CASE STUDY 2

ANTHONY ROWE SQUIDSOUP SWCTN PROTOTYPE

Anthony Rowe
is a media artist, designer and researcher. He founded digital arts group Squidsoup in 1997. As a SWCTN Immersion fellow he is investigating the idea of liminal materiality.

Squidsoup is a UK-based international group of artists, researchers, technologists and designers working with digital and interactive media experiences.

AudioWAVE SWCTN Prototype is a spatialised immersive audio system prototype that can be used in theatres, galleries and other social spaces.

For Anthony and Squidsoup the shift towards immersive was a conceptually deliberate jump away from the screen, a desire to create an affective experience rather than analytical.

Originally focused on digital arts and interaction design, Squidsoup became increasingly frustrated by the screen as a boundary or barrier between them and their audience – the "one finger interface".

Their vision was to create experiences which were more immediate and emotional – to feel, rather than analyse in real time. First experiments used 3D or large scale projection, but this merely indicated that they needed to make environments, not objects, to achieve the desired experience. And by definition this required a leap from virtual spaces to augmented physical spaces –, and therefore a move to an entirely different discipline, with a requirement for a very different set of skills.

In some senses this progression is indicative of Squidsoup's development of immersive environments over the past decade. Their model has been one of purposeful trial and error, an iterative process towards an end vision: – see what works, build on that experience, innovate the next step, repeat.
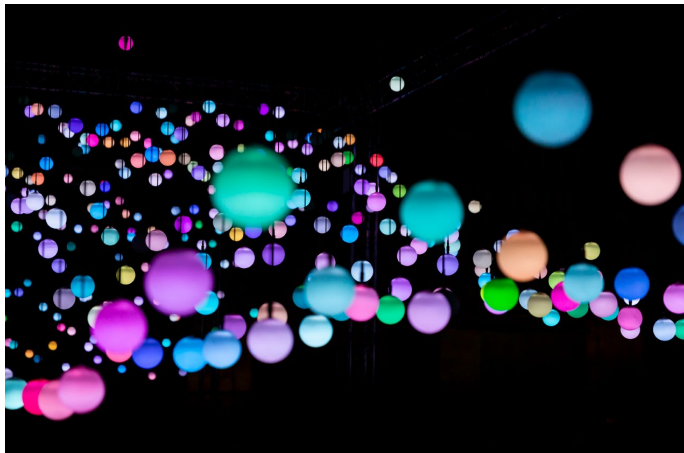
For Anthony this process is always limited by the available technology but the key is to minimise compromises, to find the practical implementation which makes the idea work as best it can whilst having a clear vision of the future goal.

MODEL

Core to Squidsoup's capacity to take this patient approach has been their ability to generate revenues from the prototype steps on the way.

First shown in 2013, the start point for Submergence was a desire to have a floating grid of light points in space – clearly impossible. The necessary compromise for wiring then became part of the installation, ultimately ending with a "product" which has been toured to over 50 locations worldwide.

Their next project, Wave (2018), displays this iterative approach in detail. Starting again from scratch the development process takes the tech as far as it can go in pursuit of the end vision, and then loops back.

Wave progressed through at least three forms from its start point:

1. Light array (Field 2015)
2. Light and sound scape (Bloom 2016)
3. Light array, more sophisticated audio model and 3D form (Wave 2018)

Whilst they hadn't set out to make another tourable product, Wave has now been installed in five locations, including the Burning Man festival.

Continuing the iterative development format within their SWCTN prototype, Squidsoup is developing AudioWAVE, a flexible, easy-to-use spatialised immersive audio system for social spaces.

Anthony describes Squidsoup's focus as cutting edge exploration which then becomes mainstream over time - they are "motivated by discovery and challenge". Although money is not the primary driver, they have become more adept at managing the particular challenge of relentless innovation versus commercial sustainability finding revenue models which allow their iterative experimentation process to become purposeful product development rather than hopeful R&D.

Photographs:
Rikard Österlund, Wave