Master thesis (E-level): Algorithmic Side Effects – An Interactive App for Audio Theatre

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Project area: Smartphone app, interactive audio drama, gamification, mobile tracking, privacy invasions

Supervision languages: Both supervisors speak English and Swedish.

Project outline

I'm looking for one or more students who are interested in working on an artist project using a smartphone app to create gamified, interactive audio drama pieces. The app will appear to the user as an audio player, enabling them to access a series of short audio drama recordings (‘PlayPods’), each dealing with some aspect of algorithmic control (e.g. online surveillance). Behind the appearance of an audio player, the app will generate various “side effects” related to the PlayPods and the listener’s own location and/or online profile. For example, after listening to a PlayPod about location tracking, the user may be sent a text message suggesting what they should wear, depending on the weather specific to their location. The app will involve a kind of artistic hacking that mirrors and makes use of commercial practices, but with the aim of generating critical awareness, giving the audience a direct experience of the power of algorithms in everyday life.

Technological framework

Students will discuss the particular side effects with the participating artist, investigate their technological feasibility and produce, together with the supervisors, a plan for their implementation.

The project will require the following activities from the students:

- Capture, investigation and specification of “side effects” and research how they will get technically implemented;
- Production of an app that can play audio, extract information from phones, and communicate with a “game controller” (either by sending messages to a human or by connecting to a server, depending on the output of the specification step above)
- Research, planning, implementing and testing selected “side effect” interventions with the artist, running a prototype of the app;
- Writing of a master thesis report summarizing development and prototype deployment.
Further background information on the PlayPod art project

The project is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), UK; Curve Theatre, Leicester; and Making Space Arts, London. It consists of 8 PlayPods, each coupled with instructions detailing the time and place in which they should be listened to. The PlayPod ‘Drowning’, for example, explores how Google’s search algorithms can steer and (re)direct thoughts and information, and should be played through earphones, while seated in a busy café. To access a recording, visit: https://soundcloud.com/makingspacearts/drowning

The PlayPod project is developed by Amanda Fromell, an AHRC PhD student at the department of Drama and Theatre Arts, University of Birmingham, UK. She also works as a writer and dramaturg in theatre, dance and TV, making work at the intersection of art and technology. To learn more about her work, you can visit her LinkedIn page at: https://www.linkedin.com/in/amanda-fromell-473482149/.

In terms of the future of the project, we hope to tour the app around theatre festivals in the UK and Europe, before investigating the possibility of making it available for purchase to a wider audience.