

# Firewall

## Proposal for Proboscis: Private Reveries, Public Spaces John Paul Richard and Caroline Smith

### Introduction

The project 'Firewall' is a prototype for an interactive learning tool in which a variety of communities can explore morality, ethics, intention and consequence through environment, language and action within a video game framework.

We define an interactive learning tool as a computer-based environment in which defined scenarios that explore social behaviour can be played out. Within game play, it is acknowledged that displaced experiences such as sex and aggression can be engaged with in an exaggerated form (albeit within a restricted framework). However, exploring a more diverse set of social behaviours – ones for example that are less 'fantastic' and draw upon public and private memories and experiences – remains a relatively untapped area. We aim to 'cast' remote players by way of interview. This is to implicate the players into the story. Many of the players' own memories will drive and inform actions and events that will be played out and 'lived through' within the game framework. Actions will be regulated by the team of players, and have consequences on the plot and the other characters. We anticipate involving behavioural psychologists and related professionals from the outset to explore the behavioural patterns of an online community. In particular, we will be exploring how players/characters respond to notions of the self as a virtual avatar, through working with reconfigured memories and experiences.

We will be exploring the framework of an online gaming environment. We perceive this loosely to be a 3D multi-player, real time online game. We will initially be researching a template for the game environment and looking at a wide spectrum of 3D games (from mainstream to more experimental models, such as Quake and Unreal) to find a close match for our requirements. Our conceptual template will be mapped onto the selected game engine.

We aim to explore and reconfigure the traditional narrative structures found not only in gaming, but that more widely serve as restrictive definitions within technology. Terms such as linear/non-linear narrative and interactivity are often peddled within an art/technological terrain, but are insufficient signposts in the light of convergent technologies – a definition that splinters and radically shifts the relationship of social spaces and social interaction. We aim to create an experimental narrative model that is more precise in reflecting these technological and cultural shifts, whilst challenging existing, prescriptive definitions.

## Why Firewall?

A Firewall is by definition is a means of protecting private information from public access – it is a means of regulation. We aim to use Firewall as a metaphor to explore notions around the public and private use of information:

- By concealing the players' real identities from public view.

This will allow for a character to fully develop unrelant on age, gender, job, etc. Fragments or entire scenarios collated from players' biographies (stories and photos, as well as dreams, desires, anxieties, phobias) will be written into the narrative and played out by the players in the game's public domain. Only the individual player and the authors will be aware of how much the real merges with the fictional character, and how much is revealed through the player's 'personal firewall'. The regulators of information are the players themselves.

- By setting tasks and procedures to be carried out in the real space.

Technologies (email, SMS, Internet) will be used to facilitate in-game actions (from seeking support/solving dilemmas outside of the game to research in public information archives).

- Public and private forms of communication.

The players' characters will also exist in other virtual domains, i.e. have their own home pages in chat sites, such as U-Boot, to enable communication, air grievances, share dilemmas or develop their character in an autonomous space with other remote online communities. Players can also email and text each other privately or as a group.

## Social behaviour in Gaming

It is understood that interaction is the linchpin of game play. Sophisticated interaction occurs when the materiality of technology and the human/machine interface is rendered invisible. However, moral and social behaviours in traditional game play are often by-passed. Games that aimed to explore these behaviours (often within an art context) have focused near exclusively on their attention to seductive interfaces and feature the materiality of technology in a bid to prise notions of the 'game' away from its mainstream (stereotypical character and content) associations. Other artworks tend to critique gaming by deconstructing interface (most recently Lisbon based artist/curator Antonio Pinto's D-Games and the work from the group Jodi), or omitting interactivity altogether (Greek artist Miltos Manetas' endless loop of Lara Croft getting killed). Firewall instead intends to prioritise and experiment with diverse social experiences – lived out by individual players – the results of which will always have consequences for the group. It is proposed that 'Game death', for example, is a singular event (i.e. no multiple lives or 'continues' – the dead character becomes redundant), and stages of illness and disease will be included in the narrative. Players will have the responsibility of looking after their character, of treating possible

diseases, ensuring sleep and seeking medical help where needed. Firewall becomes entirely dependent on building social skills and team play; social behaviour and codes will be tested through team action and consequence. It is anticipated that the project will explore the development of an online micro community, the players within which would have a parallel and remote existence in the physical space.

The initial research will use sociological material from resources such as [www.sosig.ac.uk](http://www.sosig.ac.uk) (Social Studies Information Gateway) [www.behavior.net/JOB](http://www.behavior.net/JOB) (Journal of Online Behaviour) in addition to behavioural psychologists and other related professionals.

## Assumptions

It is important to outline the assumptions shared by the authors. Firewall is a collaboration between John Paul Bichard – a games programmer and multi media artist and Caroline Smith – a cultural/new media critic and writer (studying Prose Fiction MA). They bring a number of key critical evaluations around the cultural and sociological implications of technologies to the prototype:

The term 'beyond convergence' can be defined as a shifting of focus away from the materiality of hardware and a transparency of the human/machine interface. In utilising the games console and the mobile phone, we are using two tools that have most dramatically and radically steered technology into personal, domestic environments and shifted the ways in which social interaction and sociability take place.

In Firewall, we concentrate on the notion of a 'third space'. Since the inception of Liquid idea we have used this definition as a way of experimenting with new concepts. In discussions around technologies dualities/polarised notions tend to be key (mind/body split, the disembodied space versus the construction of the body in virtuality, the physical and the simulated). The third space shifts away from these ideas in order to describe a series of memories and experiences that are constructed through an engagement with convergent technologies that occur when technology is turned off, (e.g. the game has been played, the batteries run out, the plug has been pulled). Spatial disorientation, for example, occurs when the player attempts to align the simulated and the real during game play. Other kinds of disorientation such as those belonging to more intimate, psychological experiences (e.g. anxiety/alienation) also belong to this third space but tend to be omitted in game play.

We understand that that we will hold a privileged position in the creation of narrative and plot. The roles of the authors in the project are principally creators for a prototype model (Firewall is a template for the exploration of online communities, not a fixed objective and scientific approach). We acknowledge that the pleasure offered by interactivity occurs with user/player's control. Whilst the players will regulate the information within the space in Firewall, the delivery of the structure, as well as the timing and configuration of memories and events will be produced by the authors. Notions around control of the artist versus interactivity and choice often confuse the computer game in an art context. In a sense, there is no "happy medium" as the artist

is by nature the creator/controller of the work – interactivity is often a subordinate, token gesture. One of the key reasons for working with behavioural psychologists is to address this dilemma from the outset, and involve players as complicit in the character and plot sketching. In experimenting with a new narrative model we aim to test out the extent to which our delivery of information can still ensure a full level of player interactivity.

Video gaming's market group still traditionally comprises kids from 8-14 years of age, or males aged 18 to 35 (though there are signs to show that this is changing). We aim to engage with a much wider audience that isn't differentiated by gender. We anticipate a strong level of audience engagement with those who use virtual chat sites (such as U Boot) as part and parcel of everyday social interaction.

## **Aims & Objectives**

- To research and develop a learning tool in which social behaviours can be explored and worked through by a number of remote players, working with professionals within behavioural psychology.
- To explore a new model of narrative structure within an online gaming environment.
- To test the user relationship to private and public construction of memory and experience, in particular how players/characters respond to notions of the self through a virtual avatar.
- To test out social responsibility and to explore the extent to which the inhabitation of social spaces changes with the use of technology.
- To investigate erosion between the perceived fixed parameters of computer game play and identities, actions and social behaviour in the physical space.
- To explore how convergent technologies facilitate, give structure to and aid progression of the game.
- To research the relationship of the user to his/her own fictional, virtual character and how interaction occurs with other online characters both within the game and with remote on/offline communities.