

Transcript of Episode 1: Entering Soma

Guide for Reading Transcript

SFX: Sound effects.

Clarice: Clarice Hilton

Jo: Joseph Hyde

Tom: Tom Mitchell

Holly: Holly Thomas

Lisa: Lisa May Thomas

Harsha: Harsha Balasubramanian

SFX (Intro music): String instrument playing notes of a chord, with the last note bouncing on every repeat. The music moves between left and right ears.

Harsha:

Welcome to the Soma Project Podcast, a series that goes behind the scenes with the creators of Soma, a participatory performance that uses interactive virtual reality (or VR) technology. Join the team as they reimagine access to VR by exploring what lessons we can learn from multisensory performing arts and disability culture. My name is Harsha Balasubramanian, and like you, I'm here to listen *in* to the making of Soma.

In this episode, we'll be entering Soma: asking what *is* it and *who* is making Soma possible.

SFX: Intro music returns for a few seconds and fades out.

Harsha:

As proclaimed by an article in Fortune from January 2022, the performing arts are leaping into VR, with many art forms including theatre and dance imbedding this digital technology in their interactive productions. VR involves putting on a headset, also known as a head-mounted display, to enter a 3D computer-generated environment that can be interacted with almost as if the world was physically there. I'm a PhD student at UCL, studying the experiences of artists who are trying to integrate VR in their practice. This is how I came to learn about Soma and was eventually invited to hang out with the creators, joining their remote development sessions during lockdown and their in-person workshops. My approach to observing the team at work centred my lived experience of visual impairment and my immersion in related disability arts practices: I spent a lot of my time listening to what the practitioners are doing and encouraging them to describe what they are making. Producing this podcast has been *my* way of bearing witness to their process.

The people contributing to Soma are scattered, a distance which has felt amplified by restricted travel during the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK. However, I'm happy to report that I'm currently on my way to experience the work in progress with the team in Bristol, meeting some of them in person for the first time!

SFX: Inside moving train and announcement saying, "Welcome aboard this Great Western Railway Service to Bristol Temple Meads".

SFX: Buzzy atmosphere and two people saying, "Pronto!"

Harsha:

So what is Soma? Well, Soma is a three-part participatory performance which is grounded in a moving and sensory play with the materiality of strings- across physical, virtual and imagined

environments. Audiences may use a VR headset to interact with a multiperson, 3D, computer-generated environment, including a virtual rope. The visual parts of ; vr are opened up to audiences through sound and descriptions. Four participants and four witnesses journey together through this hour long experience, guided by four dancers. There are three phases to this journey, with equal emphasis placed on each phase: first, pre-entering the virtual environment; second, being in the virtual environment; and third, being in the after-space of the virtual environment.

That summary describes what you would get when you come to a performance of Soma. Behind the scenes though, there was a lot more going on, and now it's time to meet the people who can put us in touch with that part of the action.

Lisa:

I'm Lisa May Thomas, and I'M the Artistic Director of Soma and for May Productions, my company, based in Bristol. I'm a Resident at Pervasive Media Studio in Bristol, and I'm also a Quest Lab Network artist for Studio Wayne McGregor in London. The ideas and the scope for this project have been drawn from my practice and my research. So I've got a background and training in dance. I did my undergraduate training at the Laban Centre in London in the nineties. Since then, I've undertaken further training in contemporary dance techniques, in dance and movement improvisation, contact improvisation, and different somatic practices. I've directed, choreographed, and produced my own work, and this has ranged from making dance films, to site specific work, to immersive performance, and participatory experiences.

Harsha:

In the first phase of the Soma, the dancers guide the participants through a sensory tuning process which decenters the visual, emphasising non-visual ways of sensing before entering into the VR headset.

SFX: Pinging sounds.

Once in VR, participants are invited to attend to the sensory bodies and environments of both the physical reality they can "feel" and the virtual space they can see and interact with inside the headset. Then, once the headset is taken off, a post-VR environment supports the continuation of the sensory shifts that have taken place, offering space and time to explore, imagine and remember together.

SFX: Many hurrying footsteps moving from left ear to right ear.

Lisa:

Soma is very much not about saying let's take the visual information away, but about the possibility of inviting shifting of attention across the senses. When participants are in this world of the virtual environment, that there's this possibility of moving into that felt body and that felt physical sensation of being in a physical environment which isn't seen, and then this movement of attention between those two domains if you like. That forms the basis for how I set up the VR moment in Soma, and also what happens afterwards as well.

Harsha:

Throughout Soma, there are descriptions which can be heard crossing between the physical and virtual worlds. This borrows from a well-known practice called Audio Description (or AD), which involves verbally describing the visual content in performances for audiences who identify as visually-impaired. As I came to find out, in Soma, receiving and engaging with descriptions is a part of the experience and *not* just intended for visually-impaired folk. Therefore, the expertise

of visually-impaired people not only informed accessibility considerations in Soma, but it also influenced the aesthetics of the piece.

Excerpt from Audio Description (delivered by Holly)

We're standing in a large room with white walls, dark blue fabric curtains and a high ceiling. The floor is a dark brown wooden floor. At one end is a large arched semi-stained glass window, and it stretches from the floor all the way to the ceiling, allowing natural light into the space.

Holly:

I'm Holly Thomas. I'm a dance artist. I've worked quite a lot in the field of dance and also theatre. So my role in this project is to think about how the Soma world and the Soma experience can become more inclusive and be informed by the experience of visually-impaired participants. I think it's really worth saying that when people who have sight are in the VR experience, and they have the headset on, that is obviously covering their eyes. So they see what is in the virtual world, but they don't see what's in the actual space that they're moving in.

Excerpt from Audio Description (delivered by Holly)

A loop of golden thread drifts from the sky and draws in.

SFX: The description has sounds of plucked strings in the background, and as Holly's voice fades out, the sound of a breeze flows in, mimicking the movement of the thread.

Holly:

I think everyone in the team is very very generous. We do come from very different disciplines, and I would be the first to say I don't know very much at all about technology. We all have really different vocabularies that we use. Because I suppose we've worked together for a while, it feels like we are all really good at interpreting what each other might mean in that moment. So I might just say something as simple as- oh I just think if the sound came from here more, or if there was a way of it sort of behind me more in that moment-, I've got no idea if that's even possible myself. But I know the sound designers will very quickly have thoughts about how that might work or what might be possible.

SFX: Footsteps moving from left ear to right ear, and Harsha and Tom saying hello.

Harsha:

A little away from the dancers, off to one side of the room, I found the technologists making Soma. Their corner was easy to locate by just listening: it had a unique sonic signature- frantic typing, whirring laptop fans, hushed chatter, and even misbehaving headsets that spurted random noises.

Excerpt from Harsha Chatting with Sound Designers

Tom (to Harsha): Do you wanna have a go?

Jo: Yeah if I plug the headphones into here.

Harsha: Yup.

Tom: Is that working?

Tom:

I'm Tom Mitchell, I'm an Associate Professor at the University of the West of England in Bristol, and on the Soma project, I am working a lot on the interactive sound for both the physical space

and the virtual space, so the sound that's playing over speakers into the room where everyone is and the sound that is coming over the headset.

Excerpt from Workshop

Tom:

Probably the most interactive aspect of it was the sound associated with the rope, but there was a lot more going on with the sound. There was a lot of atmospheric sound, and there was also a composition that Jo did that was particularly important towards the end of the experience I think. Yeah it's important not to overlook those parts of the sound.

Jo:

My name's Joseph Hyde. I'm a Professor of Music at Bath Spa University. I've an MA in Sound Arts, and I'm really interested in the role of sound beyond traditional music or music technology in interdisciplinary projects, arts-science projects, and crossing over with the other senses as well. In my own research I do a lot of audio-visual work. I've always been interested in working with other artists and practitioners in other fields, in particular working with dance a lot, and through that, I've always been interested in sound as a physical phenomenon.

SFX: Footsteps, chatter, running water seeming to slide from high to low pitch, and someone asking, "Can you hear Water?"

Harsha:

All the way through the Soma performance, there is the exploratory capacity of a group improvised play and discussion between the dancers and participants, giving agency for each participant to move through the journey in response to both their individual and shared curiosities. What you just heard was an instance where sounds from the physical space are detected by someone wearing a headset; sounds cross between the spaces, seeming to blur and question the boundaries that separate them.

Excerpt from Workshop

Clarice:

I'm not sure if they have it in the old Quest, but the new Quest, the sound comes from the headset. So you can hear both the outside and the headset at the same time.

Clarice:

Hi, I'm Clarice. I am a PhD student, a researcher, and a creative technologist. In Soma, I have been part of the tech team, or as someone called us, the geek team. I've been creating the world and doing the interaction design of what it's like to interact with the string, how the string looks, and how the string behaves in that world. My PhD is looking at movement interaction and how this can be based in critical disability design and queer feminist theory, and looking at how machine learning might be able to be used in a process for designing movement interaction in immersive technology, and I'm looking at that specifically in the context of dance and art.

Excerpt from Workshop

Lisa:

I'm myself Lisa, and the dancers- Holly, Laila, Ania, Will and Alice. There are three creative technologists at the end of the room- that's Tom, Jo and Clarice. They're just there- they are

looking after the technology for us.

Lisa:

Through making this work, it crosses over between arts and science and technology, but also between industry and academia. There's so many different ways of thinking and methods and models for the approaches to making performance or exploring research questions in these different areas. It has been quite challenging to maneuver the project across these borders, but actually, it's really what I love. I love what comes from having a conversation about something that feels really integral to my practice to my body with someone coming from a very different discipline or very different sensibility and what comes from those conversations is for me is just super interesting. I'm very happy in these borderlands of collaboration and bringing in people from very different disciplines to explore a question together.

Harsha:

I would like to invite you to dwell with us in these borderlands, because in the next episode, the team will be asking what happens when we bring dancers into dialogue with VR.

SFX: Intro music returns and remains till end of episode, fading out at the end.

Harsha

Thank you for listening to the Soma Project podcast. You can find links to any resources referenced in each episode on the podcast page. If you would like to join us for real, please check out the Soma website for tour dates and how to book tickets.