

From conflict to revolution: The secret aesthetic, narrative spatialisation and audience experience in immersive cinema design

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Abstract:

In 2014, Secret Cinema Presents ... *Back to the Future* ..., tensions emerged within a section of the audience who were not invested in the rules of engagement of the secret cinema brand. The secret location of the screening, the requirement to surrender mobile devices on entry to the venue, and subsequently to adhere to the explicit instruction to Tell No One confused, and frustrated some, many of whom were core fans of the *Back to the Future* franchise. In 2015, in the Secret Cinema Presents ... *Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back*, both the pre-event and main event experiences were imbued with themes drawn directly from the film and from the wider *Star Wars* storyworld – that of secrecy and rebellion. In this article we argue that the widespread acceptance and compliance with Secret Cinema's rules of engagement within this particular experience can be attributed to the evolution of the specific formula such that the chosen film affords a specific mode of engagement. The motifs of rebellion and secrecy central to the film fitted perfectly with the Secret Cinema rubric, and thus this ethos was supported and celebrated by audience members across the multiple online and offline spaces. We pay specific attention to experience design and scenographic strategies in these spaces – with a particular focus on narrative spatialisation – and explore how these configurations shaped the audience behaviour. We argue that Secret Cinema deploy an increasingly well tooled formula through which to both guide and develop audience literacies relevant to these novel experiences. There at least three literacies being called upon here to negotiate this form – the ludic literacy of navigating interactive environments, narrative comprehension of complex multi-stranded storyworlds and a meta cinematic awareness of film's construction.

Key words: Immersive cinema; event-led cinema; Secret Cinema; experience design; nostalgia; Star Wars

Introduction

The subject matter of our article – a large scale live cinema experience – poses particular challenges in the application of traditional, singular audience research methods. Drawing on our previous research (Atkinson & Kennedy, 2015a; 2015b), we move forwards with an audience research methodology which facilitates a more detailed and deepened engagement with a specific audience group, that offers a holistic insight into the highly complex, multi-layered and protracted experience under interrogation. In this case Secret Cinema’s 2015 rendition of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* – an experience which spanned 5-months (from the point of ticket sale to the attendance of the live event – which in itself was 5 hours in length). It ran from 4th June to 27th September in Canada Water, London and sold 100,000 tickets (each at £75) generating over £7 million at the box office.¹

The experience included a prolonged engagement in online spaces where participants received instructions on how to prepare for the event – which persona they would adopt, what clothes they needed to wear and what props were required to ensure a full and meaningful engagement on the night of the event. Participants were also invited to visit thematised physical spaces in the lead up to the main event, these included ‘Rebel Stores’ and a Secret Cantina night club (see **Figure 1**). At the pop-up shop near Brick Lane, London costumes and accessories such as scarves and badges could be purchased (and they were reportedly one of the top purveyors of scarves in the nation during this period²), and at the night club (housed in Hoxton Hall, London) participants could engage with aliens, Jawas and other members of the rebel alliance.



Figure 1: The Secret Cantina and Rebel Stores, which was open in the lead up to and throughout the main event.

Operating under the infamous ‘Tell No One’ Secret Cinema rubric, in which participants are encouraged by the organisers and the Secret Cinema fan community to keep their

participation ‘in character’ further problematises the research process of such an event, and the potential engagements between the researchers and the subjects. This presented itself as an issue (Atkinson & Kennedy: 2015a) where the researchers were discouraged from communicating with participants by Secret Cinema in the lead up to the *Back to the Future* event as it was deemed to be disruptive to the audience’s engagement during the lead up to the event³. A key analytical and methodological challenge is therefore our necessarily highly engaged and thoroughly embedded participation in the field of our research. However, this is becoming an accepted feature of research⁴ into increasingly participative contemporary media phenomena, as noted by Graves-Brown, Harrison & Piccini:

Whilst the traditional territory of archaeology is always and already the ‘other’ (Fabian: 1983), we necessarily approach the contemporary from within. We begin as participants, rather than excavators. Different participant approaches are possible, including what we might call interventions [...], participation in events [...], and engagement with communities [...]. (2013: 15-16).

Through the deployment of a multimodal approach for this particular event we are able to interrogate the following questions:

- To what extent does the control and design of the immersive cinema space (both online and physical) produce specific kinds of experience and behaviours amongst the participants?
- How does the aesthetic of secrecy pre-determine the selection of the filmic text and how does this shape the modes of engagement available for the audience?
- How far does this approach assume or frustrate a ‘playful’ subject as participant?
- To what extent are these experiences designed to depend upon audience expertise as readers of film whilst also extending the required expertise to engage the audience as participant, interactor, player and/or character?

Our aim is two-fold: to answer the questions set out above in relation to live cinema (and thus potentially offering a framework or lens through which to interrogate other forms of live experience); and to advance a methodology for approaching the study of audiences in these complex conditions of participation, immersion and interaction. To do this we draw on approaches from performance studies, game studies and film studies as these each offer helpful resources through which to address complex playful, performative, but also highly mediated experiences.

Methodology

Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based, in which to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion, both your own and that of others, that you're not quite getting it right. (Geertz, 1973: 29)

In order to capture, describe and analyse this complex 'live/lived' experience we have deployed a multimodal approach: combining elements of participant observation, microethnography, autoethnography, individual engagement with the event, group and shared engagements, critical/reflective individual writing (describing and analysing the experience), group feedback and further open discussion. These activities were further supported by the capture and analysis of online social media material and other contextual factors such as how the Secret Cinema marketing and participant pre-event interactions drew on and made use of concurrent public issues and debates in mainstream media. We visited Rebel Stores, the Secret Cantina, and attended the main event on two occasions and we also recruited and hosted a participant briefing and a subsequent focus group.

We are drawing on related work that is attentive to the specificities of interaction design and the highly individualised nature of this form of experience. The approach depends upon work developed and refined through analysis of video games as an 'event' and most specifically a form of attention that is described as 'microethnography'.⁵ To take the **event** as the primary object of study then is to look for the relationships constituted by, and constituting, hybrid and heterogeneous agents, rather than making assumptions about the primacy of any single element within the event. (e.g. story and character which are very often privileged in an analysis of audience experience). So, the study of a playful 'event' in these terms requires a description and analysis of ludic, cinematic, spatial, behavioural, textural and sensory elements of the activity along with an account for how these assemble and make possible new participant experiences. Understanding the **event** as a highly constructed, staged and yet also individualised aesthetic experience means paying attention to *all* aspects of the experience – including participant mood, expectations, dispositions, environmental factors such as heat, lighting, smells, tastes and more mundane bodily factors such as hunger, thirst and other aspects of physical 'comfort'.

In this methodology we are thus attentive to the whole embodied experience and draw on a notion of the aesthetics of experience, which is beautifully captured by Terry Eagleton as follows:

That territory is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensate surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that

arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world (Eagleton, 1990: 13).

For our analysis of the Secret Cinema's *Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back* main event, we carefully selected three male and four female participants to maximise the expertise we could bring to bear on the diverse elements of the designed experience. We selected according to our critical interest in the extent to which the spatialisation of the narrative is a key factor in Secret Cinema's approach to the development of these events. We actively sought out the participation of those with an understanding of architectural language and an ability to understand and evaluate the creation and manipulation of navigable, explorable spaces. We argue that this is a key feature of the Secret Cinema experience design, which we began to explore in our research into the *Back to the Future* event (Atkinson & Kennedy: 2015a), but here we extend this analysis through the recruitment of our participants with this architectural sensibility and spatial awareness.

We offer new and focussed insights into the impact of spatial, narrative and experience design upon audience engagements - which can be taken forward to inform the wider research project of the emergent phenomena of live cinema experiences and the resurgence of 'live' cultural experience more generally. Here, we offer a new approach to the audience research of complex immersive events, which could be extended to other interrogations within the emergent cultural 'experience economy' (Pine & Gilmore: 2011).

We position this work as clearly distinct from other work which looks at narrative and fidelity to a particular story and its characters, not because these elements are entirely absent, but because they are not the principle determinants in the specificity of our analysis of this particular experience design. Here we are paying attention to the aesthetic brought about through a deep attention to the production design and the spatialisation of the narrative as critical determinants of the experience. The characters and the story become part of what the participant brings to the event and to the set design that is lovingly reproduced/remodelled in particularly hard-sought environments/spaces (which are managed through Secret Cinema's own location department Secret Space⁶).

Therefore, the Secret Cinema model of experience design is currently distinct from other live immersive experiences although we would anticipate that this approach will ultimately be emulated by others seeking a similar success.

Our critical argument here is that this experience design shapes a particular kind of audience and subject behaviour where there is an oscillation between observer/participant leading to a complex hybridity that results in moments of disjuncture and fissures in the immersion. This experience design feels analytically more proximate to a game world spatialisation of a narrative (Jenkins: 2004) as distinct from TV /film/novel franchises or adaptations which are often more concerned with narrative coherence and character cohesion through either fidelity or experimentation – e.g. From *Sherlock* (TV Series, UK, 2010-) to *Elementary* (TV Series, US, 2012-). That is not to say that there are no cultural precursors and other experiences which share aspects in common with what is under

scrutiny here but the intersection of space/character and narrative architecture invites this hybrid analysis and this sense of distinction.

In what follows we examine in detail the location, spaces and scenography of the *Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back* main event and the secret aesthetic as critical determinants in the embodied experience of the participants.

Secret Cinema – location, spaces and scenography

Secret Cinema experiences have become best known for the spaces (both online and physical) that the events devise and inhabit. The production department has a dedicated webpage showcasing many of the previous spaces alongside a list of their illustrious sponsors. Synonymous with the Secret Cinema brand is their ability to build a prolonged and compelling sense of anticipation and online-buzz in the lead up to their events, and to source and animate these locations in elaborate set-dressings and intricate textual detail through which they bring the films “off the screen”. In both online and physical spaces, Secret Cinema have focussed their attentions to the creation of compelling, navigable and immersive extensions of the film’s fictional environment. Year-on-year these have become increasingly closer to the ordinary film set design in their careful reproduction and minutely detailed recreation of specific features such as landscapes, mise-en-scène, costumes and props. In this regard, the experience design emulates the process of production design and art direction for a feature film:

Art direction is a branch of architecture in which environments are built but seldom in their entirety and seldom to last. What the art director creates are spaces, facades and even entire towns. (Heisner, 1990: 1)

It tends to be these elaborate sets and distinctive locations that are foregrounded and celebrated by Secret Cinema themselves, their audiences and the associated press as a key defining experiential aspect. Therefore, it is the ‘disused railway tunnel’ of *Paranoid Park* (in 2007), and the aircraft hangar of *Prometheus* (2012) and the lavishly animated Farmiloe Building in Farringdon for *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) that are avidly and enthusiastically discussed. Significantly in this regard, it was reported that it was technical, health and safety, and *location* permissions problems that resulted in the delay of the opening of the *Back to the Future* event: a delay which led to the organisation’s most infamous bout of bad publicity (Atkinson and Kennedy, 2015b). This was a consequence of the high ambitions of the production design – this expansion of the film universe of Hill Valley was to include pyrotechnics, physical zip-wire stunts and multiple-action-vehicle scenes in order to achieve their most impactful levels of interactive spectacle yet.

Through this recreation of the entire set of *Back to the Future*’s Hill Valley in London’s Olympic Park, the Secret Cinema set not only recreated the space of the film’s setting, but also simulated the entire narrative timeline of the film – a significant temporal

dimension which we write about in Atkinson & Kennedy 2015a. Participants entered this spatialization of the film's storyworld through the actualization of the fictional locale of the film in which the chronological ordering of film's storyline is recreated through a carefully simulated topology. For example, the approach to the site is marked with a '2 miles to Hill Valley' sign, which leads the audience through Otis Peabody's farm (Marty's first arrival point in 1955 as he crashes the DeLorean into Twin Pines Ranch). The fabric and iconography of *Secret Cinema's* recreation of Hill Valley is notably drawn from the entire *Back to the Future* trilogy in which the 1955 version of Hill Valley is introduced in the first film, and then subsequently recreated and extended in the sequels. This provides a deeper and more expanded frame of reference from which Secret Cinema have drawn both textual and expositional detail.

In 2015, Secret Cinema took over a decommissioned newspaper printing plant in Canada Water and employed the talents of Piers Shepperd the Technical Director of the London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony, in order to transform it into the storyworld setting of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*. In the same way that the *Back to the Future* set drew from the visuality of the trilogy, the entire *Star Wars* storyworld/franchise palette was drawn from in order to provide the settings and the textual fabric of the space which expanded way beyond the boundary of the onscreen universe of *The Empire Strikes Back*. For example the Mos Eisley space and the Cantina were dominant features of the Secret Cinema setting, within which other multiple spaces were created in the building; including narrow corridors, small openings to crouch through, a cavernous aircraft hangar, prison cells, shipping containers, stairways, space shuttle interiors and a flying Death Star. They also incorporated a huge auditorium environment for the screening of the film during the latter part of the evening, with three separate screens, configured in an elongated corridor arrangement - necessary to accommodate the large audiences each night.

In contrast to *Back to the Future*, the *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* event set was a far more exploratory space. As described, the narrative world extended far beyond that of the ordinary film text, and one which didn't replicate the story arc/heroes journey of the film in the way that *Back to the Future* did.

This prioritisation of set, stunts and spectacle is indicative of the formation of a new cultural experience. In relation to cinema, Geoff King has noted:

The focus is on spectacle as spectacle rather than as something subordinated to a place within a narrative structure ... spectacle tends to be foregrounded especially during periods of innovation. (King, 2000: 31).

This focus on production design is in contrast to the approaches taken by other high profile and successful organisers of immersive experiences such as Blast Theory and Punch Drunk, who take an approach more closely aligned to the traditions and emergent practices of street and improvised theatre, historical re-enactments and live action role-play (For further research in to these organisations and their origins and cultural precursors and

contemporaries (see Chatzichristodoulou, 2015, Biggin, 2015 and Machon, 2013 & 2015). These companies foreground the performative aspect of the experience and are renowned for deft improvised acting and skilful interactive play and/or performance design. In these other forms, place is animated, remade, transformed or subverted through live physical suggestion, the careful staging of interactions and live performance more generally. Whilst these latter experiences involve and engage the audience as participants and require a deep affective interaction, they do not require a prolonged or elaborate preparation on the part of the audience (i.e. costume and prop acquisition) nor do they normally depend upon the adornment of the space by audience members in costume and 'in character'. In *Secret Cinema* by contrast audience members are simultaneously inculcated in to a narrative of fictional secrecy whilst also being recruited as *extras* to the production of the secret event itself. Audience members are simultaneously invoked as performer and spectator as they enter the set, and through this process complete and cohere the experience both for themselves and for others.

Exceptionally, Philip Pullman's *Grimm Tales* (Dir: Philip Wilson, 2015) and *Alice's Adventures Underground* (Les Enfants Terribles, 2015) were combinations of these two trajectories - high investment in location and set design alongside professional levels of performance and interaction design. For example, in the *Alice's* production participants were politely requested to attend in either black or red formal wear which then became a determinant in how their experience unfolded.

This attention and focus provides a cinema-of-sensation, where set design, special effects, costume, lighting, smells, sound and taste characterise the experience. Benedetto (2013) foregrounds the scenographer in the determination of a theatrical experience, and we would argue that this is relevant here:

A scenographer is a god of sorts creating the world through the shaping of the lighting, the objects, the colours and movements. Without structure we quickly spiral out of Descartes's universe into the blank expanses of a never-ending vacuum. Scenography as dramaturgical structure enables attendants to focus their attention on one aspect, on one sensation, and guides them through their experiences so that they can comprehend (Benedetto, 2013: 190).

What we experience is *Secret Cinema's* evocation of a navigable, thinly interactive but immersive scenography true to the topologies of the originary text(s).

It is also worthy of note that a key aspect of *Secret Cinema's* commercial success is their ability to align the selection and timing of their events to achieve maximum exposure within established fan communities. For example, there was a really clear commercial alignment between the choice and timing of the latter two *Secret Cinema Presents ... Experiences*. In the case of *Back to the Future*, this experience took place in the lead-up to the 30th anniversary celebrations of the film, where hype was building and social media channels were already alive with fan excitement for the imminent anniversary. In the case

of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* event this took place during the lead up to the heavily globally publicised release of the latest of the *Star Wars* franchise – *Episode VII – The Force Awakens* (dir: J. J. Abrams, 2015)

As well as drawing on these existing fandoms there is also a clear nostalgic turn to these screenings which attract the audience members who originally engaged with the texts (and associated cultural practices) as children and teenagers growing up in the 1980s.

Here we might see a continuity of what Reading & Harvey (2008) describe as ‘nostalgia-play’ in their discussion of memories of video game play and, which Harvey (2015) later extends in his analysis of relations with transmedia storyworlds (with specific reference to *Star Wars*). ‘Nostalgia-play’ in the Secret Cinema context seems to very nicely capture the affect so visible in the participant engagements.

We and our fellow participants observed that many attendees brought their children with them to the event – potentially engaging in acts of what have been described as acts of ‘intergenerational transfer’ (van Dijck: 2009; Bolin: 2015).

We will now argue that the secret aesthetic was critical to the commercial and experiential success of the event. For this event, the entire experience (from ticket purchase, through to preparation, to the final event itself) was imbricated with the film’s narrative – that of secrecy and the rebellion.

A secret aesthetic

Within the social media mise-en-scène, secrecy became a fundamental aspect to the mode of address for the audience and intrinsic to the pre-event experience. Instead of resisting the covert approaches taken in other events (creating problems such as those identified in Atkinson & Kennedy: 2015b) the audience could now readily engage in the ‘stay disconnected’ narrative, performing in character on social media (see **Figure 2**).



Figure 2: In-character tweets from audience members on social media

Core to this secrecy was an additional invitation to be part of an underground rebellion - the in-fiction rebel alliance. The overlapping nature of the narrative architecture and the apparatus used to engage the participants produced a unique convergence of aesthetics, which appeared to us to capture a particular mood in the UK post-general election malaise of May 2015.

In this event Secret Cinema also further aligned themselves with dominant mainstream media narratives through the inclusion of refugees into the opening narrative of the experience and their sponsorship of their partner charity the Refugee Council for which they raised £28,000. Secret Cinema furthered this alliance through the high profile screening at the refugee camp in Calais.⁷



Figure 3: The REBEL X Communication channel showing Secret Cinema’s in-fiction response to the real-world UK general election, May 2015.

Taking the story underground and offline to secret rave-like spaces⁸ and engaging the audience through a rhetoric of rebellion seems to have taken exquisite advantage of this dominant mood in the run-up to the launch of the main event. We were not alone in remarking upon this allusion to 80s and 90s rebellious and counter-cultural experiences. Indeed, one of our participants remarks:

The journey to the venue raised fond memories of looking for a secret rave, eyeing up fellow travellers to ascertain their potential tribe; searching for recognition and affirmation. (Participant A)

This convergence eliminated the conflict so evident in the pre-event disharmony and discord (as discussed by Atkinson & Kennedy 2015b, in relation to *Back to the Future*) amongst the participants and signalled the ability of Secret Cinema to continue to adapt this novel format in relation to fan practices and resistances.



Figure 4: The launch event at Alexandra Palace, London, UK, May 4th, 2015.

In contrast to others, the ‘secret’ aspect is actually part of the narrative and intrinsic to the audience experience (particularly prior to the 5-hour evening event) - instead of resisting the covert approaches taken in other events (problems identified in *Back to the Future*) the audience are readily engaging in the ‘disconnect now’ narrative, performing in character on social media, and compliant in the surrender of their mobile phones on entering the experience. Participants were invited to engage on social media using the hash tag #staydisconnected and the twitter account @WithYouRebelX (see **Figure 5**).



Figure 5: Examples of WithYouRebelX tweets.

A number of websites were created, including a communications channel with regular in-fiction communications and updates, such as that depicted in **Figure 3**.

This ethos of rebellion and the counter cultural call for participation is in contradistinction to the cultural dynamics and consumption at work here - where participants pay theme park prices for ‘Spice Smuggler’ and ‘Bounty Hunter’ cocktails and get drawn into merchandising opportunities which are at odds with the anti-establishment discourse which they exploit.

Secret Cinema’s core commercial identity could be argued to capitalise on the wider cultural trend or taste for experiences which are deemed to be exclusive. The whole clandestine marketing campaign focuses on building the mystique of these experiences. Exploiting the audience desire to be ‘cool’ and through the expensive ticket price (£75 per ticket) generating this elite sense of distinction, exclusivity and ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton: 1996) for the participants. This sense of distinction was further compounded through a manipulated tickets shortage in line with a temporally relevant external event. Tickets sales were available briefly and then re-released on May 4th, to coincide with national *Star Wars* day (‘May the 4th be with you’).



Figure 6: “May the 4th be with you” – the International *Star Wars* Day was used to advantage as part of the Secret Cinema marketing campaign.

For this year’s secret cinema experience (2016) tickets are banded as ‘operative standard’ (costing £67) and ‘operative X’ (costing £134– these ticket holders will receive private

transportation to the secret location and will be briefed by experienced agents and given access to secret materials and complimentary refreshments.) This price banding strategy was also deployed in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1995) experience (2012). For this event, standard tickets were priced at £50, for an additional £30 audience members could stay overnight in one of the 'cells' and be subjected to an early-morning workout; £100 tickets enabled audience members to play the governor's guests and be served a three-course meal.⁹

However, it is important to note that the aesthetic of secrecy all but dissipates in the actual experience of the *Star Wars* event. On busier evenings there *was* a small easter egg to be uncovered which led to a secret/exclusive experience but this was available to all during the quieter nights. The trading, bartering and secret codes and passwords element established in the instructions given in advance of the event were disappointingly underexploited as our participants demonstrate below.

The Main Event

Our seven participants comprised advanced creative media students and architecture students studying at Masters level at the University of Brighton, UK. They were all given a detailed briefing, starting with: "Primarily we want you to come along tomorrow night prepared to pay close attention to *everything* that takes place." This is a tall order request particularly in relation to an event that calls upon, invokes or requires the participant as co-creator, or determinant in many aspects of the experience itself. As a result, we had very different kinds of accounts of the evening from our participants. These distinct experiences were the subject of a great deal of interest during the group feedback discussion and focus group where we all remarked upon the extent of these differences in individual actions, responses and interpretations.

As indicated by our research questions, we were interested in what we described to the participants as the means through which our behaviours, movement, participations are all controlled and regulated. We were particularly keen to identify those moments when this control was delegated to the architecture and staging or design of the event as we were in isolating those moments where the hired actors were controlling behaviours through issuing instructions or 'barking' orders.

As with our previous research, (Atkinson & Kennedy: 2015a) we were once again interested in the extent to which the experience design assumed a playful disposition and/or a game-like approach to the proceedings. It was our intention to privilege the perspective that our architectural students would bring to the analysis of how the storyworld and the *Star Wars* universe was brought to life, animated and was spatialized.

The participants also received the generic *Secret Cinema* briefing that included character name, costume requirements and indications of specific props that would be deployed on the night. In the context of *The Empire Strikes Back* these presented an opportunity for fan practices and engagements to flourish such as 'cosplay' which is an already well established practice within the *Star Wars* fan community (Brooker: 2002; Hills:

2002, 2005; Gn: 2011; & see Pett this issue). In the recent release of *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* (2015) audience members even turned up in costume at the conventional screenings. The instructions given in relation to the acquisition of specific props also plays into these well-established fan practices. However, we argue that it is these preparations that position the audience member as an *extra* required to fulfil their role in dressing and animating the set. This activity can be conceptualised as a form of *playbour* as defined by Kücklich (2005), which in this experience repurposes these fannish pleasures in the construction of a dual identity, which is potentially productive of a dichotomous and problematic subjectivity.

We attended this event for the first time with all of our participant group, meeting beforehand to ensure that they understood their instructions, answering any queries they had. The participants were aware that they had been asked to write a short piece of individual writing on their experience using the prompts given in the briefing document and then to attend a focus group debriefing the following week. As stated above we also attended a second event on a much quieter night later in the run to fill in some aspects of the experience identified through these written accounts and the debriefing which followed. A far more involved engagement with the performers and a more complete sense of the interactions available was experienced in the later visit.

Drawing on our previous research into these experiences we were also interested to try to capture as fully as possible the extent to which the audience subject positions shift through the highly choreographed and tightly controlled spaces, and how dramatic community behaviour might have transpired (Atkinson: 2014a and 2014b). As these events are typically much longer than a film or theatrical performance (3–5 hours for example) it might therefore be expected that there would be different kinds of engagement alongside moments of disengagement, different modes of interaction and active participation alongside forms of embodiment and aesthetic expectation more closely aligned with, or akin to, that of the embodied spectator.

Experience Design in Time and Motion:

In what follows here we intend to articulate for the reader the sense of speed and control of motion that shaped the experience of participants as they were ushered through the early parts of the set as designed. Later we pick up on other aspects of this experience but here we are attempting to capture the way in which the narrative is suborned to this force of movement through a carefully constructed space.

Upon ticket purchase, ticket holders were invited to join the rebel alliance through an online interface whereby, after a series of questions they are given one of the following identities: Galactic Explorer, Mercenary, Governor of the Alliance, a member of the Alliance Starfighter Corps or Creative Council. An identity card with a unique name was then issued.

On the day of the experience, audience members were instructed to arrive in their uniforms, with their identities, to wear a mask and goggles, and to assemble at a location nearby (GPS coordinates were delivered in an email). The main event thus begins with the

audience arrival in these designated costumes where tickets were checked and wrist stamps were issued. Audience members were then ushered to the Earth Cargo Airlines (ECA) terminal building by various crew members and were constantly instructed to keep faces covered with a scarf. After an initial security bag check, audience members were then led into a net-covered tunnel where they were briefed, and then led to a metal shutter for a theatrical set piece, in which they were welcomed to the rebel alliance. This was followed by frantic ushering through the raised metal shutter where audience members were instructed to keep low and to run through tight corridors in the building. This swift traversal of a tightly delineated topography was accompanied by a frenetic soundscape of alarms ringing and disorientating flashing lights. Upon entering a larger hall-like space – the loading bay – participants were required to switch off their mobile phones which were then heat sealed into bags and returned to the audience members. In the rendition of this sequence during our later visit we noted a distinct difference at this particular juncture. In this quieter experience participants were required to stand in line at a check-in desk and to show their identity cards during an intimidating exchange with an alien security guard. This set piece in the loading bay space was also afforded more time and the audience were taken through various experiential interactions with the performance crew. This involved being shut inside a shipping container and briefed on the journey ahead – audience members were addressed as *refugees* and informed that they were to be shipped and concealed as *illegal* cargo, before engaging in some cargo loading exercises. Participants were guided in military fashion to move cartons and containers from one location to the next. They were also required to stand in line for a health inspection and some told to also run on the spot.



Figure 7: Entry stamp

These highly controlled moments were reminiscent of similar staged interactions with the Shawshank 'inmates', the novice performers could run through the somewhat militaristic and mechanical drill with minimal room for deviation or improvisation on their own or the audience members part. An emergent formulaic pattern suited to the limited capacities of the performers and the narrow expectations of the audience members to be guided, controlled and shepherded through the experience is becoming characteristic of the *Secret Cinema* event design.

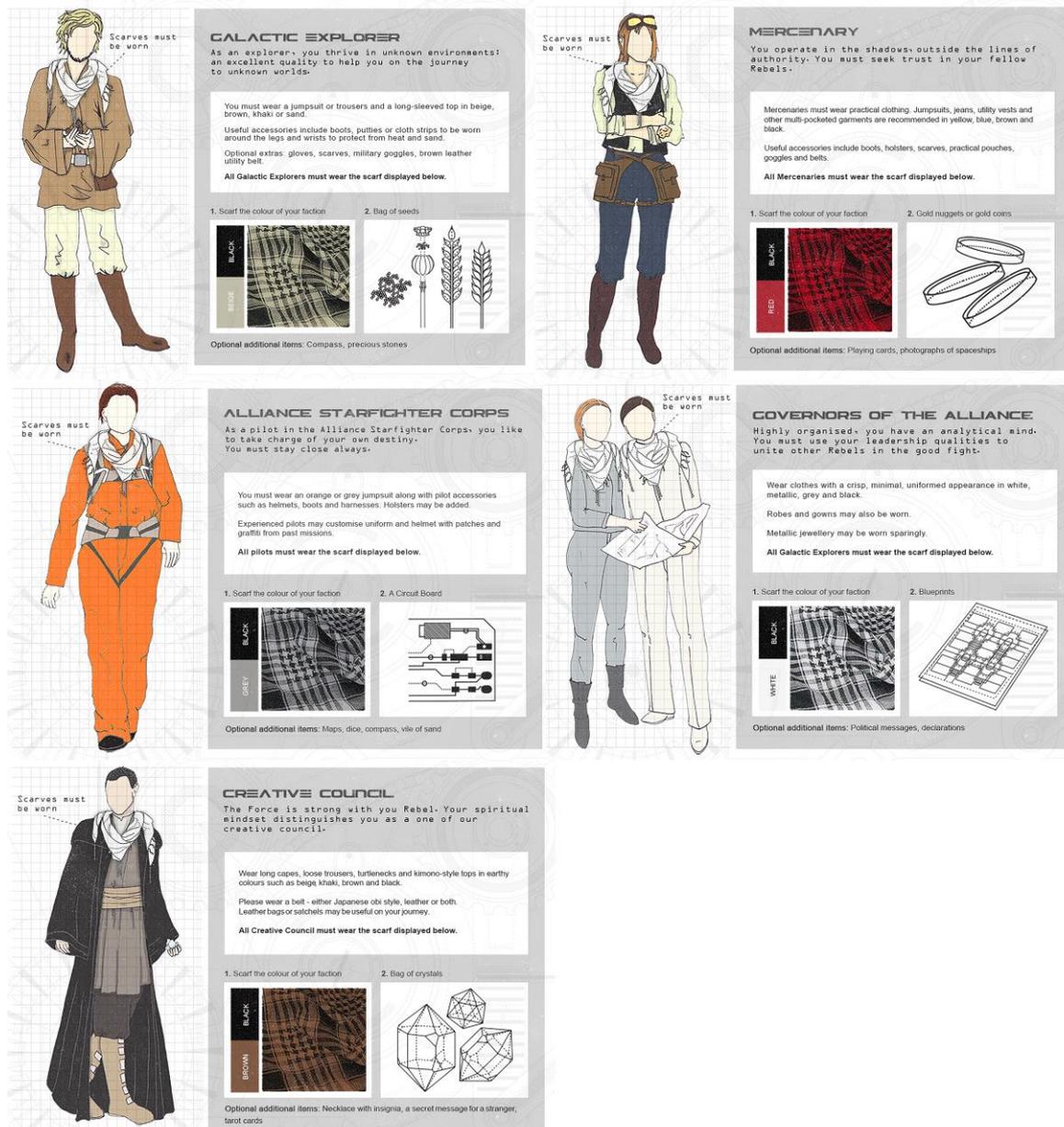


Figure 8: The range of identities assigned to the audience participants

Shortly after, all participants were lined up in queues to enter one of the small entrances to the waiting aircraft. Upon being seated in the aircraft, a 3D flight simulation was played on a wide cinema screen flanked by Storm Troopers. The screened simulation incorporated visual

graphics reminiscent of the early 1980s *Star Wars* arcade game wire frame animations – including the use of first person perspective as pilot or navigator drawn from this game aesthetic.

Movement through space and the landing of the aircraft was simulated through vibrations and sound effects accompanied by artificial smoke and the participants were led quickly off into another adjacent and cramped corridor featuring new aromas of food leading to the Mos Eisley market place. Here the topography changed significantly as audience members enter a simulated market environment featuring food stalls, shops and drinks vendors populated by crew and audience members dressed as *Star Wars* characters. It is here that R2D2, C3PO, Jawas, Luke Skywalker, Chewbacca and Han Solo could be encountered in a series of highly staged set pieces drawn directly from the film narrative. At this point, the audience members access the Cantina bar, with seated live music area and access to the external out-of-narrative portable toilets and smoking areas.

Secret Aesthetic on Location

As we have argued, the secret aesthetic was an effective device in the hailing and engagement of the audience in the online and physical spaces which were designed to precede the ‘main event’ as well as being designed to guide and control their preparations and subjectivities. For the main experience itself – the 5-hour event, which culminated with a screening of *The Empire Strikes Back* – this secret aesthetic was less of a central or key determinant in the activities and experiences that followed.

Secrecy was invoked as the participants were met, shepherded and corralled in to the main Mos Eisley space and was frequently the motivation or excuse for an insistence on total compliance – i.e. audience members were made to crouch, scurry, hand over their phones, remain silent, follow barked orders etc. as part of maintaining their ‘hidden’ status.

Our participants had all brought along the ‘secret’ coded items that were apparently to be deployed to trade and ‘unlock’ hidden experiences throughout the evening. These hidden experiences were evidently more limited during the sell-out shows. However, during the later visit and presumably on other quiet nights, the requisite secret spice was easily obtainable through trading the props audience members were instructed to bring – for example a circuit board was traded for gems with Jawas and then gems were traded for spice with a Jedi knight. The spacecraft simulator then led passengers to this ‘easter egg’ ‘prison’ set. In addition to this overarching ‘easter egg’ of the prison there was a further singular experience for those in the right cell who would then become part of the team of rebels rescuing Princess Leia.

The management of this trading and secrecy element of the experience was inconsistent and unsatisfactory for some, as one of our participants commented that: “playing in character led to confusion” (Participant A). It was clear that the actors had a limited repertoire of responses solely tailored around a single point of exchange and any further attempts at rebellion-related banter led to dismissive responses (if any). More experienced actors/interactors might have been able to identify where participants were

lost and failing to engage with the opportunities 'hidden' behind a moment of exchange or some key questions or codes. Many of our participants were also disappointed that the effort they had expended on sourcing key elements of their 'costume' or 'disguise' went wholly unrewarded. For example one participant noted:

I had a scarf for a belt which I didn't wear, tarot cards which I didn't give out, a pendant without purpose and an ID badge that I never used. I asked at least half a dozen people about gems and ended up negotiating with those I already knew, desperately seeking affirmation from trading to gain status within the game. I sold out, gave up on the fantasy and waved a 'contactless' bank card at various stall holders for beer and food. (Participant A)

Our participants frequently remarked upon this gap between the promise that was established during the period preceding the event via the instructions given and the evening itself. They pointed to the contract between the vivid attention to detail in the location and set design with the shallow interaction throughout the evening – this comment is illustrative of these responses:

As a passive experience the venue and set were spectacular, as a participatory community the dynamics suffered from lack of spontaneity and genuine connectivity. (Participant A)

One of our participants did uncover the secret 'easter egg' and therefore did experience this augmented engagement as described: "A cryptic quest, accessible by identifiable characters depending on experience and spatial awareness." (Participant D).

Secret Aesthetic: Space, Bodies & Disposition

Constrained space also played a part in underscoring the aesthetic of secrecy, continuing the rebellion trope and helpfully instilling obedient bodily behaviours – such as the hot oppressive tunnels that worked to disorient participants but were also where the hired actors/characters issued instructions and helped to describe our subject positions within the experience – i.e. informing us that we were *comrade rebels* being smuggled to 'relative' safety. A number of our group were experiencing the *Star Wars* universe for the first time so these prompts were critical in determining how the unfolding actions were interpreted:

Since the existing setting cannot be altered physically, it becomes the additional forms of narrative design that give it a façade that fits within the story, whether it's the character-actors, specific props, or entire set pieces. (Participant C)

Our participant group made regular mention of the lighting as a critical component in shaping the affective elements of the experience; darker more claustrophobic elements

where participants were made to run swiftly from one place to the next, or forced to crouch waiting for 'secret transportation'. The lighting also served to highlight areas for our attention but also to shroud secret areas in darkness only to be discovered by the more curious or inquisitive of the group (as noted below curiosity featured as a key disposition required for full enjoyment/engagement with the world).

The following two very detailed observations from our participants make very explicit the connection between production design and their embodied and affective experience:

The industrial setting transports you to somewhere unusual – this is exaggerated by the lighting effects used to break up the darkness and create a sci-fi/fantasy feel. The addition of specific visual cues or references to *Star Wars* helps to emphasise the narrative aspect. The way the existing space is utilised is important to how you are made to feel detached from the real world. The industrial scale of the space is in a way overwhelming and alien especially with the lack of day light. Mesh screens and cages allow for longer sightlines but these are partially obstructed. (Participant B)

The choice of setting seems to have been crucial to the overall success of the experience. The combination of no daylight penetration and initial winding run to the Transport Ship detach the participant from any time of day, directionality and external goings on. This lack of locational awareness allows you to better assimilate into the immediate spatial environment. From the smaller spaces that feel controlled and force a ... narrative that is not directly from the films, the open spaces (Mos Eisley, Death Star) that are recognisable sets immerse the participants in to the narratives that are already known. (Participant C)

Our participants made frequent references to the oscillation between active self-driven engagement with the storyworld as a construct and moments of being taken over by staged events which propelled them through the space and towards the climactic moments of the pre-film experience – the launch of the Death Star across the crowd below and the ensuing iconic light sabre battle sequence. Again these evocative descriptions below from our participants capture this sense of a dual subjectivity - freedom of movement versus highly constrained behaviours and the dynamics of participant control:

... the food market, Cantina and live music plus the heat and sand, encourage you to act as a lively city dweller in Mos Eisley, whereas the dark, industrial environment with patrolling Stormtroopers of the Death Star make you feel on edge and much like a captive prisoner of the Empire. (Participant C)

The set [Mos Eisley] at this point is directly based on the film, allowing the participant to live out their fantasy and have control over their actions. This freedom is interrupted occasionally by acted out scenes from the film, where the line between participants and set actors is blurred. You are encouraged to interact and actively seek out information or contact actors to proceed through the narrative. (Participant B).

The participants experienced these shifts differently – from a sense of relief from the tiring business of interacting and figuring out what to do next to a disgruntlement at the extent of the control being exerted. The larger group experience was taking place during a sell-out show and the participants had to be much more tightly controlled through the space. During the group feedback session, it became evident that there were many opportunities which were restricted in access and made available only to those in precisely the right place at the right time with the right props immediately to hand. As indicated above this was not the case during a much quieter show. Highly differentiated experiences are a common feature of this type of research into participatory phenomena (see Breel: 2015). This differentiation is true both in terms of the busyness of the different events and the individual participants and their dispositions and attentions.

Behaviours/Disposition/Affect

The participants all made reference to the careful engineering of the experience through issues such as heat, sounds and smell – these elements serving as devices to shape attitudinal responses, expectations and – with the latter – provoke hunger. Our participant observations featured frequent references to the interconnection between these elements of the production and their own disposition during the event. The examples below give a sense of the extremes that featured within these accounts:

With sudden claxons, sirens and flashing lights, legs turned to jelly and as a last deconstruct of identify, mobiles willingly surrendered. The audience were no longer queuing for a themed ride, just subjugated and coerced, this didn't feel like a game no more. *[sic]* (Participant A)

... the heat became suffocating and the guards aggressive. (Participant A)

The attention to the construction of distinct zones to signal transitions and demark territories was critical to the evocation of the spatialised narrative and the subjects journey through the production. The arrival at Mos Eisley was signalled by the aroma of cooked food, a blast of hot air, and the shift from a harsh metallic surface to soft sand underfoot as well as the opening up of the space and a sudden apparent lack of instruction or other behavioural controls. One participant mentioned the way in which these complex aesthetic factors also triggered curiosity and the drive to investigate the environment further:

The change in temperatures plays a role in triggering curiosity and expectation [...] Curiosity gets the better of one after wandering for a while knowing there is more but not knowing what, guides one to a quest to find crystals or spices to gain entry to more hidden or restricted areas. (Participant E).

The participant here is also indicating this shift in disposition from controlled behaviour to a more open and exploratory mode.

From Interactor to Spectator

A further shift in subjectivity was reported by the participants in relation to the transitions between these exploratory, interactive, more participative engagements and their experience of the screening. For many of our participants, the screening was somewhat at odds with the hail to participate that had been so prevalent during the online engagement:

... the transmedia narrative was not owned by the community and was almost a distinct and separate experience from the film screening. (Participant A)

Here, this participant is particularly drawing out the disjunction between the expectation established through the online channels and the realised screening.

The film when it came, felt like an anti-climax and the actors a mere sideshow, this was not the multimedia immersion I had expected. Dated and grainy, without sophisticated CGI, the screening suffered from what felt like archaic and rudimentary staging; having to sit still on plastic seats after all that running around, just didn't feel right. (Participant A).

The expectation of the audience to switch abruptly between two participatory registers – from that of active participant in the performative spaces, to that of still spectator when directed to sit in front of a screen to watch the film calls to attention this disjuncture. Our respondents all noted the jarring moment of transition in *The Empire Strikes Back*, when their experience switched from one of full active (and at times challenging) immersion to a highly conventionalised arrangement of participants in rowed seating in front of a large screen. In contrast to other Secret Cinema experiences it was noted by participants that there was a very limited augmentation of the screen through live enactments. All that took place were some set piece fight sequences, some lighting changes and some movements around this very traditional hall like space which was already hampering any full visibility of these augmentations. The tightly controlled seating area with a fixed and standard viewing position was productive of behaviours and dispositions at odds with a participatory event, for example we noted widespread 'shushing' when participants were enthusiastically

responding to these small screen augmentations or moving around more freely within the space.

And herein lies the inherent dichotomy in immersive cinema events - the very presence of the cinema screen on-site calls to attention the mediation of the spectacle, and underlines the ultimate position of the audience member as spectator as opposed to participant, and as such a sense of 'total immersion' (Machon: 2013) can never be achieved. Secret Cinema, and other immersive events are not frameless experiences – in the way that Punch Drunk and other immersive theatre experiences can and where in these latter experiences there is a notable absence of the proscenium arch.

What we argue is that it is the film design and the technical set design infrastructure that underpins the aesthetic of this experience – here we have highlighted this through reference to sound design, lighting design and overall production design. These events are not animated by a concern with adaptation of and fidelity to a particular story - it is all about the control of a space as if it were the film location (although we argue that this is not the location of the story but the location of the filming of that story, i.e. a film set).

This sense of a mediated space is compounded by its position within the context of the wider Hollywood industry superstructure. The screening of the film and the use of the characters, iconography and set was clearly subject to a specific licensing agreement between Disney LucasFilm and Secret Cinema. Although, we have not seen the terms of the license, which 'took the best part of a year'¹⁰ to negotiate, we can only assume that this would have stipulated certain conditions relating to which elements of intellectual property could be used within the event. These conditions seemed manifest in the choice of logos/costume branding on sale in the Rebel Stores – which did not necessarily correspond with those from the originary *Star Wars* franchise. The rhetoric of rebellion that is played out in this imposed industrial context is not only weakened but also manifests as a further reflexive aesthetic – of the well-known and long-running tension between *Star Wars* fans and LucasFilm – and the corporations persistent attempts to control fan practices, which have been endlessly resisted and reproduced through fan behaviours. Back in 2002 Brooker had already identified this tension:

Lucas's return as omnipotent author therefore puts him in the ironic position of reclaiming control over an Empire, stamping his own vision on the *Star Wars* universe and stamping out 'rebel' interpretations such as slash fiction or films that infringe copyright (Brooker, 2002: 8).

Despite the rebel identities invoked in the Secret Cinema participants, within a seemingly underground and clandestine setting, participation comes with its own set of IP compliant, instructions and prohibitions, within the Secret Cinema 'set' these are played out in a recurring interplay of resistance and punishment – for example - both ourselves and our fellow participants were captured by guards and placed into prison cells within this experience.

We have also highlighted here the hybrid subjectivity endemic of this type of experience – that is oscillating between the sense of wandering (and wonderment/abandonment) of the flâneur¹¹ to the tightly conscripted behaviours of the film industry extra populating the film set. This identity is immediately established through the prescribed costume and prop requirements (although in this case – access to the wardrobe and property departments are only available at a price), and then is underscored through the strict marshalling of movement throughout the experience and the ability to play only a limited role as an extra/participant (limited even further through the latter dual positioning of the participant/spectator).¹²

From our own experience as participants, there was a moment of total rupture and subjective confusion, when we clambered into what we thought was a space-craft. We were reprimanded by a man in costume and told to get out, but when we engaged in a series of exchanges in full rebel character, the ‘guard’ broke the fourth-wall and stated words to the effect of ‘you need to get out, this isn’t part of the experience’. Clearly this was a stunt vehicle to be used in one of the later scene re-enactments in which we were not welcome as *either* participant or spectator.

It is only through the obedience to the wardrobe instructions and tightly controlled movement through the space and adherence to the rules of engagement that the experience is brought in to fruition, where each participant plays an essential role and is also generative of a fulsome and satisfying experience for the other participants.

As with the *Back to the Future* event, it became apparent very early on in the experience that as an audience member you are not actually immersed in the world of Hill Valley, you are immersed in the *world of its making* - such was the presence of the physical evidence of its construction (scaffolding, light rigs and scenery), populated by stunt vehicles, production and security personnel.

In this regard, Secret Cinema is itself a hybrid cultural form. It is formed of the ‘liveness’ and responsiveness that is endemic of theatre; the pre-recorded, post-produced, rehearsed and repeated action of cinema, and the elements of gameness and play in its interaction design and the expectations made of the audience.

Conclusion

As we have indicated above, Secret Cinema invest heavily in the discovery and exploitation of specific kinds of space within which to animate their chosen feature. The careful construction of a spatialised storyworld is accompanied by their elaborate ‘digital scenography’ through which a particular aesthetic, mood and mode of participation is established. As a new chimeric form which is still adapting to feedback and modification it may well be that Secret Cinema will refine their offer for their specific cinema going audience - to create less expectation during their build-up of a deeply playful, interactive aesthetic and more clearly and accurately build an awareness of their events as more akin to an immersive theme park attraction (with costumes! and a screening!) than live theatre or games.

This gap which opens up between expectation and lived experience was not inhabited as a failure by the audience members in our group, nor did this figure in the dominant public reporting and reviewing of the event or in social media channels. One reason for this could be the extent to which this experience builds on nostalgia on a number of levels; a nostalgia for filmic text; it invokes and deploys cultural memories of past rebellion for that audience who grew up during the Poll Tax Riots and Criminal Justice Bill reform protests; fulfils desires to relive experience with their own children or experience those anew; and offers a promise of agency at a moment of political disillusionment. It may be that the audience fill in or ignore/overlook those aspects which are missing due to their pleasure in a reengagement with a beloved text with other fans or their own children, what Boym (2001) would refer to as restorative nostalgia, which ‘manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins’ (Boym, 2001: 41).

Contradictions are glossed over in this nostalgic engagement – wherein the highly commercialised repackaging of childhood or youthful rebellion goes unremarked and is even celebrated in the enthusiastic consumption of £7 beers and overpriced food, in an environment of control/obedience/compliance, where there was no chance of an actual audience ‘rebellion’ taking place. Martin Barker (2012) in a summary of his extensive analyses of audience responses to a range of popular cultural forms uses the term *investment* to capture their affective engagement with a particular experience. This *investment* allows for these moments of disillusionment, frustration, discontinuity to be overcome.

As we indicated above, we are particularly interested in how this resurgence in live cultural experience might challenge our understandings of audiences and therefore our methodologies through which to analyse audience experience. In particular we have further demonstrated the value of the deployment of microethnography as it has enabled us to draw attention to the set, the lighting, the soundscape as agents in the construction of the experience. Here we have shown how an attention to complexities of the embodied, playful, performative and highly mediated experience of live cinema requires an equally fluid and nuanced range of methodological resources.

As Secret Cinema continues to evolve, growing in commercial success, popularity, cultural kudos and critical acclaim, we see the recurrent themes of order and the aesthetic of control persisting in their established formula. At the time of writing (February 2016) we are anticipating a forthcoming Secret Cinema event which sees a return to their previous mode of ‘secrecy’ around the film itself. Those who have booked their tickets are currently being drip fed fragments of information which are all imbued with themes of espionage, surveillance and, in response, social media is alive with speculation about the possible film text. As participants once more, we find ourselves in receipt of an identity and strictly defined (military and government-issue type) uniforms (see **Figure 9**) – by now a clearly preferred palette to support their own particular brand of experience design.



Figure 9: The identities being assigned to current Secret Cinema participants (2016)

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Notes:

¹ <http://www.screendaily.com/news/secret-cinema-audience-tops-100000-as-empire-strikes-back-event-wraps/5094687.article>

² SECRET CINEMA presents Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back Concludes, 28th September, 2015, <http://www.frontrowreviews.co.uk/news/secret-cinema-presents-star-wars-the-empire-strikes-back-concludes/35602>.

³ This conflict with the authoritative Secret Cinema organisers led to the adaptation of our methodology which we go onto detail.

⁴ Pett makes a similar point drawing on the work of Virginia Nightingale (2008) in relation to her own fandom of *Star Wars* during her participation in an analysis of the Secret Cinema Star Wars experience, this issue.

⁵ A form that is explained in more detail elsewhere (Giddings & Kennedy: 2008; Giddings: 2009)

⁶ www.secretcinema/spaces.org.

⁷ Dougal Wilson reports on Secret Cinema's 'Secret Protest' at the Calais Jungle camp, Creative Review: www.creativereview.co.uk/cr-blog/2015/september/dougal-wilson-reports-on-secret-cinemas-secret-protest-at-the-calais-jungle-camp. 'Secret Cinema in Calais: "We can offer a break from the constant reality of living in tents"', *The Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/film/2015/sep/11/secret-cinema-in-calais-jungle-fabien-riggall-secretprotest.

⁸ There were a number of pre-event popup night clubs, a special launch at Alexandra Palace – see **Figure 4** – as well as the Secret Cantina, which was open for the duration of the official event in a secret location in London.

⁹ Nick Curtis, 'Secret Cinema: How to Get 25,000 People to Pay £50 for a Film Ticket, without Knowing What the Film Is', *London Evening Standard*, 7 December 2012.

¹⁰ Wilson, Benji. (2015) 'How Secret Cinema built The Empire Strikes Back', *The Telegraph*, 5th June 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/star-wars--the-empire-strikes-back/secret-cinema/>.

¹¹ We are using the term flâneur 'as originally envisaged by Charles Baudelaire' as 'a character willing to immerse himself, not just in, but *with* an environment' (Shearing, 2014: 45, original emphasis).

¹² In her analysis of Secret Cinema, Pett (2016 – this section) makes an interesting comparison between the subjectivity built into the interaction design of Punch Drunk, in which the individual experience is privileged, in comparison with Secret Cinema, which she notes tends to treat their audience as a crowd to be moved through the location, or what we would describe as the set.