

---

# Subcultures to Interventionalist Design Strategies

**Vicki Moulder**

Interaction Design Research Lab  
Simon Fraser University  
British Columbia, Canada  
vmoulder@sfu.ca

**Ron Wakkary**

Interaction Design Research Lab  
Simon Fraser University  
British Columbia, Canada  
rwakkary@sfu.ca

**Carman Neustaedter**

School of Interactive Arts &  
Technology  
Simon Fraser University  
British Columbia, Canada  
carman\_neustaedter@sfu.ca

---

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

CHI'13, April 27 – May 2, 2013, Paris, France.

Copyright 2012 ACM 978-1-XXXX-XXXX-X/XX/XX...\$10.00.

**Abstract**

In this paper we introduce our position, goals and interests in participating in the *Crafting Interactive Systems: Learning from Digital Art Practice Workshop*, CHI 2013. On a number of occasions our research team has coproduced and analyzed digital artworks produced by professional and non-professional artists. Sometimes it is the case, that these artworks represent new ways of thinking about a subject; and often they present alternate methods for unraveling the complex design challenges of social engagement. For this reason we intend to discuss how the synthesis of art, design and technology can provide a fertile ground for perceiving artists' roles in a collaborative work environment, as well as provide opportunities for interventionist design strategies, in general.

**Author Keywords**

Digital Artwork, Interactive Storytelling, Transmedia, Location-based, Alternate Reality.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.3 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interfaces – computer supported cooperative work.

**General Terms**

Design, Experimentation, Human Factors, Performance, and Theory.

## Introduction

The theoretical underpinnings that bridge technology, sociality, and culture can be found in the artists who pioneered such a design space through the lens of theatre. In 1938, French author Antonin Artaud introduced the concept that the imaginary world of theatre was the *virtual arts* [1]. At the same time, German playwright, Bertolt Brecht, revolutionized the way theatre engaged with audiences by creating principles that would intentionally inspire social agency [8]<sup>1</sup>.

After World War II, European art movements emerged looking to reintroduce creativity into everyday life. For example, the Lettrists artists explored a new science of language and signs called *hypergraphic* – a concept similar to what we now consider hypertext. At this time, some art movements believed that only through the suppression of art as a separate category, could the realization artistic practice be integrated into everyday life [7].

Other arts movements that contributed to our understanding of the virtual arts or psychogeography constructs can be traced to *Fluxus*. These artists explored the concept of mapping one's understanding about a place on to the physical mapping of a place whether it is real or imagined. In the late 1950's and early 60's, when electrical engineering shifted to electronic engineering, Fluxus's strategy was simply to

---

<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht theories revolutionised that way theatre practitioners perceive of drama-as-a-medium. Over the course of his career he introduced a number of principles most notably the "defamiliarization effect". This concept has been recently appropriated by HCI researchers as a method for analyzing ubicomp.

de-emphasize authorship and to produce works like '*Happenings*' that were site specific and involved the collective action of people. Fluxus advances where intentionally philosophical, because their goal was to find technological solutions, rather than to develop technology with no apparent use [2].

Central to the discussion of art, technology and sociality as synthesis is the *9 Evenings* in 1966. The event was a series of technology-based performances produced by professional artists, some Fluxus members, and Bell Labs engineers as part of a movement to bridge C.P. Snow's iconic *Two Cultures* of science and art [8]. The *9 Evenings* pioneered key aspects of today's perceptions of art and technology collaborations. Researchers have claimed that the technology used acted as a boundary object that helped artists and engineers/scientists translate concepts and discoveries into other ways of seeing each other's subcultures[5].

Advancing from the 1970's until now, many arts and technology groups have forged their way into new media events like alternate-reality games (ARG) or immersive storytelling. These events are usually location-based and delivered through multiple broadcasting modes. In many cases, the system design is a part of the artwork designed to have multiple points of entry for non-professional artists to participate. By submitting content, people sometimes determine the outcome of the event, and on occasion the artwork is solely dependent on their contributions.

## Interventionalist Design Challenges

Unraveling the process in which designers, technologists and artists synthesized their conceptual



Figure 1. Talking Pole placed south side of greenway (picture above). Judith Clearsky's video interview about the importance of love as a vibration that can heal all wounds (picture below).

models into system designs whereby people (who do not perceive themselves to be artists) can engage or contribute to the overall meaning of the work is the focus of our research. We have employed a range of approaches to analyze the system design process; participant engagement; and theatrical practices explored. Although there are many questions that still remain unanswered, we believe digital artwork provides insights into the way creativity transforms our collective experience of the world. In the following sections, we discuss the design of our recent artworks, Talking Poles and Babylonica.ca. Due to the constraints of this position paper, we frame these projects by their design challenges and HCI influences.

#### *Talking Poles, 2011*

In 2011, we completed a public artwork commissioned by the City of Surrey in British Columbia, Canada called the Talking Poles. The two interactive Poles are steel structures decorated with a vinyl mural and placed in a suburban community. Pedestrians approaching the Pole trigger a sensor, which activates the audio recordings of local residents' voices ranging in length from 30-90 seconds.<sup>2</sup>

Our artist team incorporated interventionist and participatory design strategies to involve residents in the design process. Overall we worked with 3-community advisors; university art students; secondary school design students, organized a feast at the Keginow Native Housing Co-op; and held on-site prototyping sessions wherein information about the

project was translated into English, Punjabi and Hindi and shared with people in the area.

In all of the workshops we introduced the Talking Poles project and asked people semi-structured questions like "What would you like the artwork to say?" and "What message would you send to future generations?"

Through a process of open and selective coding, we analyzed the audio, written and video documentation collected from the workshops, then looked for emergent themes.

By using HCI methods to engage with the public, we were able to understand their concerns conceptually and amplify these aesthetics through the audio recordings. All though there were many discoveries in the process, by defining the 'social' as an art form, we were able to lobby for the same ethical considerations as a professional artist. The implications are that the audio recordings made by the participants cannot be altered or removed[4].

#### *Babylonica, 2011*

In 2011, our research team and Radix theatre collaboratively produced an ARG (Alternate Reality Game) called Babylonica.ca. The workshop version of the event showcased at the Free Fall Festival in Toronto in March 2012. The goal of this 4-day long event was for people to watch Jordan Mapplethorpe's video diaries and follow directives called *Memory Anchors*, which invited them to upload various images and text to the story narrative. On the last day, the audience was invited to the live-performance where upon their arrival Mapplethorpe would lead them to "digital nirvana" through a mind-mapping process.

<sup>2</sup> More information about the Talking Poles project and the community art engagement process can be viewed on the City of Surrey's web site <http://www.surrey.ca/culture-recreation/7373.aspx>

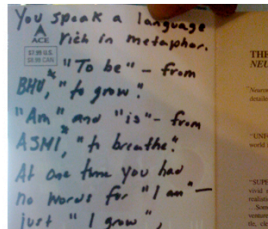


Figure 2. Babylonia Live Performance, Free Fall Festival, Toronto, March 2012 (picture above). On day three of the ARG players are asked to go to a bookstore and find the hidden message in a book (picture below).

To understand the collaborative and interdisciplinary practice that occurred, we reviewed all 246-pages of the email correspondence by our joint production/research teams along with 31-attachments, including sketches, wireframes, interaction designs and orchestration maps. Our goal was to understand the effects of disciplinary models used in negotiating the system design between the artists, designers and the technologists involved. We utilized data analysis techniques from sociology to systematically abstract empirical data into categories and theoretical constructs.

Among the many findings, we have chosen to focus on the importance of the design artifacts most notably the video trailers and the orchestration maps. Through this process we learned that some writers are highly skilled at crafting transitions that if properly interpreted through the system design can propel the audience's advancement through the story-narrative with performative action.

### Goals for the Workshop

In this paper, we have briefly characterized our working collaborations with designers, performing artists, non-professional artists, writers, programmers and technologists throughout the production of two research projects. The benefit of this type of research provides insights into the working environments of digital artworks, and HCI tools as well as processes for negotiating story-narrative and social engagement. Through reflective praxis we have been able to suggest alternative ways of thinking beyond the concept of 'the writer' or 'the artist' as content producer, but more as co-orchestrator in system design.

Our goals are to share insights, as well as, participate in discussions that explore the lessons learned from other participants in the *Crafting Interactive Systems: Learning from Digital Art Practice Workshop*.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the creative contributions of Surrey residents in the Talking Poles project and Radix Theatre for allowing us to study their involvement in the Babylonia design process.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Artaud, A. (1958). *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards. New York: Grove Press, 57
- [2] Friedman, K. (1998). *The Fluxus Reader*. Chicester, West Sussex: Academy Editions: 237.
- [3] Greenbaum, J. and Kyng, M. (1991) *Design at work: Cooperative Design of Computer Systems*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [4] Moulder, V., Boschman, L., & Wakkary, R. (2011). The talking poles public art based in social design. In *Proceedings of the 2011 annual conference extended abstracts on Human factors in computing systems* (pp. 201-209). ACM.
- [5] Oppenheimer, Robin. (2010) *The Strange Dance: "9 Evenings: Theater & Engineering" as Creative Collaboration*, PhD Thesis, The School of Interactive Arts + Technology, Surrey, BC, Canada
- [6] Peterson, R. A. (1977). Where the two cultures meet: Popular culture. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 11(2), 385-400.
- [7] Plant, S. (1992). *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International and After*. Routledge.
- [8] Willett, J. (1959). *The theatre of Bertolt Brecht: a study from eight aspects*. Methuen.