

First Contact



First Contact is an interactive audiovisual installation

Designed to be experienced either individually or in groups of up to eight people

Rumours...

A dramatic sunset scene with silhouettes of a building and a bat-like creature hanging from a rope against a bright orange and yellow sky. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong glow and casting long shadows. The sky is filled with wispy clouds, and the overall atmosphere is mysterious and intense.

*Rumours are spreading. They talk of strange creatures inhabiting the night.
What are they? Where do they come from?
You are the first person to encounter this previously unknown life form.
How will you make first contact? How will it respond? How will you?...*

Lights in the sky...

High above you looms a large alien being, measuring over six metres across. It looks a bit like a spider, or an octopus, or something... It senses you are close. As you pass under its outstretched tentacles, you are illuminated by circles of light emanating from its body.

Its eight long limbs glow softly. Attached to the end of each limb there is a thin cord, reaching down towards the ground. Now could be a good time to run away, while you still can. But it draws you in...

You reach out and pull on the nearest cord. As you do so, the limb begins to illuminate, waves of colour pulse along its length, moving from the pointed tip and back towards the bulbous body in the centre. At the same time, the creature begins to emit strange, unfamiliar sounds – perhaps it is trying to talk, or perhaps to sing? It reminds you a little of whale-song.

As you pass underneath the creature you reach for another cord, which is attached to another limb. The ground around you is illuminated once more. Pulling on the cord, this limb now lights up and once again the creature emits a sound, only this time it is a little different. Coloured patterns of light begin to pass across the surface, in sync with the sounds.

Moving around, pulling gently on each of the eight cords, you realise they all have a similar effect on the creature. It seems to like it. Perhaps its time to find some more humans to help you...



Many hands...

Having gathered some more of your species, you now have enough hands between you in order to pull upon each of the cords attached to the creature's eight limbs. Each human is bathed in a circle of coloured light, emanating from the body. As each rope is pulled, the limbs begin to light up and pulse, in sync with one another. The sounds triggered by each person build in to a collage of sound, as if each limb were an individual instrument in some alien orchestra.

At this point the main body itself begins to illuminate, swirling patterns radiating across its surface. We have connected! Then we hear a voice. What sounds like the babblings of a young baby slowly begin to form in to intelligible words. It has a message for us...

But one of the humans gets a little too excited. Yanking hard on the cord, tugging the poor creature's limb a little too violently. It screams. The colour is gone from its body. The ethereal music is gone. Blindingly bright strobe light rains down on the humans below as deafeningly loud white noise fills the air. And then there is silence, and the creature plunges in to darkness. It stops responding to touch.

We are going to have to let the creature recover from the shock. And then perhaps gently start tugging on those cords once again. Perhaps the over vigorous one should step aside, give another human a chance to commune. Hopefully the creature may eventually be coaxed in to telling a little more of its story...

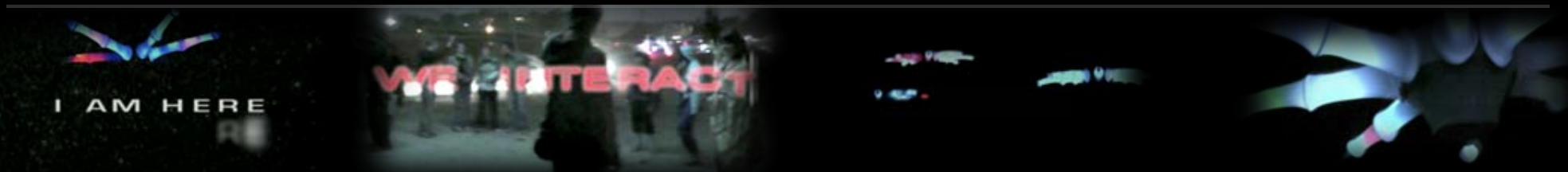


User Experience

As the installation is primarily an interactive lighting piece, with synchronised audio and projected video elements, it needs to be experienced either in a darkened room, or at night, if set outdoors. The sheer scale of the piece, the beauty of this strange object pulsing with patterns of light, the otherworldly sounds it emits as it hovers over the people below, is striking in itself. There is a palpable 'wow' factor to be observed amongst the audience. The mechanics of what is happening under the skin are hidden from the observer. This does not look or feel like any other 'audiovisual' installation. It does not feel like a piece of technology, more like a piece of living sculpture.

The real magic though, comes when the audience has a chance to interact with the piece. Each of the individual cords that dangle before the audience triggers a unique sequence of light patterns, video clips and musical effects. These cords are not simply on/off triggers – they are more subtle than that. The lights and sounds respond differently depending on how far and how quickly they are pulled. Each cord effectively controls its own musical instrument and light show. These individual 'instruments' have been designed to each look and sound good in isolation. But each one also makes up a part of a larger composition, in the same way that rhythms and melodies performed on individual musical instruments combine to form a complete piece of music.

In a fascinating self-organising process, strangers begin to perform together as they become aware of their contribution to the ensemble. There is no barrier to entry, as the only 'skill' required to participate is the ability to pull on a cord. This is a group interactive experience, people are creating a unique sound and light show for each other and for those around them. Perhaps after experiencing this shared process of creation, people may be less likely to want to be mere consumers of entertainment.

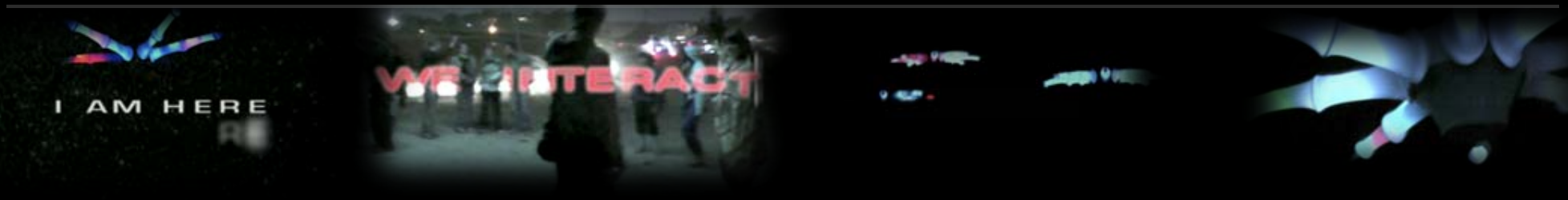


Evolution

The creators of First Contact have developed a number of different compositions for the installation. Each of these compositions consists of a series of eight interlinked lighting patterns, soundtracks and video sequences.

These different compositions allow one to evolve the user experience over a period of hours or days. Stories can unfold over time, or one can surprise the audience by having the installation react in a different way to how they remembered previously.

This concept of compositions also allows for the creation of site-specific experiences or pieces attuned to specific audiences, infusing the soundscapes with elements from particular musical genres, for example.



Technical Brief

First Contact is a large-scale interactive audiovisual installation. Its spider-like body measures approximately six and half metres from tip to tip - each of its eight limbs measure two and a half metres in length, surrounding a central body measuring approximately one and a half metres in diameter.

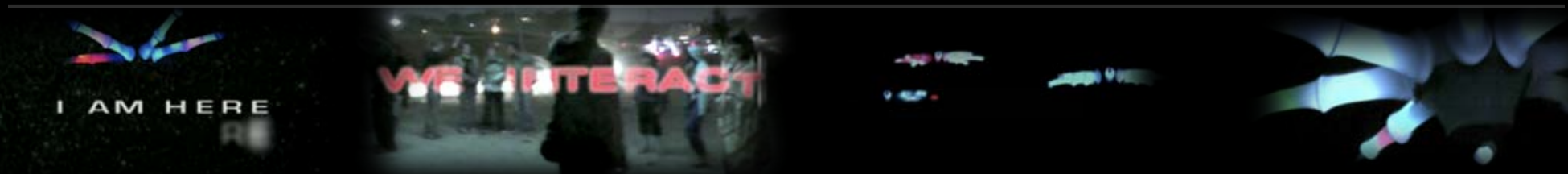
It is designed to be rigged at between four and five metres in the air. In suitable buildings it can be attached to the ceiling. Outdoors it can be attached to trees using steel wires. Where trees are not available, it can be suspended by means of steel wires attached to vertical steel posts, anchored to the ground.

The central body is made from wooden sections, the limbs from carbon fibre rods and wooden ribs. The body and limbs are encased in a tensile Lycra skin. Within each leg, beneath the skin are hundreds of individual of LED lights, in arrays of Red, Green and Blue. These arrays are individually addressable via the DMX lighting protocol and able to produce any shade of colour. The colour sequences of the LED arrays can be animated to produce moving patterns of light across the entire surface of the creature.

Located within the central body of the creature is its self-contained 'brain'. This is a bespoke design employing both off-the-shelf and custom-built hardware. The central processing unit runs a combination of commercial audio and video software, working in conjunction with custom written code. Outputs from the 'brain' consist of analogue audio, DMX lighting control and VGA video signals. Elsewhere within the body is array of audio speakers that emit the creatures various sounds. The body also houses an LCD video projector which projects moving images on to the Lycra skin of the creature.

The pulling movements of the eight cords are carried up and in to the tip of each leg, before passing along the legs to the central body. Sprung mechanical levers inside the body receive the movements from the cords. Attached to these mechanical levers are sensors which translate the movement of the cords in to control signals for the brain.

The whole installation is entirely self-contained and autonomous. It merely requires a single 240-volt mains power supply. As soon as it is plugged in, the system initiates itself, requiring no intervention from an operator. All the internal components have been battle-hardened and weatherproofed to survive outside in the elements, from extreme heat and dust, to heavy wind and rain. The installation has been designed from the outset with international touring in mind. It breaks down to be transported in two small plastic crates and a single suitcase.



The Creators

First contact is a truly international artistic collaboration. It was originally conceived by multidisciplinary artist Philip Mayer from the UK. The project was co-created by Philip Mayer and audiovisual and interactive artist Pedro Zaz from Portugal, in collaboration with tensile sculptor Du Gonçalves from Brazil.

Additional creative, technical and physical assistance was provided by: Simon Myers (UK), Tom Bassford (UK), Gabriel Godinho (PT) and Jorge Constantino (BR).

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WE INTERACT

