

## PROBOSCIS: Private Reveries, Public Spaces – Responses to the Brief

### Liquid idea (John Paul Bichard & Caroline Smith) Firewall

#### 1 – *Brief description of the project.*

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.

The authors of the proposed project comprise an artist and a writer, who bring together critical evaluations of the relationship between virtual and physical spaces and their own specialists in character, narrative and game development.

Key to Firewall is the erosion of the perceived fixed parameters of computer game play and identities, actions and social behaviour in the physical space. Firewall will be developed as a multi-player, real time video game. Narrative structure, memory and identity of players and their characters will be investigated in order to explore how a game is played and what/where its perceived edges exist. We propose working with behavioural psychologists and related professionals.

Based on the outcomes of the research, narrative and characters will be sketched out. 'Casting' for the game players will occur in order to implicate the players into the plot itself. In order to explore notions around memory and anxiety, biographical material (stories, images, desires, fears etc.) from the players will be collated and written into the game characters.

Moral and social behaviours in traditional game play are often by-passed; Firewall will experiment with diverse social experiences – lived out by individual participants – the results of which will always have consequences for the playing group. It is proposed that 'Game death' 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.

The perceived boundaries between the physical and the virtual will be blurred by the inclusion of tasks and procedures 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). The players' characters will also exist in other virtual domains (i.e. have their own home pages in chat sites, such as U-Boot).

We intend this as an experimental, pilot project. The results from this pilot will underpin development of a prototype with communities who could benefit from exploring early memories, from playing characters in a disembodied, group regulated space, and for use as a learning tool for social, collective behaviour through environment, language and action.

#### 2 – *How does your proposal go 'beyond convergence'?*

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 steered technology into personal, domestic environments and shifted the ways in which social interaction and sociability take place.

We define the territory beyond convergence as the 'third space'. We have continually been interested in the notion of a 'third space': an engagement with traces of memories that occur after the switch is turned off, the game ceases, the batteries run out, the plug is pulled etc. In game play spatial disorientation occurs as the player attempts to align the simulated and the real – other kinds of disorientation such as those belonging to more intimate, psychological experiences tend to be omitted. Firewall aims to engage with a disorientation of real and fictional memory in order to test out and restructure the occurrence of this third space.

3 – *How have you addressed the key relationship of public and private spaces?*

A Firewall by definition is a means of protecting private information from public access. It is a way in which information is regulated.

Real identities of the players will be hidden from public view. Fragments or 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 public domain of the game. The player holds the key to how much the real merges with the fictional character, and how much is revealed through a 'personal fireball', the regulators of information being the players themselves.

We envisage that participants would need to be in contact with one another through SMS, and share information found out from external sources (such as libraries and other archives) or from sources exclusive to the participant.

We also envisage utilising other virtual, remote audiences, through Email or through collective social spaces such as U-Boot, or other technologies to interact privately with another character. Real identities will remain concealed to allow for a character's development, unreliant on gender, age, job etc.

4 – *Is your proposal a critique of the technologies of convergence, if so in what way.*

Firewall is an exploration of the technologies of convergence, rather than a critique. Convergent technologies have resulted in new kinds of social, mobile spaces. How this may work within the framework of a video game has rarely been explored. Previous alternatives to computer game models have experimented with interfaces (Jodi), literally subverted game action (Miltos Manetas) or have attempted a critical deconstruction of the game (the group show Serious Games). We take the multi-player game as a loose framework from which to explore evocative, memory based and social behavioural content. This project aims to explore how those convergent technologies facilitate, give structure to and aid progression of the game.

5 – *How does your proposal relate to society and community?*

We aim to develop a learning tool in which a variety of communities can explore morality, ethics, intention and consequence through environment, language and action in a game space.

Through Firewall, we are building a micro community that will be highly visible. This community of players will engage with social interaction, intentions and consequences. Players, for example, would have the responsibility of looking after their character, of treating possible diseases, ensuring sleep and seeking medical help where needed. Players (in character) can also interact, ask advice, seek help from other virtual communities and forums.

It is our aim to involve behavioural psychologists and sociologists from the outset to explore the behaviour of a virtual community, in particular how players/characters respond to notions of the self and the construction of memory through a virtual avatar.

6 – *What audience or public does the proposal address?*

The audience is aimed at a variety of culturally engaged communities who are interested in extending the boundaries of the 'game'. It will appeal to Quake followers (or other multi player gamers). It will also be of interest to those who are interested in exploring the idea of a virtual presence. Teenagers to 30 year olds who engage with chat sites as a form of everyday social interaction will be able to follow a character through the 'reality' of a chat room to a computer game.

7a. – *Please indicate which of the issues, listed in the brief, your proposal responds to and,*

The relationship between the physical and virtual in public spaces  
How technologies are changing social interrelations in public spaces  
The management of anxiety through technology

Changing nature and experience of time  
How technology changes our inhabitation of social spaces  
How technology changes our concept of sociability

*7b – how it addresses them.*

The proposed research and then pilot project will be involved in the issues noted above. Firewall will include notions of the physical and virtual, social interrelationships, and our attitude towards concepts of sociability. Working with and through anxiety in addition to exploring memories and desires will be key to the game narrative. Games are a temporal construct – Firewall will see the players inhabiting two parallel existences. Tasks and actions within the game will be time dependent.