A Machine to See With (and Reflect Upon): Interview with Blast Theory Artists Matt Adams and Nick Tandavanitj

Marcos Pereira Dias

Introduction

> Man is a self-performing animal—his performances are, in a way, *reflexive*, in performing he reveals himself to himself.
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> — Victor Turner (1988, 81)

Blast Theory, led by artists Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandanavitj, is an internationally renowned group developing innovative and provocative performances that invite participants to reflect on the media-rich environments in which they 'perform' their everyday lives. In September 2011 I had the opportunity to interview Matt and Nick as part of my field research on their recent work, *A Machine To See With* (Blast Theory 2011a), during its premiere in England at the Brighton Digital Festival.

In many of Blast Theory's projects, participants engage in highly embodied experiences that enable reflection and sometimes involve transgressive acts from both performers and participants. For example, in the controversial performance, *Kidnap* (performed in the United Kingdom in 1998)*,* they launched a lottery where two participants—having preauthorised the artists through a written contract—were kidnapped and kept in captivity for 48 hours, while the whole process was broadcast live on the Internet (Blast Theory, 2011b). Matt Adams commented on the use of the

Marcos Pereira Dias is a Ph.D. candidate and lecturer in the School of Culture and Communication in the University of Melbourne, Australia. His current research investigates emerging forms of social interaction and the participant's experience in digital performances in networked public spaces. His work is supported by the Institute for a Broadband-Enabled Society (IBES), and he is currently on a one-year exchange with Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland where he is based in the Telecommunications Research Centre (CTVR). **Matt Adams** and **Nick Tandavanitj** along with **Ju Row Farr** are the leading artists of Blast Theory, renowned internationally as one of the most adventurous artists' groups using interactive media, creating groundbreaking new forms of performance and interactive art that mixes audiences across the internet, live performance and digital broadcasting. The group's work explores interactivity and the social and political aspects of technology. It confronts a media saturated world in which popular culture rules, using performance, installation, video, mobile and online technologies to ask questions about the ideologies present in the information that envelops us.

kidnap narrative in the performance: "we're aware that a kidnap is a deeply traumatic experience, but it does give you time to reassess your life, and it can fundamentally alter your sense of self. Everyone comes out of a kidnap changed" (Rampton, 1998).

The narratives driving Blast Theory's works borrow from popular cultural references and media formats and sometimes invite participants to imagine themselves in the guise of other characters or, as pointed out by Nick in the interview: "let people occupy some fantasy life within public space" while allowing them to "understand the trajectory of their own personal lives as well". For example, in *Ulrike And Eamon Compliant* (performed during the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009) participants were invited to assume the roles of controversial characters Ulrike Meinhof (a German journalist and member of the Red Army Faction) and Eamon Collins (a member of the Irish Republican Army). At the end of the performance participants entered an interrogation room where they were interviewed and asked, among other things: "What would you fight for?" and "Are your beliefs rational or emotional?" (Blast Theory 2011c).

A Machine To See With was originally commissioned as a piece of 'locative cinema': a crossover between locative media performance and an imaginary cinematic narrative. It engages participants through a highly embodied experience that—despite the prescripted narrative—remains open and unpredictable. Participants use their own mobile phones to make and receive calls to an automated phone system that guides them through the streets of the city on a narrative with a fixed (and fictitious) objective: robbing a bank. At the beginning, participants move alone through the city environment, performing instructions given by the phone system, such as observing small details of the urban environment, remaining inconspicuous, keeping an eye out for suspect bystanders, and stashing all their money somewhere on their body in case they are confronted by the police and 'get into trouble'. They are eventually asked to enter an abandoned car in a multi-story car park where they must decide if they will join another (unknown) participant in the bank heist.

The ensuing action is a crescendo of emotions involving tension, betrayal, fast thinking, reflection and finishes with an invitation (in Matt's words) to "step across the boundary of the world of the game into the real world and engage with a member of the public and do something that is an act of generosity and warmth". This act is the invitation to give some of your money previously stashed away to a complete stranger in the uncanny environment of a claustrophobic games arcade.

The fictitious world enabled by *A Machine To See With* therefore finishes with an act that proves to be more transgressive than the narrative's suggestion of a bank robbery: reentering the 'real' world to engage with a complete stranger in a 'real' world situation.[1] It regrounds participants and leaves them to reflect afterwards on their

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[1] During my field research I observed a group of nineteen participants taking part and only one of them—a twenty-one year old male participant who had never been to Brighton

actions, while the final message from the phone system synthesises the experience:

> Today has been all about you. We needed to know whether you are a person who can step through a door and become someone completely different. And now we know. To a bystander you could be anyone. This is not a personality test. This is A Machine To See With. The ending is up to you. In 8 seconds I will hang up. You will not hear from me again. Goodbye. (Blast Theory, 2011d)

Blast Theory's work aims, in their own words, to "ask questions about the ideologies present in the information that surrounds us" (Blast Theory, 2011e). These ideologies are manifested in several ways, such as the glorification of 'the cloud' as the latest digitally-fuelled metaphor of a world consisting of sentient flows of information that are capable of solving all our needs and problems.[2] However, as Hayles (1999: 13; her emphasis) reminds us: "for information to exist it must *always* be instantiated in a medium", and therefore embodied.

A Machine To See With provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the tension generated by the increasing mediation of our everyday experiences of embodied performativity through pervasive digital media. It foregrounds the ambiguities of digitally-mediated interaction: promise and failure; affordance and disappointment; transparency and opacity; anonymity and surveillance; virtuality and materiality. Embodied performativity engages individuals with the surrounding environment, digital media and other individuals in a dynamic feedback loop while allowing us to reflect back upon it. As Erving Goffman (1990: 20) reminds us, in our everyday lives we are all subject to several mutual performances between individuals where everyone is at the same time actor and audience; an unrehearsed, emergent performance that is never fully controllable and subject to a "kind of information game—a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery". This information game, enacted in the environment in which we perform our everyday lives, enables reflexivity.

In Victor Turner's definition of the individual as a *self-performing animal* (see opening quote), reflexivity is highlighted as a defining aspect of performance. Reflexivity indicates a dynamic form of feedback that involves, initially, reflection, followed by reaction and further reflection. For Turner (1988: 24—26), performative reflexivity allows individuals of a certain sociocultural group to "turn, bend or reflect back upon themselves [and upon] the sociocultural components which make up their public selves". This is done through what he calls *liminal phenomena*: forms of ritual

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before—actually gave money to a complete stranger. In his interview he described the experience as one of the highlights of his participation.

[2] See, for example, Wendy Chun's (2011: 13) insightful exploration of the eternal promises of new media in its attempt to predict and reshape the future in her recent book *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory:* "You are the engine behind new technologies, freely producing content, freely building the future, freely exhausting yourself and other. Empowered. In the cloud."

where play and rules are equally important and that are capable of both "sustaining cherished social and cultural principles and forms, and also of turning them upside down".

Turner's argument reinforces the importance of dynamic feedback loops in the embodied performativity of our daily lives and the potential for triggering emerging social interaction through reflexivity. Feedback loops are also at the core of computing processes, such as those supporting 'the cloud'; however, in this case the end target is to generate processes that can be fully controlled and scripted, and where information must flow unimpeded. This is certainly not the case in digital performances that foreground embodied performativity: information is in constant dialogue (and possibly in conflict) with embodiment, which leads to unpredictable and emergent patterns.

Therefore, the enactment of performativity through embodied practices highlights the importance of accidental malfunctions, slippages and conflicts. As Judith Butler (2010: 159) reminds us: "performativity not only fails, but [...] it depends on failure". Butler adds that performativity describes processes that *produce* ontological effects which in turn "lead to socially binding consequences". Embodied performativity questions the technolibertarian myth of digital media as an augmenting module to be attached to contemporary social practices or the main driver of social interaction in these practices. It enables emergent social interaction to materialise through its perceived imperfections, or breakages in information flows.

To better understand how these emergent, unpredictable and imperfect patterns of social interaction unfold, I argue that there is a need to observe closely the participant's experience in digital performances in public spaces. With this intent in mind, I conducted fieldwork on the performance of Blast Theory's *A Machine To See With* during the Brighton Digital Festival in September 2011 for a period of one week. During this period I followed and observed nineteen voluntary participants while they took part in the performance and interviewed them afterwards with a fixed set of questions. I also took part in the performance and had the opportunity to observe some of the project meetings and the last two testing days prior to the Brighton premiere, where minor adjustments were made based on participant's feedback and observations made by the artists.

During my fieldwork, I was able to observe how 'failure' manifested itself in different forms: failure to follow the instructions relayed by the 'machine', getting lost and asking a (clueless) bystander for information on directions, failing to engage with bystanders and fellow participants according to the instructions given, failure to avoid the paranoia of being followed, imagining you are part of some strange social experiment; and even failure to complete the performance due to previous participants hijacking it (see interview below). However, all these failures eventually enable participants to reflect back on their participation in the performance, and in turn to reflect on themselves.

Interviewing Matt and Nick highlighted the importance of (in Nick's words) the "fallibilities and foibles of being in the city". It also gave me insights that invite reflection on the meaning and weight given to collaboration in digital performance in public spaces. While usually there is an expectation that the participant will actively become a collaborator in reshaping the narrative, Matt asserts that participants are *not* collaborators and that *A Machine To See With* "follows a traditional artistic model". However, taking part in it (as I did during my field research) reveals how, through a supposedly 'rigid' model of interaction, you are led to push the boundaries of your own imagination towards 'making your own movie', which doesn't necessarily conform with the prescripted narrative guiding the performance. In this process, a participant's experience of the urban space and the awareness of strangers in that space is heightened, and the fissures between fiction and real life bring you into revealing encounters through a social drama which is, as Turner (1988: 26) argues, only fully realised once performed; and in doing so, it exposes "the material of real life presented in a meaningful form".

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Interview

Can you describe your influences in developing *A Machine To See With*?

Matt: The work was commissioned by the Sundance Film Festival, the Zero One Festival in San Jose and the Banff Center for New Media as a piece of locative cinema, so it was part of the premise of the commission that the work would explore some ways how cinema would exist in a urban environment and where the 'viewer' is moving through the city; so looking at the cinematic was a key starting point and we talked a lot about the movie *The Conversation* (a Francis Ford Coppola movie) as a longstanding favourite of ours, but also as a scene where people are being monitored as they move through a city square. And we went on to look at what activities we thought were interesting in the city and we realised that surveillance or observing a building were the kind of things that you can do that exist on the boundary between being a normal citizen and being a criminal; that standing and watching something, and particularly since 9/11, have become more nuanced things.

And then, as we developed the work, we looked at a book called *The Jugger* by Richard Stark, which is a famous piece of film (noir fiction) which was filmed by Jean Luc Godard illegally (without permission) as *Made in USA*, and so that book and that film became critical parts of how we thought about what we were doing. So, sort of employing the genres of popular fiction but using them to address political questions; and once we realised we were going to work with a heist movie idea and a bank then

clearly, you know, banks and banking have become kinds of political lightning rods in some ways in the last two or three years. And so it became an opportunity for us to look at the financial crisis and some of our feelings around that.

Your biography states that Blast Theory confronts a media saturated world and that you question the ideologies present in the information that envelops us. Can you discuss that in relation to the project?

Nick: I think the thing that has struck us over the course of making this series of works all taking place out in the city is how much that experience is determined by a whole set of kind of cultural references about what experiences mean and how you understand what's going on in the world. Even in the early days, *Rider Spoke* (a performance from 2007 by Blast Theory where participants are invited to cycle through the streets of a city equipped with a handheld computer) was going to be a car journey through Los Angeles; and so we had all these references about road movies and that imaginative space that is created within films and cinema that lets people occupy some fantasy life within that civic realm. It allows people to fantasise about passersby, where they might be going or really give shape to understand the trajectory of their own personal lives as well. These references are from all sorts of places that we want to make explicit in *A Machine To See With*.

And so when we talked about *A Machine To See With* we had a whole set of cultural references which were things like: the Clint Eastwood movie *Dirty Harry* where he is led on a chase through the use of phone boxes; and *Matrix*, when the phone is delivered in an envelope and then he [Neo] is instructed to crawl beyond the desk and out onto a window ledge; all those seminal cinematic moments in people's experiences of using phones and mobile phones within the cinema. If we can bring some of those moments that are slightly more transgressive and push the boundary of what is your fantasy life when you are on the streets, it would make it more transparent as to what these forces are and make it more explicit.

The project seems to address two main forms of interaction: (1) between the participant and the automated phone system and (2) between participants who have never met before. How did you envision the outcomes of these interactions and were you surprised by the outcomes from previous premieres in other cities?

Nick: Did you also mention interactions between participants and members of the general public?

That would also be good to talk about...

Matt: The porosity of those boundaries, the fact that you slide across those three

different modes of interaction has always been an interest for us and to the city-based work we've made, and it is increasingly clear that we make these kind of social projects where you spend almost all of your time alone. And we are quite unusual in that respect in terms of being interested in interactivity but almost always as an isolated or atomised individual, and very few of our works involve groups of people gathering together in any way.

Clearly, the work is very interested in the nature of interaction itself and the limits and false promises of it. And in fact the work promises a number of forms of interaction of which it gives you very few. So the work actually pays very little attention to what you are doing. This is dramatised early on in the work where it says: "record your name"; and then the voice says "I don't know what your name is because this is an automated system"; just to really flag right at the outset that these are kind of limited, very partial, systems of interaction; and that they are very didactic and controlling systems. So it's no accident that we wanted to use this Asterisk system, which is a call centre system. We don't associate call centre systems with artistic pleasure in any way whatsoever.

And in a way, this work kind of trades of that, it's not a particularly friendly and gratifying set of forms of interaction and its core is mechanic: you listen, you do what you're told, you occasionally press buttons and every now and then those button presses are meaningful, but as much as anything else you are just confirming that you are ready to receive your next instruction, or you are in the right place to receive your next instruction. So the work is very deterministic in that respect, and you can see that has been the case in some of our works before, but never to this degree. It's quite a kind of almost oppressive work in terms of how it employs interaction. But it does finish with this moment of a kind of porosity where you are invited to perhaps step across the boundary of the world of the game into the real world and engage with a member of the public and do something that is an act of generosity and warmth; and that is perhaps that note of hope at the very end of the work.

Following up from that question: in terms of this collective social experience of the participants in these small interactions, did these correspond to your expectations? For example, the experience of the arcade at the end and the car park interaction?

Nick: I guess the shape of the work changed over the course of us making it. Our initial idea was to have a sort of structure that choreographed people almost second by second so that we could arrange for people to not have a large scale collective experience, but rather with groups of six people who would be able to synchronise certain activities. So that you would do things in sync with certain other people who are taking part in any given time. And I think over the course of developing and testing we found that it is actually impossible to predict people, the kind of fallibilities

and foibles of being in the city and the things that might delay people and change people's experience on how long they take. And so that sense of the group of six confronting each other, of facing each other as a group of six, changed to something where we are able to pull out this partnership with one other person. And in a way it is actually quite set to chance to how you meet (or who you meet) with another person and instead became much more outward looking— towards your relationships with the public, as opposed to internal to this group that you are in.

You've done quite a few feedback sessions during other premieres of *A Machine To See With*. How do participants interpret the project and is there a common pattern of interpretation from them?

Nick: One of the strongest responses from people is the sensation of having a heightened sense of their surroundings, where people are looking around them and not knowing what to look for, but just having a sense of what's that person doing, what's that car doing there, what's that doing there. And a sense of being watched, and we've invoked that quite a lot, because we talk about a camera being on you, and trying to frame it as being cinematic and placing you within a field of view of a camera. And people feel extremely paranoid, they don't know whether there is a camera there or not, they don't know whether there are half a dozen Blast Theory [performers] all standing, waiting to come on stage or step out in front of them at any point. And so I think that sensation is really common.

Following on from that: did you envision the participants as actual collaborators in your project and to what extent do you think they reshape the project or are reshaped by it?

Nick: Yeah, I think with *A Machine To See With* there is quite a formal process, isn't it? Because the only way for it to progress is to actually get out on the street and test it, and then you really need people who are new to it to be able to test it, and are unfamiliar with it. So we have with *A Machine To See With* a fairly regular process; both when we were developing it, so we had a version of it that was developed over three months in advance of a premiere in September, of which two months were spent here in Portslade[3]—and we probably did three or four tests out on the streets of Portslade—and then the final months were spent in Canada. We did three tests with the same structure of six people, and then formal feedback questionnaires after each test. And then in San Jose before we opened we probably again had another three tests.

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[3] Blast Theory's studios are located in Portslade, just outside Brighton in the United Kingdom.

Matt: Yeah, probably ten in total actually, or something like that. Plus all the informal ones before that.

Nick: Yeah, and plus ourselves [as testers] walking through in terms of user's feedback.

Matt: I don't think we see them [the participants] as collaborators. We are creating an experience that we hope will work for people and to do that you have to pay very very close attention to how people engage with it. But that's not to say that they are collaborating in any meaningful sense. It's quite a traditional artistic model in that respect.

Did you observe participants interacting with the project in unexpected and unconventional ways. I know, Nick you mentioned people turning up in a van and trying to get people into it?

Nick: Yeah, we had one instance of people who'd done the project and, knowing where one of the start positions were, they were driving past in a van and saw someone waiting to start. They pulled up, they opened the side of the van and they said: "Get inside!" And they then drove that person, I think, all the way to the end, all the way to the bank and then dropped them off and said: "This is where you are going", and then left them there. And I think they also took this circuitous route round town. And then we had another group of people who had done the project, so they knew where the car was, and they went back to it, and they then got into the car when they saw people getting into it and starting being quite, you know, not aggressive, but quite hyper, really hyping it up, like how dangerous it was going to be.

And so, they completely improvised—we don't encourage people to do that or go back. And I don't think in any way it suggests that's really an option, but I think people do. The context that it happened in was this festival—it was a quite highly trafficked area so people were moving back and forth along one of two parallel sets of streets where these locations were, and so if they've done it, it was quite common that they would be walking back and forth past the cars. So I think the encouragement was there. And those were the only two we had heard about, but I'm sure there could well have been more in that context. Everyone was quite lively in that festival.

The title of the project—*A Machine To See With*—has a kind of a posthuman connotation. Katherine Hayles (1999: 22) in her book *How We Became Posthuman* argues that narrative plays an important part in contesting the "transformation of the human into a disembodied posthuman". So, how do you see this tension between technology and embodiment in your project?

Matt: Well, obviously this is a highly embodied project as most of our works are. The

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origin of our work in performance is always very clear I think, and we have just showed it in Edinburgh essentially as a piece of theatre, within an entirely theatrical context. I can't comment on the idea of the posthuman or what role narrative might make; but I suppose, one thing that we would argue is that technology/the virtual is always embodied, that this binary or sort of oppositions have some purpose, have some use in some very narrow terms—but they are completely redundant if we don't always accept that they are very partial—that kind of metaphorical idea about how you might view the world. The idea of virtual versus real, of course, is a completely sort of syntactically insane concept. So that would be my observation on that one.

Nick: Yeah, it reminds me of two things. One is: at one point, one of the versions we produced would involve actually people making recordings of their bank robbery as they were undertaking it. And we had this idea that the system—not the back story, but the logic of the system—was that it was gathering a set of data around bank robbers and bank robbery. And so even though that's not what it actually was doing, if you were to try and understand what it was doing, that there might be that interpretation.

And the other is to do with that sense of us being absent as performers. And I suppose there is something in that kind of quality of the voice where it reminds me of the first time I heard a railway platform announcement, where the automated announcement said: "I'm sorry for the late arrival of this train". It was like this disjunction, because I thought, "You're not saying 'we', it's not a recording speaking on behalf of the company, it's saying 'I'". So at the point he was saying, "I'm sorry", the person wasn't there, and it wasn't aware of what train it was or why it was late. But you are listening to a machine say, "I am sorry", so it's embodying the person. And I think that [there is] a similar sort of disjunction between things in this voice where it suggests its presence as a person and as having a kind of humanity, but also it suggests that it doesn't actually have that. And that there is some unresolved distance between these things.

Matt: And I think there has been a continuity in a number of our projects about the sort of social and cultural affordances of different devices and platforms, and that they enable you to speak in certain ways and say certain things and they also silence you in particular ways. And each platform has ways in which it will stop you from speaking or saying or being or existing in certain ways because it is quite hostile to that. You know, the most flippant and glib example has to do with how the comments work on YouTube through to phones themselves and [how] they enable certain kinds of things but also truncate and delimit some of the ways in which we can be truly ourselves. And I think this work slightly reflects some of that.

Would you make any future changes to your project after observing how participants engage with it and engage with other participants and, if so, what

would these be?

Nick: Hack it as a mobile phone app? (laughs) False calls?

Matt: Yeah, it was made on a shoestring financially, and so we had to make a number of concessions very, very early on. So then that has driven the work in very, very particular ways. We didn't really begin with an aim to make the work as linear as this. We thought that we could create something where you choose your bank. You would wander around and pick a bank that you want to rob, and then you work out how to rob it, and talk about the strategies that you are going to employ. And I think that could have been a really, really interesting project and it could have worked, but what it meant was that it had a number of implications for how the work exists, and most particularly about how you address a public.

For work like ours it is formally quite unusual. The issue of how people are going to hear about it and what will motivate them to engage in it is absolutely critical. It is a very big challenge, and so I think we ended up with a work that exists within a kind of performance or screening kind of model. And it's been conscious all the way, but I've always been conscious of the fact that we could have taken a couple of decisions earlier on in the process that would have really taken it in a very different direction. In fact, I think you kind of argued [...] you were very keen on that approach, weren't you? (looking towards Nick). We did look at that.

Nick: I do think it's a different project, though. It is something where the structure would have to be much longer or attract a very different kind of audience, much more around urban gaming.

If you compare *A Machine To See With* to, say, *Uncle Roy All Around You* (a performance from 2003 by Blast Theory that was played simultaneously in a virtual city by online players and on the streets of an actual city by street players). I know you mentioned before that Uncle Roy had a big structure and a lot of people working for it.[4] Do you see this as an advantage—that you can have a more streamlined system?

Nick: Yeah, I suppose it is an advantage in the sense that it allows us to tour more widely and one of the obstacles for *Uncle Roy* travelling further was because of the size

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[4] To track the location of street players in *Uncle Roy All Around You*, Blast Theory decided to resort to the self-reporting of positioning by street players because of the inability of GPS systems at the time to provide a smooth tracking experience of users in the congested urban space of central London. For a detailed description of the implementation of *Uncle Roy All Around You*, see Benford et al. (2004).

of the team that was required to run it. With *A Machine To See* With, you can pop it up and down in any continent with a team of two people, pretty much.

A lot of projects nowadays involve apps, so you need an Iphone or and Android phone, for example. Was it deliberate that *A Machine To See With* allows anyone with a mobile phone— regardless whether it is or not the latest model—to take part in the performance?

Nick: Yeah, I think the motives for me were twofold: one was accessibility, and I do find this presumption of people producing work which is only for Iphone users kind of a bit strange, but it is what it is I suppose, that's where they make their work. The other is the quality of voice calls as a medium and all these associations that they bring. The resonances that they have in terms of what it actually means to be on the phone speaking to someone is a whole different set of things [rather than] interacting with an application.

The implication is: when people are in a voice call, it's nearly always to a loved one or a friend or through work. Even in the age of call centres, nine times out of ten you are talking to a real person, and that's the kind of expectation that people have; and they bring a different set of associations to it.

Do you have any final comments or thoughts on the project, or how it is developing here in Brighton?

Matt: I still feel it's developing a lot, I still feel that the semantics of the work are incredibly mobile, that it's very uncertain exactly how the pieces fit together in the experience of participants, that people interpret it in different ways and that different emphases come very vividly into focus depending on people's experience within the work.

It's an inherently tropic, chaotic thing to make works in the city, and so every single time someone does something that you wouldn't expect or couldn't predict. Or people interpret things in very, very diverse ways and bring very, very diverse kinds of views to it. And that's its strength, but also a tremendous challenge for us in terms of the making of it.

We had people, for example, in Edinburgh who were game players and they just 'ate it up' (laughs) [...] had no problem at all, they all get to the end, they bring a mentality which is like: "Right, what am I doing? Where am I going? I can challenge this! Oh God, it's gone wrong! OK, I'm gonna have to do". And then theatre people, who are much more 'sitting back', and much more like: "Well, that's not completely clear to me, this is obviously going a little bit off the rails!". Their expectation is that they will be served something that will be absolutely 'beat by beat', that we will be delivering

them an experience they can take on; and that's just one kind of simplification of the ways in which people bring very different perspectives to our work.

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