

# **Designing a Responsive ‘Immersive’ Story Experience: Racism and the Sonic Representation of the Stephen Lawrence Murder**

**Tahera Aziz<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Immersive storytelling has recently gained popularity as a technique for interacting with audiences, typically providing experiences favouring visual media through 360-degree video, virtual reality, etc. This paper investigates the potential of using a multi-channel sound-only experience to explore the issue of racism in society by revisiting the murder of Stephen Lawrence, in 1993, and the media and public debates generated by the case. Fusing the dimensions of sound, storytelling and computer-mediated interactivity, the practice-led research involved developing a prototype for a responsive sonic story environment based on the case. The prototype was tested on an audience and qualitative data, based on in-depth interviews, was collected. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed, with reference to the dimensions of experiential engagement proposed by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009), to gain an understanding of audience engagement with the story environment. The paper illustrates the role that artists/designers can have in providing new insights into and/or understandings of real life and lived experience.

## **Keywords**

multi-channel sound, storytelling, interactivity, audience engagement, anti-racism

---

<sup>1</sup> London South Bank University, [azizta@lsbu.ac.uk](mailto:azizta@lsbu.ac.uk)

# **1. Introduction**

Immersive storytelling has recently gained popularity as a technique for engaging audiences, transforming audience experience of theatre, games, documentaries, advertising and journalism (Arrow 2016: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)). The current preoccupation with blending virtual reality technologies with filmmaking promises to satisfy a growing mass-appeal for unique and individualised, embodied narrative experiences. This paper focuses on the development of a responsive, sound-only story environment; an ‘immersive’ form often overlooked because of the primacy of visual storytelling. Building upon a rich body of work concerned with dramatising real life – ranging from the verbatim plays of Tricycle Theatre (e.g. *The Colour of Justice*, 1997) and the ‘re-enactment’ work of Jeremy Deller (e.g. *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001) and Rod Dickinson (e.g. *The Waco Re-enactment*, 2004) – it seeks to illustrate how artists/designers can harness multi-channel (surround) sound and computer-mediated interactivity to offer new insights into and/or understandings of real life and contemporary lived experience.

Focusing specifically on a piece of practice-led and applied research, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the paper explores the potential to develop innovative ways to engage audiences in a dialogue about racism, framed by the media and socio-political debates surrounding the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. After highlighting the significance of the case to British public life, I provide an overview of the research involved in developing a prototype for the multi-channel, sonic story environment. Utilising the dimensions of experiential narrative engagement offered by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009), I discuss findings from analysis of the qualitative feedback elicited following audience interaction with the prototype.

## **2. The story of Stephen Lawrence: a murder that changed a nation**

Stephen Lawrence was a black teenager who was murdered by a group of white youths in a ‘completely unprovoked racist attack’ (Cited in Macdonald 2003: 45), near a bus stop in southeast London on the evening of 22 April 1993. The case was propelled into the media spotlight in 1997 after an inquest verdict into his death. Between 1997 and

1999, there was unprecedented coverage of the murder in the British press, with numerous television documentaries and current affairs programmes dedicated to the case, making it one of highest profile racist killings in contemporary British history.

The Stephen Lawrence Public Inquiry, published as the Macpherson Report in 1999, sparked intense public debate about the policing of the black and minority ethnic community and the nature of racism in British society. The judicial review not only revealed the violent nature and abhorrent racism of the suspects, but also exposed the failure of the Metropolitan police to investigate the murder because of racism within its ranks – institutional racism<sup>2</sup>. The report precipitated cultural change, transforming police attitudes towards race relations and police accountability; the partial abolition of the ‘double jeopardy’ law paved the way for the conviction of one of the five suspects in 2012 (Quinn 2019: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)).

### **3. Towards a recontextualisation the Stephen Lawrence murder through sound**

Conceptually, the practice-led research draws upon the ‘violence hub’ narrative format – where a violent incident is placed ‘at the cent[re] of a web of narratives that explore it from multiple points of view’ (Murray 1997: 136) – to position Stephen’s murder at the heart of a sonic hub in which the audience experiences a reconstruction of events from a number of different perspectives such as that of the victims, bystanders, police, etc. Murray offers a persuasive argument for using the hub to promote audience engagement:

The retracing of the situation from different perspectives leads to a continual deepening in the reader’s understanding of what has happened, a deepening that can bring a sense of resolution but one that allows for complexity of the situation and that leaves the moment of shock unchanged and still central.

---

<sup>2</sup> Institutional racism is defined as ‘the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people’ (Macpherson 1999: 6.34).

The decision to work solely in sound flowed from a deep-seated ethical and creative difficulty with employing visual modes of representation in the reconstruction of the murder given the traumatic nature of the attack. The inherent qualities of sound as a complex, multi-discursive, immersive and event-oriented medium made it a perfect vehicle for retelling the Stephen's story (Altman 1992). Chion (1994) describes how the omnidirectional and reflective properties of sound make it difficult for us to reliably place sounds in space. The privileging sound over image offered the opportunity to use this property to good effect: to incorporate a level of ambiguity in the interpretation of events, in keeping with the attack itself, which was sudden and short-lived. The conceptual framework provided a creative mechanism for deepening audience engagement with the complex and multi-layered narratives associated with the case.

## **4. Methodology**

The methodological framework employed was that of developmental and applied research; taking an existing narrative format – the violence hub – and adapting it to develop a unique, multi-channel, sound-only story environment based on the case. The programme of research proceeded through four interrelated stages, with prototype development, testing and evaluation involving an iterative process.

### **4.1 Developing the 'story' substance and structure**

The Macpherson report was a primary source for developing the 'story' substance, providing detailed witness accounts of what happened from the moment of Stephen's death. A close reading of relevant chapters was undertaken to identify the key sequence of events associated with the murder and its immediate aftermath. A timeline was constructed of what happened, who was present and the location where the activity took place (Fig.1). This visual approach offered the scope to unearth alternative or oppositional accounts in response to those that had dominated the mainstream media. For example, the report revealed that the widely-publicised claim (propagated by the Metropolitan police) of a 'wall of silence' with respect to witnesses coming forward to give evidence was in fact false, stating that the police had enough evidence to make arrests within 48 hours of the murder (Macpherson 1999).

|       | Three eye witnesses (bus stop)                       | Stephen Lawrence                            | Duwayne Brooks                       | The five murderers | Mr & Mrs Conor Taafe | PC & Mrs Geddis |
|-------|--|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| 22.30 | Joseph Shepherd, Alexandra Marie & Royston Westbrook |   |                                      |                    |                      |                 |
|       |  | Arrives at bus stop in Well Hall Rd with DB | DB looks to see what time bus is due |                    |                      |                 |
|       |  | Goes to mouth of Dickson Road               | Between Dickson Rd & roundabout      |                    |                      |                 |

Figure 1 – An extract from the timeline (colour-coded) recording people, location and ‘action’

McKee suggests that ‘story is born in that place where the subjective and objective realms touch’ (1999: 147). Gaps in the documented accounts were noted and this triggered a series of perplexing questions that filtered into the ‘story’ substance: Apparently, there were three eyewitnesses at the bus stop (Fig.2). Why did they get on a bus after the witnessing the attack? Was it because they thought Stephen was okay after he managed to get up and run across the road? Other questions related to the police response on the night: failure of the police officers to give Stephen basic first aid as he lay dying on the pavement, the poor treatment of Stephens’s friend Duwayne Brooks at the murder scene, etc. The subjective act of ‘witnessing’ became pivotal in retelling Stephen’s story, and an important mechanism for tackling the issue of racism head on.

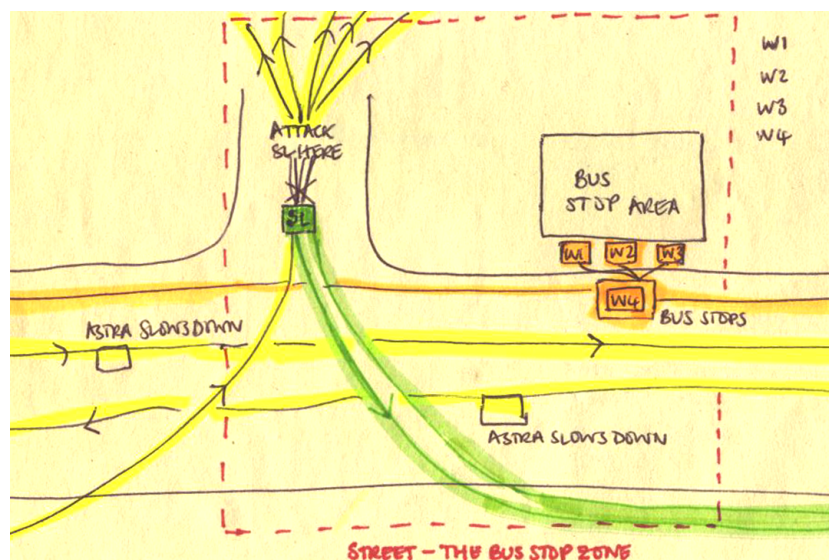


Figure 2 – Visual mapping of the location where the attack took place in relation to the eye witnesses at the bus stop

Once the main ‘story’ elements were identified, the dialogue and ‘action’ were devised with a group of actors, and focus shifted to determining the interconnections between scenes in readiness to map the internal architecture. Cobley explains how the use of a non-linear structure can allow for ‘alternatives within the body of the narrative’ (2001: 203). Whilst an expansion of the storylines was desirable, maintenance of a sense of narrative coherence was paramount; crafting the individual storylines went hand-in-hand with addressing the complexity of the narrative structure. This approach to developing the story architecture made it possible to re-present different perspectives on events.

## **4.2 Experimenting with audio recording and compositional techniques**

The scenes and multiple storylines were recorded using simultaneous, multi-channel audio recording techniques. Up to six actors were kitted up with portable digital audio recording devices at any one time, and synced close recordings of their voices were captured as they performed the action. These experimental audio recordings, in which the spatial relationship between the characters was retained, provided the audio material with which to structure audience experience from different perspectives.

A range of multi-channel compositional techniques were utilised to develop the prototype. Binaural field recordings, captured on location at the bus stop at night, were used to immerse the audience in sounds of the street and the ebb and flow of passing traffic. The multi-channel recordings of the dialogue and action were then reassembled and placed within the multi-channel sonic environment to mirror the position of the characters for each scene.

## **4.3 Programming responsiveness into the system**

Careful consideration was given to degree to which the audience could influence the content of the story (Nakevska et al 2014). Given the uniquely sonic or acousmatic<sup>3</sup> nature of the prototype, the challenge was to explore the potential to change audience

---

<sup>3</sup> Acousmatic refers to sounds that can be heard without seeing their source of origination. The term was theorised by Pierre Schaeffer in *Traité des objets musicaux* (1967).

‘point of audition’<sup>4</sup> or listening in both the spatial and subjective sense (Chion 1994), whilst maintaining narrative coherence and flow. As sensor-based interactions offer new opportunities for enhancing audience engagement (Rogers and Muller 2006), experimentation with real-time processing software (MAX/MSP) and photosensitive motion sensors (coupled with infrared lasers) was undertaken to introduce responsiveness into the system. The motion sensors were programmed to randomly trigger one of a number of storylines within a specific timeframe (Fig.3).

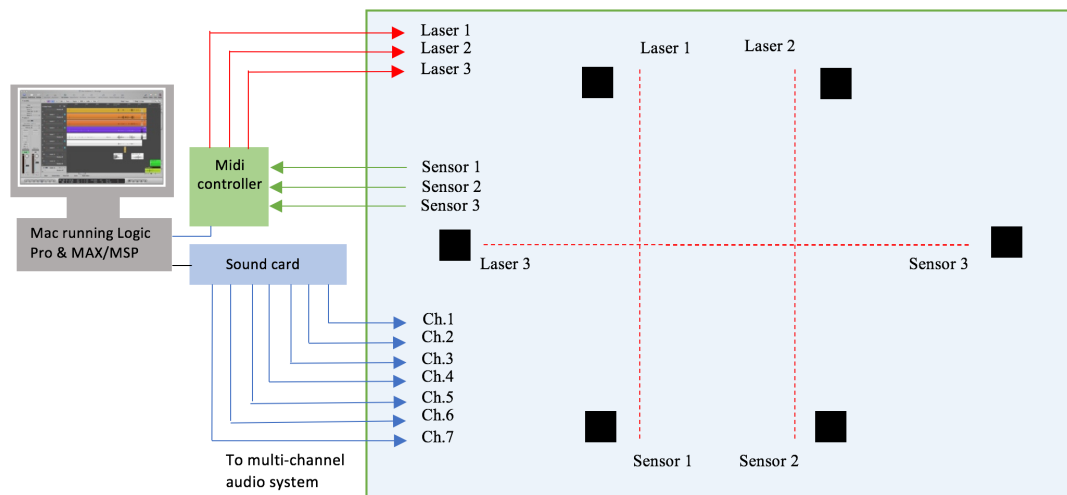


Figure 3 – A diagrammatic representation of the system architecture, including sensor configuration

#### 4.4 Testing and evaluation of the prototype

Fifteen participants were invited to experience the prototype and qualitative research methods based upon in-depth interview techniques were employed to elicit each participant’s perspective on the experience (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). Specific questions were asked about their perceived position (spatial and subjective) in relation to events and their sense of immersion. Analysis of transcripts of the interviews was undertaken using thematic analysis, and this included considering the four aspects of experiential engagement – narrative understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement, and narrative presence – proposed by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009).

4 Referring to point of audition, as described by Chion (1994), where ‘spatial’ is the place from which the audience member hears the story ‘action’, and ‘subjective’ refers to which character, at any given moment in the story, is hearing what the audience member hears.

## 5. Analysis and Discussion

Participants registered a high level of engagement with the story, and described their sense of immersion in various ways: ‘You feel like you’re...in the middle of it’ (Interviewee 3), ‘I felt surrounded’ (Interviewee 7), ‘I was totally immersed in it. I could totally take part in it’ (Interviewee 11). The experience provoked questions primarily relating to understanding the story itself, given the absence of visual cues. For example, in the extract below, a participant focuses her attention on why the witnesses didn’t go over to help Stephen:

I thought where is Stephen’s body in relation to the people who were at the bus stop? Because I just wanted to know how come they don’t run over...I just imagine...they’re standing at the bus stop. They [Stephen and Duwayne] see people running towards them () so I imagine that they both started running () and then I can’t tell how much further down the road they were. Maybe they were quite far away because somewhere I’m trying to think what stops the people at the bus stop going over and having a look?

(Interviewee No. 11)

Participants identified changes in how they viewed their position in relation to events, as well as their emotional engagement with the story. One participant (Interviewee 8) clearly described a shift from being an ‘eavesdropper’, overhearing people talking at the bus stop, to becoming a ‘witness’ when the attack took place; the interaction provoked a range of feelings – shock, anger, frustration, helplessness and sadness – once the attack took place.

Busselle and Bilandzic refer to narrative presence as ‘the sensation of being present in the narrative world due to comprehension processes and perspective taking’ (2009: 325). The realisation that the attack was completely and utterly motivated by racism was a source of dismay, as was the racism encountered in the heated exchange between Duwayne Brooks and the police officer. Taking sides, a female participant describes her anger and frustration at ‘witnessing’ this scene:

It’s that loud and that emotional. It is right next to you. You think that you are right there...and, at one point I was so pissed off with the officer, I actually turned my



back () because I just thought: you complete asshole! I can't believe I'm hearing this (), and I had to turn my back because I was really pissed off () but you know you have to turn back in order to hear it properly, and experience it properly.

(Interviewee 5)

Participants commented on the uniqueness of the sound-only experience, reporting that this was heightened by the way the sound moved around them, particularly during the attack (Fig.4). A participant reflects on the power of the medium of sound to evoke mental thoughts and images when she says: 'it makes it more vivid to hear it and not see it. By hearing, your subconscious is left to [its] own devices' (Interviewee 5).

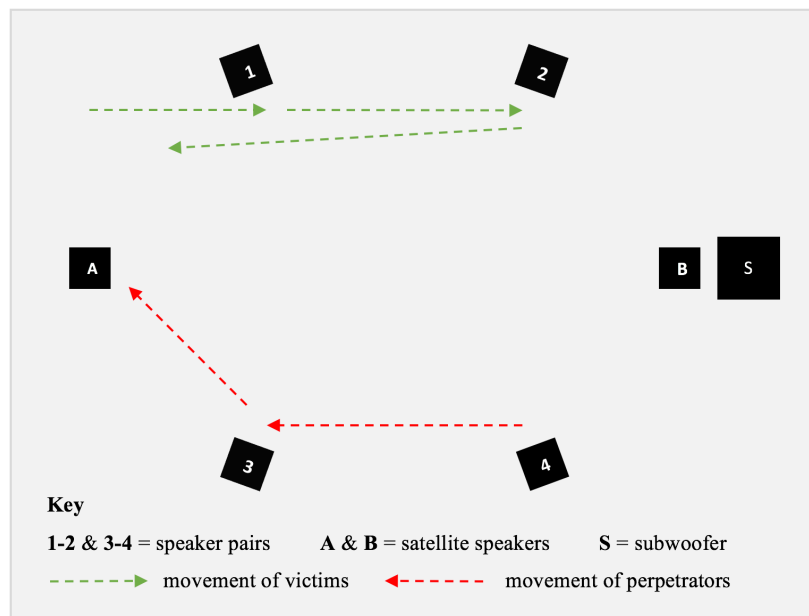


Figure 4 – Surround sound configuration showing dynamic movement of sounds moments before the attack

## 6. Conclusion

The original practice research sought to explore the potential of sound to re-examine the media and socio-political debates surrounding the Stephen Lawrence murder, and to find new ways to engage audiences in the retelling of Stephen's story and contemporary racism. This involved exploiting the unique qualities of multi-channel surround sound to develop a prototype for a responsive, sound-only story environment based on the case.

The findings from analysis of the audience experience of the prototype were extremely insightful, and indicated a deep level of engagement with the sonic story environment. A distinctive property of multi-channel surround sound is that it enables the distribution of sound in space to provide a three-dimensional illusion for the ears (Isaza 2014). Participant feedback suggests that this characteristic enhanced the sense of immersion and of ‘being there’. The fact that the interaction provoked such a strong physical and emotional reaction was totally unexpected, and serves to exemplify the multi-sensory nature of sound, and its ability to create a powerful embodied experience.

The act of witnessing emerged as an important strategy for revisiting Stephen’s story, and for framing audience experience of contemporary racism. Most participants reported an intense sense of shock at the moment they realised that the attack was motivated by racism. The absence of visual cues meant that participants generated their own mental images as events unfolded around them. It would be reasonable to conclude that any mismatch between what they imagined (mental images) and what they heard (‘witnessing’) amplified this experience. According to Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) transportation into the narrative occurs when there is a complete focus on the activity of comprehension. It appears that the sound-only nature of the story experience encouraged the audience to be more active in interpreting events.

While the audience were unable to alter the course of events, the responsiveness of the story environment offered them different perspectives on events. The harnessing of computer-mediated sensor technology was able to expand the scope for contemporary storytelling. In terms of the benefit of using the ‘violence hub’ as a conceptual model, the experience of navigating the sonic hub can be likened to ‘a physical manifestation of the effort to come to terms with the trauma, it represents the mind’s repeated effort to absorb it and, finally, get past it.’ (Murray 1997: 136).

To conclude, the prototype has been developed into a responsive 6.1 surround sound installation based upon the multi-channel configuration seen in Figure 4. Given the resurgence of racism in society today, the intention is to undertake research to explore the potential of the artwork to act as a catalyst for engaging young people in a dialogue about the nature of racism in contemporary society, and to promote anti-racist activism in schools and community spaces. This provides a rich and fertile ground for examining the role that immersive storytelling can play in bringing about social change.

## References

- Altman, R. (1992) (Ed.) *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Arrow, M. (2016) *Immersive storytelling is everywhere and there's no going back*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2016/may/31/immersive-storytelling-360-vr-technology-marketing>.
- Busselle, R. & Bilandzic, H. (2009) *Measuring Narrative Engagement*, *Media Psychology*, 12:4, 321-347.
- Chion, M. (1994) *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cobley, P. (2001) *Narrative*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Isaza, M. (2014) *Art of Surround*. Available at:  
<http://www.designingsound.org/2014/05/30/art-of-surround> [Accessed: 15/09/19]
- Jovchelovitch, S. and Bauer M. W. (2000) 'Narrative Interviewing' in Bauer, M. W. and Gaskell, G. (Eds.) *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 57-74.
- Macdonald, M. (2003) *Exploring Media Discourse*. London: Arnold.
- Macpherson of Cluny, W. (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*. London: The Stationary Office.
- McKee, R. (1999) *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. Methuen Publishing Ltd.
- Murray, J.H. (1997) *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York: The Free Press.
- Nakevska, M., van der Sanden, A., Funk, M., Hu, J. and Rauterberg, M.  
'Interactive Storytelling in a Mixed Reality Environment: The Effects of Interactivity on User Experiences' in Pisan, Y. et al (2014) (Eds.) *Entertainment Computing: 13th International Conference*, pp.52-59.

Quinn, B. (2019) *Macpherson report: what was it and what impact did it have?*  
Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/feb/22/macpherson-report-what-was-it-and-what-impact-did-it-have> [Accessed: 15/06/19]

Rogers, Y and Muller, H. (2006) *A Framework for Designing Sensor-based Interactions to Promote Exploration and Reflection*. International Journal of Human Computer Studies, 64 (1), 1-15.