

I Seek the Nerves Under Your Skin

Joe Marshall

Mixed Reality Lab, Department of Computer Science

University of Nottingham NG8 1BB, UK

jqm@cs.nott.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

I Seek the Nerves Under Your Skin is a wearable audio performance which uses the intense physical activity of sprinting to alter the state of mind of a person listening to a poem. Running hard causes their state of mind to echo the intense emotions of the poet who is performing the poem.

Author Keywords

Art, Interaction, Poetry, Running, Wearable

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.5 Sound and Music Computing

General Terms

Experimentation, Human Factors

INTRODUCTION

A growing number of games and interactive art works make use of high levels of physical activity. These range from commercial games such as the Nintendo Wii Fit [7], a combination game and fitness trainer, to research and art works such as the interactive, heart controlled game 'Ere be Dragons' [2] by art group Active Ingredient, heart controlled space invaders [11], GPS virtual racing [5], and virtual, physically controlled boxing games [4, 8].

The systems described above all use a game or other enjoyable activity in order to motivate people to take exercise, and have been evaluated, at least in part, on their ability to cajole people who do not take exercise into taking exercise, or in terms of how 'good' the exercise they encourage people to take is.

By contrast I Seek the Nerves Under Your Skin uses intense physical activity as an integral part of an artistic experience, in a similar way to the way that the mosh-pit is an integral part of being an audience member at rock and punk performances. Exercise is used not to attain some social good, but to alter the mental state of participants.

Physical activity has long been known to have an effect on mental state, for example the 'runner's high', a state of euphoria that is experienced after a long period of intense exercise such as a running race or a sporting game [6]. The interaction between art and physical activity has also been studied, particularly with respect to music used to alter the performance of athletes [9]. Music is explicitly used by sports people to create particular states of mind [1]. These findings suggest that the careful coordination of states of mind created by art and states of mind created by exercise

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has potential to be extremely powerful.

Psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi [3] describes an 'autotelic experience' or 'flow' as a state which people reach during an activity in which the activity becomes rewarding in itself. Athletes often describe this state as being 'in the zone', where total concentration on an activity makes the activity become a single flowing action in which they do not have to consciously perform the constituent actions. This project aims to create a single 'flowing' interaction with the work, rather than a disparate set of exercise actions and art appreciation or interaction.

The Performance

I Seek the Nerves combines poetry and running into a single intense experience, which was inspired by a combination of running and art appreciation first experienced by the author whilst on a trip to Athens:

"I saw a steeply pointed hill, covered with a dense wood, straight in the middle of the city, as if it had been dropped there. Having slightly masochistic sporting tendencies, I decided that it would be good to run from where I was to the top of the hill. As I got closer and closer, it appeared the hill was rather large, and that this might be harder than it looked at first. As I started to run up the hill, it turned out even harder, the hill was so steep that the only way up was a steep set of steps through the woods and finally up the side of a steep cliff. Cresting the last of the 500 steps running up the hillside, I suddenly came out into a small flat area, perched on the very top of the hill, with a tiny chapel. On entering the chapel, the walls were covered in ornate paintings and carvings, the air was heavy with incense and old ladies queued to kiss the silver statue of a saint. The intensity of these sensations was made stronger by the exhaustion I was experiencing having just run up a 250 metre hill; this felt like a very extreme experience. I felt certain what I was experiencing was truly different to the experiences of those who had ascended the hill by using the cable car conveniently placed on the far side of the hill."

I Seek the Nerves aims to make use of this combination of hard exercise and artistic experience in an interactive performance which can be run in any location, rather than requiring a big hill to work. It is based around a piece of performance poetry (Babelogue by Patti Smith [10]).

In the poem, the performer's shouting gets increasingly loud, fast, urgent and intense. The interactive element of this piece aims to encourage people to have to perform

intensely in order to listen to the poem. In this way, their mental state may itself become as intense as that of the poet.

This is done by linking the poem to movement. To hear the poem, a participant puts on a special jacket and headphones. The moment the participant starts walking, the start of the poem fades in. If they stop walking, or continue walking at the same speed, a small part of the poem plays, and then it fades out (and restarts again after a couple of seconds). If they accelerate, more of the poem plays, until they stop increasing in speed, at which point it fades out again. In order to hear the whole poem, they must continually accelerate until they reach a very high speed.

The poem lasts approximately a minute. Accelerating for this long is surprisingly hard, which means that most people will be unable to hear the full poem. Even for fast runners, accelerating up to a fast sprinting pace is quite hard to do. This encourages people to make multiple attempts at hearing the poem. The never-quite-finished experience is deliberately intended to avoid the work being interpreted as a game, with a conclusion, or a way of being able to win the experience. Instead participants are left feeling that there is always something more to experience if they could just push themselves slightly harder.

Physical Design

The technology behind I Seek the Nerves comprises a yellow high visibility cycling jacket, with a pair of headphones attached. The headphones are plugged into a Nokia mobile phone which is put in a waterproof front pocket of the jacket. This has the side effect of making the phone be non-obvious (in the first public run, several people asked what technology was being used, and were surprised to discover that there was a phone involved). It also avoids having to have any kind of explicit interaction with the technology – when the jacket is worn, and the person starts running, the poem begins. This is designed to be highly reliable, currently over 40 people have



Figure 1 The First Public Performance

experienced the work with 100% reliability of the hardware.

Previous Performance

I Seek the Nerves had its first public performance at the (re)Actor 3 conference, in Liverpool, UK. This is pictured in Figure 1. 30 people took part in the work, a high number given it was run on a rainy autumn evening. Participants ranged from regular runners to elderly and significantly less fit people. The poem clearly encouraged even those who did not usually run to push themselves hard, with several participants having multiple tries at listening to the poem.

Whilst it is hard to measure such things objectively (and no attempt was made in this initial performance), talking to people who had experienced the poem, it was clear that the level of intensity that people experienced was way beyond that of someone who had simply listened to an MP3 being played. People really felt a strong link between the poem and the exertion, helped by the choice of a poem which echoed the crescendo of their effort relatively closely, something that was noted particularly by participants who already knew the poem well.

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