

Miscellaneous documents

Interview project, May – July 2004

in conjunction with multiple MISCELLANEOUSalliances (mMa)

Edited transcript of a conversation between Jason Maling and Elizabeth Boyce regarding Torie Nimmervoll and Jason's participation in mMa

Elizabeth Boyce

Jason Maling

You mentioned that this project is going to be a manifestation of an ongoing project.

Yes. The outline of the *mMa* project seemed to suit a more open textured, variant, expanding approach. The nature of the project that we've been working on, we think could be workable in *mMa*. It will be a variation of *Splint*, which has been going for about four years.

I'd better give you a bit of background on where it came from. I do a lot of work on the relationship of fluid composition and play, and negotiated form and systems that organise the frameworks for those compositions.

For a while we worked very much with sets of textual rules - "Do this. You can't do this. You can do this" - in relation to certain objects and certain sites. I guess you'd call it a game or a type of theatre. The work was actually written for the internal dynamic less than the presentational form, but it evolved into having a dual purpose that would present a type of theatrical experience or ritual of some kind. But the real thing going on was that, basically, you had to play it. You had to play your way through the form and you understood it in those terms. It evolved from there into looking for different strategies for framing and bracketing activity that orders and structures a relationship between different groups of people.

When you talk about groups of people are you talking about participants in a project, or audience members as well?

It's the nature of the game that if you have the rules then you can be invited to play. But there was never a clear definition of where the work finished. You could watch what was going but you could also step into it, often at any time. So the audience in a lot of ways became spectators or players; they slipped in and out of it. Sometimes the work was very theatrical and obviously it did have an audience.

Was invitation was an important aspect of it?

Yes, and also allowing the system to have access points into and out of it. So when the people were actually working in these games or whatever, they could exit and other people could enter. There was never a total shut off.

It rolled into strategies for taking out as much control as possible but still maintaining a form of some kind. It moved away from sets of rules and into sets of objects or tools. The tools began to structure the activity and the play, if you like.

Splint grew out of that kind of investigation. I wanted a set of equipment which was very structured and very ordered and which had nothing exterior to its form, like a toy. You basically sit down and say, "This goes here. This does this", and so doing create a certain set of relationships. You say, "Yeah, ok. You're doing that. That means I can do that", and it evolves into a more complex thing.

Splint started off as a cellular toy, a little bit like Lego or Meccano in the sense that you have a set of elements which, if you combine them with other elements, build in complexity, but the actual object itself is a crude compass. So you have the basis [for an activity/game].

It's like a stick with a screw and a set of ropes. It's very mathematical. You have a canvas mat and it works in one cell which folds up into a satchel or harness. It's made out of leather and it's very, very strong. It can be used as climbing equipment. But basically, you've got enough information or enough elements in the thing to be able to bracket or create any drawn or physical zone.

I really wanted a definition tool or a marker point tool, almost like a plotting instrument. As when you play, you first construct a boundary; you say, "This is where we're going to play." Or, as with a hopscotch court, you lay out the grid or the framework in which the activity takes place and where the exterior and the interior to the play

occur. In a sense this tool allows you to border and create the zones but the equipment you use to create the zones, you also play with. It can be combined into a drawing instrument or a mechanical instrument (you can fit them together to build winches for cars and those sorts of things). You can also use it just very much as a conceptual tool, a visualising tool.

It started off with a very limited amount of equipment and I just started experimenting with this equipment in different sites. We would turn up to a part of a city and start working with a group of people. It was never specified what it was supposed to do. It was always seeking definition through its use, never saying, "This is how you use it." It was very open textured kind of thing. You could do a lot of different stuff with it.

We built an informal network of people around it who were interested in being part of its ongoing development. We made more equipment for it. It became more involved. It went through a lot of trial use. We'd say, "What is it that's actually useful about the thing that we're doing." We made notes and drawings and, as that went on, the equipment went through stages of generational remodelling. It adapted to what it needed to be. It kind of has evolved through...

Through use?

Yes. It's onto its third generation now and obviously at each stage it got more refined and so did the understanding of how to activate and structure things. It's in a way looking for what it takes to create, as loosely as possible, some kind of play platform without definition. What sort of activities make the form pull together and what leaves it open and how the dynamic shifts: it was a project that set up to understand that better and explore the possibilities in a very structural, geometric sense. It's now evolved in several ways.

One strand seems to have gone down a much more experimental performance line. Torie Nimmervoll and I have trained together for several months in a freeform compositional way and staged it in such a way that in performances we basically structure activities and use this thing just as a defining and framing tool. It just frames some content and it moves and rolls.

We've used it in a social play way. We've done 24 hour non-stop rolling navigational things through the city where we use this tool as a way of defining urban space and as a kind of navigational strategy

which re-orders people's activities and will then just continue. We carry logbooks and things like that.

It's also headed down an educational line. It has been used for institutions who say, "Can you design us a workshop or activity using this approach and using these tools to address some sort of concern or content?"

When we get asked to do something, which seems in keeping with that, we try to offer the tool as a platform that might be useful in its approaches to other people and I guess that's what we will be doing with the *mMa* project. We'll say, "This is a very versatile instrument. It has a history of use, which has attempted to address things in a modelling form, a visualising form, an actual play form and a constructed form. Is it useful for any of [your] objectives?" So we're offering it, more or less, as a tool and a set of strategies.

We'd hopefully set up a dialogue of some kind and say, "Is this useful for you and how can we possibly take on board some of your ideas and explore them with the tools or add your concerns into the ongoing [project]".

There is a website for *Splint* [www.splint.info] that has an archive for all the ideas, a think tank and drawings and stuff like that.

It has a sort ritualistic cult-like feel, in some ways.

It has a really interesting relationship to community as mediated by objects. You think about enthusiasts such as Lego or Meccano enthusiasts. It's an activity that can create exchange and shared experience without people necessarily meeting.

Absolutely. The next stage of the project would be to add to the website a thing called Splint Club which is for anybody who has been involved to be able to contact anybody else. Ideally, in the future, it would be nice to have some kind of online community where people could say, "I've got an idea" and maybe even some small design interface online where they could plan out something, suggest it to a community of people and say, "Ok. Let's go to this site here and try to make this work."

There's a relationship between an imagined world online, or a purely fictional space, and then applying that into a negotiated, real space as well. It did seem to generate a little bit of a club when we were doing it more regularly in the city. That really interested me, that way of providing a network of connections or something. *Splint* is actually,

physically, a connection maker. In a very little sense it's a system and it mimics the neural pathways that you imagine could develop.

It really is only what people want it to be. It's hard to say what its...

What its purpose or its content is?

It's not really sure of itself, in many ways, until somebody wants to come up with a reason. Because it is a tool, you can't fake it. It has either to be of use or engaged with in some way which is useful or, really, it's not serving its purpose.

"Tool" is a perfect word for it in that sense. Is Splint the name of the tool?

Yes, that's what we called it. When I was designing it, the sticks in one cell all followed a mathematical ratio. The reason it's called *Splint* is that originally I wanted to be able to carry the equipment strapped onto [the body].

As if it were a splint?

Yes, and it had this stick and then a rope ran around it so it originally looked like a splint. It doesn't anymore but it could be used for that. It just grew from that.

The word has an additional content because of its relationship to the word "splinter" and "splinter groups".

Yes, it does.

So, in relation to Clubs, you're offering the tool for use and perhaps the members of the groups' expertise in their use of the tool as well?

Yes, absolutely. I guess Torie and I will form the basis of it but there are a lot of people in Melbourne who have kind of become part of or who have at some point used or been a part of something in relation to *Splint*. So, I'm hoping that over time; whenever it appears somewhere, there will be people who say, "I played with that once," and, "We did this with it." It might start to have that sort of open textured relationship and move away from a presentational thing into much more of an integrated kind of thing. I don't know whether it will ever get to that stage.

I suppose it just takes time and exposure for those types of things to grow.

Yes. Again, you can't force them in any way. They either just have to work or they don't.

It's an unusual activity in a social context where a lot of [leisure] activities are marketed activities. I was really interested to hear Posh Spice say on Parkinson that she wants her children to grow up in a normal way and have normal experiences. She wanted them to be able to go and see a film normally or go to McDonalds or perhaps to Disneyland and just walk around like normal children. I thought, "I went to the library and the park! I didn't go to McDonalds and Disneyland!" I thought it had a relationship to a world in which a lot of the activities that people engage in outside of work are mass marketed activities.

Splint is like a game that is marketed. It has aspects that are similar to marketed activities but it operates within a different system.

Yes. Most of the games you play or engage in for a leisure sense are actually quite marketed or constructed or mediated by some sort of institution. Even the toys children use, even a lot of the tools we have, have a definition which is absolute or quite clearly bordered, if you like.

There are toys (like Lego and various things such as a particular modelling tool) that do say, "You need to construct the game." You have an onus to construct the game and then you have to find a reason or a community for it to be interesting.

We did a workshop the other day with a group. I think they would have been about fifteen or sixteen year olds, about twenty of them. We were on an AFL field and we were using this equipment. In a sense, they were all designing games. We used a strategy that we call an imaginative drift. Somebody sets up a premise, somebody extends it, somebody extends that again. They log where they began with this game structure.

We stopped at one point and made the point that, "You're on a playing field. You're on a zone that somebody has defined because of an activity that they see as meaningful and it's play. It's no more than what you're doing here, except that you're positioning and changing those boundaries and the other one has just become more formalised. But there is no difference between this activity that you're doing and the one that got to become AFL."

As soon as you step outside of a playing field, when you're constructing coded spaces, you are in a sense overlaying your code over the top of one that is already there, whether it be a street or a square or a set of rules of use, if you like, which have to be negotiated and built into what you're doing.

With the participation and use of this tool by greater numbers of people in differing contexts, do you see it irresistibly becoming more formalised in the way that play has become formalised into sport, or do you see it exploding more?

I don't know. It's very sculptural, obviously. It's very difficult to not be precious about it because the equipment is hand made and there's only a limited amount of it at the moment. You always have to be repairing it. I think it's a facilitating tool, which is why it was built, and you have to continually remind yourself that it's a facilitator of the sort of thinking that it's looking at and not to get obsessed or fetishise the object, if you like.

A curiosity and an anomaly is that *Splint* will always be only as much as its form in some sense. I'm very interested in what it's shown me in terms of structuring play and dynamic and now I don't think you really do need those sets of equipment. In some ways I now see them as quite limiting. It may become very refined in what it does very well and it will continue to refine itself in those terms and maybe the thinking will detach itself from *Splint* and head off into another area or another project might get something started. I do think it's interesting to refine the strategies in keeping with that tool, in some ways. But I understand what you're saying. I think the explosion in thinking has to detach itself from the project at some stage. Nothing is so encompassing that it can be that, I don't think. But on the other hand, it's very nice to see it, in some ways, get better at what it is, find what it is very good at and refine that. That's an interesting process as well.

There's thought that there is a tendency for humans to move irresistibly towards the organisation of things and set form. So even if you aim to do something that is quite amorphous, it has a gravitational movement towards set form.

In the context of *Splint*, it actually takes a lot of focus and work to structure it. That's been really interesting, because you would have thought that immediately people will (and they do) start to organise. For instance, we worked with a group, informally, in and around the city whom, even after maybe thirty sessions publicly, still had not cohesed into any kind of form. It's surprising what it takes, actually, and often it takes a kind of conductor person or a prompter to say, "Ok. Pause there." I don't know. It's very interesting. Sometimes you'll get a dynamic with three people. The ultimate thing

for me that I really enjoy watching is when it does structure itself, it brackets the activity enough to keep it moving and always be suggesting further...

Without closing down further possibilities?

Yes. "What if we then roll it into something" and then, "What if we put that something into...?" So, it's always shifting but it frames that drift, if you like. That's the thing that I like, but it goes both ways. Sometimes, it takes an awful lot of effort to get any kind of structure out of it and sometimes people can play together for hours and you'll always get one obsessive person saying, "No, no, no. You have to do this. We have to do it right".

I haven't discovered any pattern or rule. I guess it's like having a conversation with somebody. You can work with a group of people and they will have nothing going on. You'll change the group and everything will go on and the way you prompted it hasn't changed. It's just the group dynamic and that I find a really good kind of responsive training, if you like.

It has issues of pedagogy and communication in it because you are framing an activity. How little or how much you remove yourself from it or put yourself in or whether you're acting as a person that's defining too much or leaving it too open... Engaging a dynamic in a group is very interesting, and when to leave it alone, when to enter into it, I don't know. It became very clear with *Splint* that if the group isn't working it does require a certain overlay of order, or at least a sort of bare frame of, "This is the space you've got. This is the objective for the first half an hour," or whatever, and then the play kind of evolves inside that. But, patterns, I couldn't put my finger on, in terms of whether it's presented a clear [indication] of, "Yeah, that's what activates it", or whatever.

There's an interesting aspect of amateurism and expertise involved in your relationship to the participants as well.

Yes, absolutely. It's a very difficult project to be professional at. Very difficult! It is perpetually experimental in some ways. It never really has a way of being cohesively presented and I like that about it. It's always unstable and I enjoy that approach in a way.

When I pitch it to schools, which have seemed to be quite interested in it as an activity, I've had to make a flyer, and try to talk but often it will take video and a meeting and an information book and even then it's very tricky to get it across. It is pretty

unusual and in a lot of ways it's not anything until it becomes something. And that's a valid kind of exercise in itself.

In relation to Clubs, have you offered it in such an open form before to a group of people undertaking other activity or has it mostly been in the context of schools or other projects?

No. It's had about four different projects in a gallery sense. We did a project in Portugal in Oporto. It was part of a performance festival and we were all foreigners, part of the festival, coming into the city. I'd never been there, I didn't speak any Portuguese and we thought, "Let's use this as a platform or framework to establish some kind of play network". We did a 36 hour kind of performance where we invited whoever came. We did three public, almost conferences, where at the start of the 36 hours, in the middle and at the end, we said, "Look, this is nothing until you join us and then we'll go off from where you do this and then we'll come back." We kept a rolling log or map in the space where people recorded what they did.

It asks too much commitment in many ways, and the best people we found were just people we encountered in the streets and [places] like that who joined us for an hour and then moved on.

We haven't really nussed out how its going to function in Clubs but I hope that it's much more open than that. I need to find out also what other people are thinking and what the best strategy will be. I'm hoping that Torie and I can basically frame the process in some way which is invitational. The tool will obviously be a tool in the space and maybe the website will be available for people to log onto and add to. Then maybe the process would just be a matter of us discussing and exploring with other people. I'm not sure. Maybe Torie and I might explore one or two things that we're interested in, in a more performative sense, but as a whole project I'm hoping that it will be sculpturally present but usable, basically as a physical tool, and a mental approach, if you like.

In fact, it sounds like the project is structured for exchange and connections to commence within the time and the space of Clubs that might continue afterwards.

And obviously it can be taken anywhere in the city, but it will be using Clubs as base for its dispersion, if you like, or its ongoing collection of possibilities, so whether people use the tool as a physical, sculptural, building thing within the space or whether they use it as a simple way of plotting out a circle to do some other activity, it's open to that kind of use. It will be interesting to see how it will shift and adapt or whether it will just sit on the wall like a nice, pretty object. It will be interesting to see how it does get used and also whether the objectives of the project are actually a reality. Are people going to work together? Are they going to be very defined about what they want? I don't know and I'm interested to find out.

Will exchange actually take place, or will projects be very discrete, traditional presentations of things?

Yes. In my past experience, there's a certain idealism to process which never quite meets the reality of process in the sense that people require certain logistics and parameters to be able to realise things, and often truly open textured things require a very, very clear and mutually understood platform. And that's a hard thing to find.

I think, in fact, your project lies particularly in the relationship between structure and lack of structure. It's perhaps not a dichotomy between those two things, because there are different kinds of structure, but the structure that you set up allows something that would be considered non-structural to thrive or it might not.

That is, I guess, its principal concern: how you can have a structure which is fluid but still remaining very structured and very defined.

...enabling an activity to take place, as opposed to not.

...and whether at times its form becomes overbearing or not bearing enough.