection of "spirits" from the past, who communicated with them using SMS. Clearly this in itself was ironic and contributed to the players' awareness that they were part of a constructed experience. Feedback was positive, with players identifying the narrative, the historical element, the opportunity to learn something new and being given motivation to walk around as the highlights of the day. For the commissioning body, Stream Arts, the game was successful, drawing in people to the Woolwich Arsenal site and providing them with a novel interface to the location. The other main stake-holder, the Heritage Museum, attracted more visitors than usual.

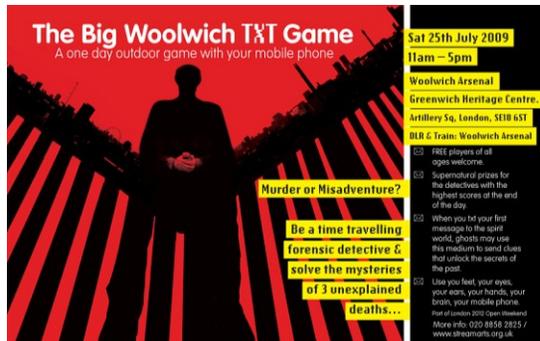


Figure 4: Family check ghostly messages, The Big Woolwich Text Game, 2009

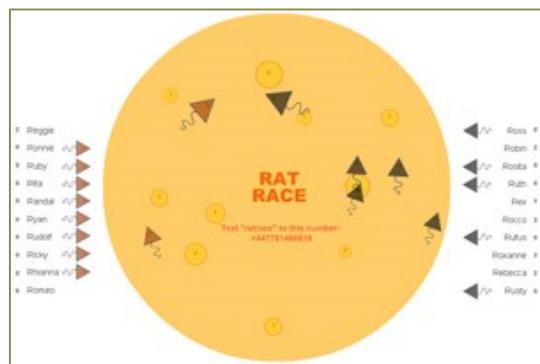


Figure 5: Rat Race live screen, 2011

The development of TBWTG was essentially an exercise in narrative design, interactive digital story-telling and interactive fiction. We discussed concepts for the game early in 2009, including treasure hunts, murder mysteries and various Olympian themes. In the end, I settled on three deaths for players to investigate: Benjamin Blight in 1777 (fictional prisoner on the hulks moored alongside the Arsenal), George Bodle in 1833 (real arsenic victim, whose murder inspired Woolwich Arsenal chemist James Marsh to perfect his test for arsenic poisoning) and Rose Mayflower in 1916 (fictional munitions worker during the war – one of the canary girls whose skin turned yellow when they worked with trinitrotoluene).

Rat Race was a mobile game with a multiplayer element that we tested in May 2011, as part of the Digital Shoreditch Festival. It was designed to motivate players to explore the various festival-hosting locations around Shoreditch and visit the different workshops and events taking place. The giant cheese (see Figure 5) was displayed on a screen in the Accelerator Building and was also live online. Players joining the game were represented by the constantly-orbiting rats, which they fed by texting the answers to questions obtained in the different festival locations. Correct answers made the players' rats grow bigger and move faster. The game screen also showed how many times clues had been answered correctly - represented by the girth of small cheeses. This concept enabled non-players to have a simultaneous view of the game via Internet, showing who was playing and who was most active.

More recently, my game design practice has focused on developing concepts for animals (specifically elephants), as part of a PhD in ACI (Animal-Computer Interaction) at The Open University. However, as a regular coordinator of public events such as the London Chapter of Global Gamejam (2009, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018) and Londonmet School of Computing and Digital Media Summer Show (2009-2018), I bring to this workshop an awareness of the practicalities associated with hosting participatory events and a sensibility of public interest and experience.

2 STATEMENT OF INTEREST

There are two themes I would be interested in exploring during the workshop:

- designing **inclusive** games that include a diverse age-range within a community, with the specific aim of **bridging the gaps between generations**.
- designing **inter-species** activities that bring together humans and other animals in friendly and stimulating social games.

These objectives could potentially, but not necessarily, be combined.



Figure 6: Playing in the park

The goal of bridging generations arises from a growing awareness that elderly people can easily become marginalized and isolated in our communities. The growth of retirement homes and care homes has offered some peaceful housing solutions for older people who may have special needs, but it has also separated them from the wider population. Aiming for inclusivity in game design encourages a tolerant, problem-solving and insightful approach to the discipline, as well as making a philosophical contribution to society by endorsing diversity, solidarity and awareness.

Inter-species game design maps to my current research interests, as well as having great potential for enhancing inter-species walks (see Figure 6).

REFERENCES

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