

Across the Universe: A Public Space Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a public space experiment conducted at Union Square in New York. It talks about observations of cross sections of the space and concepts on how to get people to interact with an installation in a particular space. It details the iterative design process that was followed, to conceive the ideas and implement. It also documents some of the key reactions, responses and results of the experiment.

Keywords

Public spaces, interface, metaphors and narrative.

1. INTRODUCTION

We often view urban areas as “in-between spaces” – obstacles to traverse from one place to another. However, not only do we spend a significant amount of time in such urban landscapes, but also these spaces contribute to our own formulation of identity, community, and self [1]. ‘Across the Universe’ is a public space project we (Stephen Varga and me) conducted at Union Square to gain insight on peoples’ behavior when a non-familiar object is installed in a familiar environment, to purposely disrupt normal transition patterns. We also study how a metaphor and a narrative, influences their reactions or choices in interacting with the object.

2. CONCEPT

Our objective was to get people to interact with our interface, be sociable and possibly interact with each other. Guy Debord and the Situationists [2] sought to reinvent everyday life in urban spaces by constructing situations which disrupted the ordinary and normal in order to jolt people out of their customary ways of thinking and acting [3]. We decided to build an interface that would generate curiosity and investigative response from passers-by.

The concept was to enable people to leave topical messages that would be later digitized and relayed across the universe. We chose a metaphoric vessel, a red rocket, and fabricated a believable

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narrative to stimulate audience interaction and response. What do people think about achieving immortality by relaying their messages through space forever? What are peoples’ thoughts about alien life forms? Would they like to communicate with them? Are they scared of them? Do they believe they even exist? Are people interested in informing them about our culture? These were some additional questions we wanted to answer with this experiment.

3. RELATED WORKS

3.1 Post Secret

Post Secret is a web-based project created by Frank Warren. It is a source of inspiration and is conceptually similar in that enables people to leave personal anonymous messages. It differs in the focus of the content and material form. The postcards contained secrets that the creators had never revealed before. 10 postcards were published to the website every week with the ability for people to post comments. The postcards were eventually published as a book.

3.2 Operation Immortality

Operation Immortality is a project to digitize people’s DNA and send it to the international space station. The project is tied into the video game “Tabula Rasa”, creating a real-world scenario in which you can literally “Save you game” by copying your DNA at a certain point in your life. The DNA consists mainly of celebrities such as Stephen Colbert, Stephen Hawking, and several athletes and musicians. Visitors to the site can also upload their character-based message to the “Immortality Drive”, a physical hard drive that will be placed on the international space station. This project is conceptually similar but materially different since we would be relaying messages into space, possibly as radio waves.

3.3 Others

There are several commercial sites that allow you to send messages into space. Most of these sites charge a fee and use earth based satellite dishes to relay radio waves into space. Some examples are: www.sentforever.com/, www.endlessechoes.com/

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Initial Observations

We studied different cross-sections of Union Square Park at different times of day, over the course of a week. We observed the kinds of people, the amount of time they spent in the park, the activities they engaged in, transition zones, textures, atmosphere

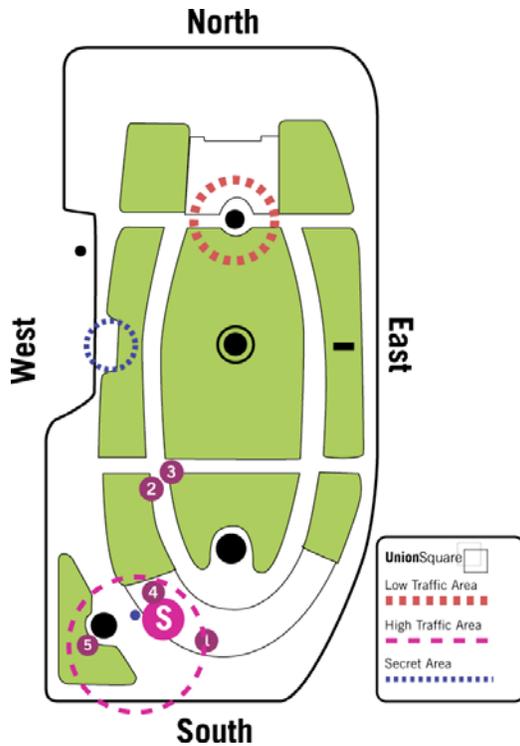


Figure 1. A map of the space.

and instruction sets. These qualities seemed to make this an ideal spot to have a large enough audience to captivate and engage in activity. We selected the area around the subway entrance as a potential spot to conduct our experiments because:

- It was a high transition space with many people entering and exiting
- Groups of people hanging out
- People relaxing or eating
- People shopping when there were vendors and farmers market

4.2 Initial Concepts

After observing the space we brainstormed ideas and how we could test them with low fidelity prototypes. The three concepts we chose were:

Smoker's Station – The idea was to create an area for smokers to gather around and create a sense of community. The display would be in the form of an augmented ashtray surround by furniture to promote a club like atmosphere.

Time Overlap – This was inspired from the concept of the familiar stranger [4]. The idea was to introduce new familiar strangers by overlapping different times and spaces by projecting large video recordings of the space, in the space.

Message in a Bottle – This idea would offer people the ability to communicate a personal message by writing a short note on a piece of paper, putting it in a bottle, and tossing it in the fountain.

4.3 Initial Prototypes

Smoker's Station – We set up a cardboard box with an ashtray and a large smoking symbol. We initiated the invitation to smoke and chat with other smokers in the Union Square area. A few people did interact with the ashtray but they didn't seem interested in socializing or hanging around. Contrary to our observation, there weren't many smokers around at the time we tested. Most people seemed to be in too much of a hurry to stop or even notice.

Time Overlap – We made fixed-point recordings of people passing by the area for several 10-minute intervals from different angles and played them back for correct angle and perspective. The project seemed interesting, but the implementation seemed unfeasible in the space.

Message in a Bottle – We set up a station with a pictorial instruction set, plastic bottles, a small notepad and pens. The prototype generated instant interest, and an actual interaction was recorded within a half hour. This prototype was successful in engaging the user to participate and we decided to further iterate the concept.

4.4 Second Prototype – Message in a Bottle

We put together a new iteration that looked more attractive than the previous prototype so that it would attract more attention and possibly generate more meaningful messages. The plastic bottles were replaced with colored candy tubes so that it would not be perceived as trash. The instruction set was also revised to be larger, clearer and concise. The new iteration was tested at



Figure 2. Second Prototype.

different times of the day and late evening to get a varied response. Glow sticks were used to light the prototype in the evening.

As a result we confirmed that the concept generated curiosity and interest. It quickly engaged several people to participate; some of them explained the concept to others and got them to engage as well. The fountain proved to be a difficult obstacle, due to cold weather, lack of waterproof bottles, and park rules concerning the fountain. We also needed to iterate on the lighting because glow sticks were rather ineffective.

4.5 Final Concept – Across the Universe

The messages we received from previous prototypes seemed rather arbitrary and impersonal. We wanted to receive messages that were more focused and topical in nature. This would mean creating a metaphoric interface that would motivate such responses. We brainstormed several forms our concept could take – a tree, a wishing well, cart wine rack and a rocket ship.

We chose the rocket ship idea since it presented possibilities of receiving interesting messages from people. It would also work well to generate curiosity and engage people. We pushed it further and built a scenario around it. The purpose would be to lead the user to believe that their messages would be broadcast across the universe. This would offer them the ability to transmit whatever message they desire, infinitely into space.

We also constructed a narrative to further stimulate responses. Users were told that this was an experiment being conducted under a partnership between NASA and Parsons. That the collected messages were part of a global experiment to create a cultural portrait of the world and would be officially digitized and relayed into space in 2012, through a repurposed satellite.

5. IMPLEMENTATION

We created a display unit that would convey the concept, attract attention and motivate responses from passersby's. The unit was made up of two parts:

5.1 The Rocket

A large rocket sculpture with light and music emanating from the inside. This would be the visual metaphor as well as a receptacle for collecting messages at the top. It would be tall enough for people to look in and notice the pool of messages others left behind.

- This was constructed out of sheets of cardboard, which were spray-painted red/white and bolted together.
- The cone, painted white, included a hatch through which users would leave their messages.
- A large pictorial instruction set was pasted below the hatch.
- Circular windows were cut into the body of the rocket with semi transparent blue paper stuck on from behind them.



Figure 3. Implementation.

- A large flashlight was installed vertically inside the rocket giving the interior a subtle glow. The glow also emanated from the hatch at the top making the instruction set visible.

5.2 The Table

A top-lit table with an array of colored post-it notes, pens and test tubes. People would write messages, encapsulate the messages in a test tube and drop it into the rocket.

- This was constructed from cardboard and wrapped with black fabric.
- The box was reinforced to be sturdy enough to write on.
- A red panel with two test tube racks was attached to the back of the table. Each rack held ten test tubes.
- An LED lantern was placed between the two test tube racks for illumination.

The ideal installation would consist of an audio/video recording system inside the rocket. This would allow users to look into the rocket and record their messages, which we would later relay through space.

6. TESTING

We proceeded to conduct a final test in our chosen location at Union Square. We set up the display a little further than where we had tested previously, which worked to our advantage since it was in the main path of traffic. We allowed for verbal interaction with

one of us since the participants seemed to have many questions and comments about the experiment. The reactions and participation were documented on film.

The experiment was successful in generating curiosity and interest. Everyone passing by noticed the rocket, many stopped to ask questions and investigate the rocket. Most people who stopped left messages. The participants expressed interest in and supported our concept. They were excited about sending their messages into space and many left their names and email addresses in their messages in case alien life forms were interested in establishing contact. Surprisingly, there were a small number of people who were cynical about our idea.

Participants engaged in conversation with us and thanked us for the opportunity to participate in something free and interesting. Merchants and vendors in the area were also really interested and came by to ask us what we were doing. The participants were from a diverse range of ages, races and sexes. Kids were the most intrigued by the rocket itself and spent time investigating, touching and poking it.

We collected 35 messages in a 2-hour period. The content of the messages ranged from arbitrary to profound. Most participants chose to use the brighter colored post-its to write their messages on.

7. RESULTS

The ideas of space, the universe, and the unknown seem to be universally appealing. Using this idea helped us generate some interesting responses. The quality of our construction attracted attention and motivated people to participate. Personal verbal interaction seemed to generate trust, further motivated people to participate and leave genuine messages. The messages gave some insight into peoples' personalities, their views and beliefs. Many of the messages were thoughtful and reflective of alien cultures. People expressed the interest to participate in things that are fun, free with no further attachment.

8. CONCLUSION

Future iterations of the concept could include audio/video recording capabilities and a larger scaled object, in the form of a booth or multiple booths in a large area. Users could record messages of a predetermined length. There could be various



Figure 4. Testing.

metaphoric representations to study its influences on message content and participants' reactions. Experimenting in various locations could lead to gaining a deeper cultural insight.

9. REFERENCES

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