

# The Living Room: A Narrative Installation Puzzle

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## 1 CONCEPT

“The Living Room” arises from interests in narrative gaming and theatre. It is designed as an entertainment experience that focuses on the cathartic release of built-up emotional tension, through the use of digital video and wireless technology. In bringing puzzle gaming to the realm of a narrative physical installation, “The Living Room” is designed to take the user through a spatial journey of challenge and reward, suspense and revelation, tension and release. It aims to address the following questions:

How does mobile technology change the ways in which classical forms of cathartic entertainment, particularly theatre and puzzle games, can be realized?

How can one create a successful, coherent, and rich interactive piece using the combined elements of storytelling, game play, and mobile technology?



The Living Room, Parsons MFADT Thesis Show 2004

## 2 EXPERIENCE - DESIGNED

“The Living Room” is a narrative puzzle installation. Players take part by moving panels with LCD monitors in an effort to solve a whodunit murder mystery. When all three panels are positioned correctly over clues depicted on the floor, video ‘memories’ are triggered with which you are able to unravel the mystery. Through the position change of the panels, one’s experience with the space changes in every scene. Ultimately, the installation functions as a giant physical puzzle that houses a narrative puzzle.

In game structure, “The Living Room” is similar to a text-based adventure game, with segments of narrative intercepted by puzzles. It imposes a loose role upon the player, as the child witness of a murder. Players begin by entering the 12’x12’ space and receiving a set of general rules. Through experimentation and teamwork, players discover the game system and work their way through the narrative by discovering and remembering clues to trigger video sequences. Each of the scenes is viewed through the three panels as if through windows, taking the players through the

events of the day of the murder. As the puzzles get more difficult, the spatial layout of the screens becomes increasingly non-traditional and encourages more interaction with the physical space. Each scene takes place in the same room (the living room), giving the players greater knowledge of that room as the game progresses. Similarly, the objects in the floor drawings correspond to where they are viewed in the space of the room, allowing a virtual room to arise from what is in reality an empty space. Both narrative and temporal information is location-based, providing the player with a fragmented narrative experience through space and time.

“The Living Room” uses familiar mechanisms to guide the players through the unfamiliar experience. An investigator acts as the game guide, providing hints as players try to work through the puzzles. The story is that of a whodunit murder mystery, with straightforward motives to enable quick recognition of plot points and the instinctive desire to solve the mystery. The use of puzzles is meant to rouse this instinctive desire as well, creating a tension that seeks resolution and satisfaction. What arises from this project are both expected and unusual interactions and problem-solving techniques, as described in the real-life observation of the installation.

## 3 EXPERIENCE - OBSERVED

The installation ran in both New York, at the Parsons MFADT Thesis Show in 2004, and in Berlin at the Transmediale festival in 2005. In its first iteration, the installation was run on an appointment basis, with 2-5 players and my presence as moderator. In its second iteration, the installation was run in a more freeform manner, with numbers varying from 1-20+ and my sporadic presence as a moderator or as an anonymous observer. What follows are my observations regarding user interaction in both instances.

The most successful interactions arose when players were intrigued but not overwhelmed by their frustration. If players felt that the puzzles were too difficult (and likewise, too simplistic), or if they did not know what response to seek in this unusual environment, they quickly lost interest and did not engage. When a satisfying balance of intrigue and reward was met, players took a dedicated interest in the piece, and usually saw the entire piece through to completion.

Players interacting with the piece were constantly working together, with a dialogue and agreement necessary to allow puzzles to be solved in a logical and systematic way. They wandered the floor in thought, examining the available clues, conversing with one another about potential solutions. The project successfully pulled strangers together in a collaborative effort, with ideas being sought and offered. The spatial nature of the piece forced movement even amidst the most passive of spectators. The project also succeeded in linking time with space, with players remembering events through the positioning of the scenes.