

Picnic on the Screen

An interactive public video installation

For the BBC Village Screen at the Glastonbury Festival 2009

By Charlotte Gould & Paul Sermon

Self-Evaluation Report – 16th July 2009

This project combines current interactive ludic interface work that Charlotte Gould has been developing, with Paul Sermon's long established practice and research into telepresent environments. Their collaborative partnership resulted in an interactive ludic interface that was site-specifically developed for the 'Village Screen' at Glastonbury 2009. This work explores the creative potential of the Glastonbury audience as participants or performers that have the capacity to create playful improvised narrative sequences through the 'Village Screen' as a communications portal.

This was the first time that Paul Sermon and myself had collaborated and we were very happy with our project 'Picnic on the Screen' and felt it to be a great success. It was very popular with the crowds, and the project was very in keeping with the Glastonbury atmosphere. There was a sense of disorientation as the participant sat on the picnic mat and found themselves transported into an alternative environment on screen, next to another person or animated character and within an idyllic picnic setting; a stylized, illustrated backdrop. When interviewed many of the participants described the experience as 'strange' and 'mystifying', again in keeping with that festival spirit.

It was also nice that the participants were able to take centre stage at an event that was all about watching other acts. Through 'Picnic on the Screen' the participants could become performers on the big screen and could develop their own narratives through interaction with the environment. We were working with the BBC Big Screens and seven other artists and the brief was to experiment and to develop ideas through the week and each artist's work was shown daily for at least an hour at a time.

The biggest concern for us about the project was that we were subject to weather conditions and working outdoors. Rain was forecast. The anticipated problem was not so much the rain itself but the mud bath that would develop in the installation area. We had brought expensive blue screens with us and were concerned about getting them muddy. We had also brought tarpaulin and ground sheets, which were the right colour blue but we did not know if this would be too reflective and therefore not work. The nice thing about the project for us was that we were able to turn these difficulties that arose into benefits.

On the test on the first day we used the cloth blue screens and asked people to remove their shoes. This worked well because the ground was still covered in luscious green grass. On day two of testing however, it rained and unfortunately the mud was so bad that we were unable to lay down the blue picnic mats. We decided at this point to test the blue tarpaulin- and it worked! The next day the mud had dried sufficiently for us to lay down a layer of cardboard with the tarpaulin over it.

We actually found that this worked possibly better than the cloth blue screens, and was definitely better suited to this project. I really like the simplicity and appropriateness of using a ground sheet at Glastonbury. As the week moved on we became more relaxed about removing shoes so by the final day we experimented with letting people go on the mats with shoes. This was liberating as some people were put off by having to remove cumbersome Wellington boots.

People of all ages enjoyed using the piece, and often learned from each other how to make the most of the installations. There was an assumption from some, initially that children would be particularly drawn to the work but people of all ages enjoyed taking part. Each time we set up the project it took a few minutes for people to build up the confidence, or perhaps feel reassured that it was ok to go on to the mat. I think this is because adults are rarely encouraged to play and they needed validation from other adults to reassure them.

The piece worked best when there were only five people on each mat, that way you could see the backgrounds and people could position themselves to interact with each other effectively. We experimented with managing the number of people on the mat or giving people free reign to organise themselves. It was really interesting to watch the different narratives that unfolded. At times it got very busy, but would then quieten down. It was helpful sometimes for one of us to go on to the mat and show the audience how they might interact with each other as, whilst most of the time people would understand the piece immediately, at times some would effectively use the piece as a mirror of themselves.

It was interesting to see how the personality of the audience changed with the environmental factors and the audience at Glastonbury is likely to be fairly unique. The bands or other events happening on the screen (for example the rugby match) influenced the people and the mood of those who were congregating and this had to be taken into consideration when programming the piece. This was something that the Big Screen organisers learnt early in the week. Initially they were quite relaxed about the time slots of each artists work, but it became apparent that the events around the screen had a significant effect on the audience as well as environmental factors. For example after the Rugby the ground was strewn with litter so it would not have been appropriate for our piece to show.

The location of the screen was very central and could be seen from three of the main artery roads including that to the Pyramid stage, so the works were able to draw a wide audience.

This project has enormous potential to be developed for different environments and audiences. It was a very successful project in terms of the interactive and creative use of the Urban Screens and we would welcome the opportunity to continue to develop work in this area and there are some discussions about possibilities for this. I really liked the project concept of Camp Pilton that this was a group of artists working to develop concepts, which were at different stages of completion and I think the project has presented potential for future collaboration through the network that has been developed.

Despite the odd bit of rain and mud the project went fantastically well for us and worked very much how we hoped. But what we didn't expect perhaps was the diverse level of interaction and performative engagement from the audience. We have learnt a great deal about a Glastonbury festival audience from this project and how much 'unplugged' user-generated content is available in such a public context. There is huge potential to develop the project further with this in mind.

We certainly used the week to continue developing Picnic on the Screen and it was interesting to see how the environment continued to influence ideas- with added animations in response to the weather conditions and props made from discarded junk on site. It was fun to be around the other artists as we worked on site to develop ideas. I think that the idea of this being a work in progress- a living artwork was really exciting and I am very interested in continuing to work with site-specific pieces in the future. A fantastic experience!

Charlotte Gould and Paul Sermon