LOWBROW, HIGH ART: WHY BIG FINE ART DOESN'T UNDERSTAND INTERACTIVITY.

THEME XI. HIGH ART/LOW CULTURE – THE FUTURE OF MEDIA ART SCIENCES?

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Interactivity and playfulness are rarely exalted in the conservative institutions, or Big Fine Art, either because it they signify a lack of serious comment or because these approaches are populist, which Big Fine Art labels lowbrow. Yet these 'lowbrow' works for the man and woman in the street appear in window displays and public installations, on the Internet and mobile phones, outside of the hallowed halls of the traditional art world. They become popular because they are simply engaging and engender powerful cultural forces laden with intricate meaning and comment, just not that of a single auteur.

In contrast, the contemporary new media art world has frequently produced works whose meaning and usage is opaque and deliberately confusing or simply ill conceived. These works often appear to not only be elitist, but also tedious and dull. Playful interactions tend to be more successful in terms of interactive engagement. They are extremely simple in their conception and are help us to understand interactivity. When combined with social and network technologies the artist becomes a facilitator of an experience, the "work" is an experience created and shared by many. This paper examines the problematic relationship between these simple interactives and the conventional gallery environment. It also argues that same conservative art institutions that dismiss interactivity as turning the gallery into a playground misunderstand its nature by failing to see that creating what they consider lowbrow works is actually a high art.

INTRODUCTION

Several papers published as the key texts for the REFRESH! 2005 conference have raised questions about the direction of new media works within the gallery environment. In particular, Christiane Paul's *Challenges for a Ubiquitous Museum: Presenting and Preserving New Media* (Paul, 2005) and Erikki Huhtamo's *Trouble at the Interface, or the Identity Crisis of Interactive Art* (Huhtamo, 2004) examine some of the problems with categorising and exhibiting interactive artworks.

This paper argues that the problem goes beyond the simple physical or curatorial issues of exhibiting interactive works, such as technology and sound or audience understanding. Instead it suggests that interactivity is fundamentally at odds with the concepts of the gallery space, particularly in the larger, more conservative and traditional institutions of fine art (the "Big Fine Art" of this paper's title), which fail to appreciate the apparently "trivial" arena of interactivity.

Giving an overview of the situation Paul recognises video works as a precursor to interactive ones within the gallery space and notes:

> "[Video works] have for the longest time been an exception to the mostly object-based art world rather than the rule. After approximately three decades, video now seems to have found an established, safe place in the art world but the museums [*sic*] relationship to performance or sound as art forms remains a problematic one." (Paul, 2005, p. 2)

Another problem that Paul explores is the difference in depth between interactive works and video works. One can see a snippet of a video work and still gain some sense of the complete piece, she argues, but with interactive, ever-changing works this may not be the case. Whilst it is true that many interactive projects have levels of detail and configuration that are potentially missed by the gallery viewer, it largely depends on the mode of the interactivity and the reason why interactivity has been used. She later makes a point that central to this conundrum for her:

> "One of the biggest challenges for the presentation of new media art is to engage the audience for a period of time that is long enough to allow a piece to reveal its content[…] Moreover, new media art often requires a certain familiarity with interfaces and -- despite the fact that computers seem to have become ubiquitous -- one can still not presume that every audience member will be an expert in navigation paradigms." (Paul, 2005, p. 2)

Although Paul makes a strong argument for thinking of alternative ways to present interactive art and critiques the usual white-box "shrine for contemplating sacred objects" she still refers to interactivity as a way into the "content" of the work, rather than simply being the work itself. I make this point not as a criticism of Paul, who's understanding of new media and digital art are not in doubt, but to underline a problem with the definition of interactive works and the common slippage of thought about them.

Both Paul and Huhtamo note the necessity of many interactive works to be "completed" by the audience, or interactors. They rightly point out that interactive works move beyond passive spectatorship and that the meaning of works may indeed not "exist" without interaction. There is still a sense here, however, that meaning and content is the aim of the interaction – that we should know or understand something about the artist's comment on the human condition through the content that we arrive at during or after interaction.

REFRAMING INTERACTIVITY

Where does the role of interaction for its own sake fit into this schema? Not interaction in order to reveal other, usually "old media", content such as text, audio or video, but interaction in which the "point" of the work is the *experience* of the interaction and little else. One of the problems with trying to answer this question is that "interactivity" still remains a general moniker for many "new media" projects and is stretched to fit many situations. Huhtamo's paper complains of exactly this mutability of the term "interactive" with regards to the Ars Electronica jury's reframing of it in order to award Ben Rubin's and Mark Hansen's *Listening Post* the Golden Nica for Interactive Art (Hansen & Rubin, 2004).

Lev Manovich's book, *The Language of New Media* (2001) explores new media's heritage of cinema and computer technologies and documents a broad history of work, but his view and definition of new media is only one reading of its genesis and he avoids coming to terms with interactivity. Manovich, though a supposed champion of (Big) "New Media", discards interactivity as being a fundamental, defining component of new media instead arguing that all texts and art are interactive for they require the "psychological process of filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall, and identification, which are required for us to comprehend [them]" (Manovich, 2001, p.57). Manovich does not agree with using the term "interactive" because he suggests, "there is a danger that we will interpret 'interaction' literally." That is, that interaction will relate to the physical aspects of interaction (with buttons, mouse and the screen) "at the expense of psychological interaction" (Ibid.). Huhtamo points out in his defence of "interactive" that many traditional art critics dismiss the term as irrelevant given that all art is "active" in some sense, and ironically Manovich takes the same path.

When we discard the physical of course we are left with psychological interaction, yet it is exactly this physical interaction that is the "new" in new media. Screens and projection surfaces may change radically each year as new technology arrives, but sequential frames running through time are still videos (in the broadest sense), whether on a mobile phone or a television screen. Manovich's further discussion of interactivity is closer to the truth:

> "Although it is relatively easy to specify different interactive structures used in new media objects, it is much more difficult to deal theoretically with users' experiences of these structures. This aspect of interactivity remains one of the most difficult theoretical questions raised by new media" (Manovich, 2001, p.56)

From navigational menus to videogames, interactivity *is* often part of an interface to other content. This commonality of interactive interfaces ignores the experience of the moment of interaction, however, and relegates it to a mechanism of control at best and something to be mastered or "got through" at worst. This is largely the confusion behind Big Fine Art's conception of interactivity. The slippery digital nature and lack of "object" value makes new media difficult enough to pin down at the best of times, could there not be at least some meaning, preferably sublime and soulful, contained within the work, somewhere to satisfy Big Fine Art's predilections? The problem is that engaging interactivity is usually simple, utilising one clear idea and is rarely able to carry complex meaning, especially in a gallery context, and therein lies the paradox.

As Paul rightly notes, the average gallery visitor spends very little time in front of any object. If one observes visitors to say, a Picasso collection, they tend to file through with barely a pause in front of any piece, yet these may be some of the most significant works in art history. How, then, can one possibly expect a gallery visitor to engage with something that requires some effort and time to be expended?

The answer, I believe, does not lie in obscuring the interface or deepening the content in order to try and draw people into another world by giving them more depth to explore. The opposite is true. Simple, playful interactions that are immediately understandable capture visitors very quickly. If conceived well (and this is usually more a matter of trial and error than well-defined methodology) it is possible to dismantle the visitor's reverent demeanour and induce them into child-like antics in the middle of the gallery. Engagement comes through interaction.

My primary research focuses on trying to understand and develop principles of interactivity, particularly the essential moment of interaction, through the theory of play (Polaine, 2004) and the notion of flow – a state in which the activity is intrinsically satisfying (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). There are two essential components to this conceptualisation of interactivity. Firstly, if we define interactivity as an action that has a physical component we also see that interaction is a mode, not a medium. This first classification helps us escape the theoretical cul-de-sac that Huhtamo described of a psychological interpretation of the term.

Secondly, interaction is a feedback loop of action-reaction-interaction or reaction-action-interaction – the former usually being instigated by a human, the latter by a machine, though of course this is not necessarily or exclusively the case. In any interactive scenario one agent is essentially *in conversation* with another and it is this process that is "interaction". The "conversation" is usually non-verbal and usually involves a dance of physical movements, from key presses and mouse moves to complicated gestural and full-body systems.

Reactive works that require no effort to start them on behalf of the interactor, such as pieces that use sensors, microphones or cameras usually avoid the problem of interactors having to learn an interface. Cameras are particularly useful because they require no understanding of an interface – one's body is the "affordance" and interaction is as simple as standing in front of a mirror (Pesce, 2004). The use of video cameras has a reasonably long history in interactive art, such as Myron Krueger's *Videoplace* (Krueger, 1974) and now these concepts are in millions of

lounge rooms around the world with the advent of the Playstation 2 Eye Toy camera (The Eye Toy game *Play* was the best-selling videogame of 2004 in Australia). These interactions start with an initial reaction from the computer (usually) causing a reaction from the interactor. If this is successful and engaging, the cycle repeats and the interactor's reaction creates another reaction in the computer and we get the interactive feedback loop.

In the case of the Eye Toy, the games are relatively simple but the joy is really in the physical movements. The executions are, in general, more successful that any art-installations thanks to the processing power of the Playstation 2 and the enormous programming effort behind them. Most videogames, though viewed as lowbrow pop-culture by Big Fine Art have an incredible amount of expertise applied to them. In general a fully-fledged game will take two to three years to create and are usually at the leading edge of technology. There are few artists that have the programming expertise and resources at their disposal to create works with similar production and technical values. Additionally, as these interactions become popularised by videogames, the technology ceases to be the innovation in artworks and the interactive idea is left to stand on its own feet, or fall over depending on the work.

An alternative model, for those well-funded, often sees the technology becoming the star of the show whilst the interaction and the content take a back seat in the creative process. One of the few notable exceptions is the work of Char Davies (Davies, 1995, 1998) in which the interaction, the content and the technology are inseparable – it is difficult to imagine the experience of her work being the same in any other manifestation. It is also one of the few interactive artworks that offer a lengthy emotional experience. Here, of course, we see an example of an artist with an enormous technical resource behind her in the form of Softimage.

Often a more successful method is to go in the other direction by simplifying the interaction and taking a more low-tech approach. In the past my colleagues and I have often referred to these kinds of simple interactives as “toys” (Allenson et al., 1994) rather than anything more formal or substantial. Toys have no clearly stated goal, unlike games, which tend to have a competitive component or “point” to them (Caillois, 2001; Huizinga, 1955) and when playing with toys the enjoyment comes not from trying to achieve an extrinsic goal, but in discovering how it works and what things can be achieved with the toy – an intrinsic goal. In a sound interactive, this discovery might be working out what movements affect which parameters, essentially trying to get inside the creator's mind and uncover the “wiring” of the circuit – the way in which the elements of interaction and sound are patched together, for example. Note here that the challenge is not about trying to understand the interface *to* the work; at this point the interface *is* the work.

There are clear similarities to real-life playing here – the simplest might be throwing a ball against a wall and catching it when it bounces back. Although the wall is essentially “dumb”, minor differences in texture, angle and velocity can make this process engaging for a reasonable time. There is no further meaning to the process; we learn little about balls, walls or people throwing things from this game in any meaningful, fine art sense, but the interaction is nevertheless pleasurable.

Part of the pleasure comes from becoming “better” at throwing or catching the ball. The same is true of learning a musical instrument and indeed the design of interactive works is a similar process (and one that often involves the use of sound). Getting the balance right between the challenge and the possibilities is the large part of the ‘art’.

In a sound-based interactive, the challenge might be a case of trying to make something rhythmical or musical out of some simple building blocks supplied by the author of the interaction. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes this balance of goals versus skills as the “boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.52) When this balance is struck, one becomes completely absorbed in the activity, Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow state’ and the essence of interaction and also of play.

On the one hand making something so complex with which it is possible to create a multitude of different combinations is powerful (a piano, for example, can be viewed as a complex interactive) and gives great scope for personal expression, but the learning curve is likely to become tedious with dedicated time required practicing. One the other hand, making something so simple (like the 'play' button on a CD-player) carries little interactive interest after the first one or two interactions.

In the sound toy example, making an interactive that has some scope for improvement but that does not produce a complete cacophony at the first attempt is a good balance. The act of learning needs to be pleasurable in itself (and perhaps this is more important than the final accomplishment) if the interactor is to remain engaged in the play and *flow* state. This apparent simplicity, however, is difficult to achieve and far from being trivial because it brings us closer to understanding interactivity in its own right.

EAVESDROP – AN OPPORTUNITY MISSED

Unfortunately, plenty of Big Fine Art interactive works fall into the “CD-player” category in which the interaction itself is less important than the content it leads to. Jeffrey Shaw and David Pledger’s work, *Eavesdrop* (Shaw & Pledger, 2004) is a high-profile piece with elements of this phenomenon. *Eavesdrop* utilises a 360-degree wrap-around screen with a “turret” in the centre that the interactor stands upon. The turret houses a projector so that when the interactor turns it the video pans in the opposite direction to the panning square of projected video. Thus we appear to see a ‘window’ onto a panoramic video that is continuously looping around a nine-minute segment. The arrangement of the video is such that we are placed in the centre of a cast of characters seated in a circle who are involved in various dialogues, both internal and external.

Each character (including the members of a three-piece band) has their own soundtrack that is mixed in multi-channel surround sound. As the turret revolves and the view is zoomed in and out the sound mix widens and narrows appropriately. The device itself is an impressive piece of engineering and this part of the interactivity is the most pleasurable in terms of interactivity in its own right. Most people appeared to enjoy zooming in the “camera” and excluding the other audio or simply spinning the turret around.

Yet the content of the work itself, the dialogues and internal mental spaces of the characters (represented by cutting from the panorama to a separate video sequence) did not really utlilise the intrinsic pleasure of the interaction beyond the sound mixing. The performances and dialogue were underwhelming and the disconnect between the interactive possibilities and the content was ultimately disappointing. Rather than exploring this turret-like interaction's intrinsic qualities, the perceived need to place some kind of meaningful content into the work detracted from its interactive potential.

Unlike Davies's works, the video content of *Eavesdrop* would have worked equally well panning past the frame on a flat computer screen with a click instead of a zoom to enter the internal world (although zooming would also be possible). Even the sound mixing would work on a home theatre set-up or in stereo. When looked at this way, the work is little different from some of the early 90's "multimedia" classics such as Peter Gabriel's *Eve* (Gabriel, 1996) which used similar scrolling panoramas.

With *Eavesdrop* one is left asking what the point of the interactivity is in terms of the relationship to the subject matter of the video. It could have so easily become something playful and engaging based on the interaction available, but it would no doubt not have gained as much funding as a result and this is one of the issues with scaling up interactive projects to satisfy the larger institutions. Hopefully Shaw and the iCinema team will now be able to play and explore its applications further and the forthcoming use of the similar technology to explore a glass blowing factory may prove more engaging; one can imagine the desire to zoom into the details may prove more appropriate.

PLAYING IN THE GALLERY

Playful interactive content does not sit well with the ideals of serious commentary, contemplation and the hallowed white walls and respectful silence of the traditional gallery. Making noise, moving around manically and laughing, for example, are usually frowned upon in those spaces and possibly earn the visitor an escort out of the door by security. This poses a problem for interactive works because their very purpose may be to create exactly that effect in the interactors. At best, such interactive works are tolerated and corralled into separate areas (often a "children's gallery" as in the case of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra), but even in these cases they are a diversion from the "real" art, not to be taken seriously. Yet these pieces often are not meant to be weighty or serious, they are playful and when one plays one is allowed to make mistakes and transcend of normal social behaviour precisely *because* one is playing and it is "not serious".

When Winnicott's (2001) examined play he described it operating halfway world between our inner and outer worlds. Crucially, he defines play as a meditative space and a physical activity:

> "The area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world […] Playing involves the body because of the manipulation of objects […] Playing is essentially satisfying." (Winnicott, 2001, p.51-52)

If, then, engaging interactivity is based on play and play is based in such ideas as physical movement, humour, noise, activity and transgressive behaviour, is there any hope for Big Fine Art to accept these whole-heartedly into its realms? It seems unlikely and perhaps it is not sensible to do so.

The real gallery of interactivity is outside of the fine art world, on the streets and in the in-between spaces of people's lives. Social networks created online and wirelessly, mobile phone "toys" and entertainment played whilst on the bus, shop window installations and fringe exhibition and performance spaces all pick up on some of the more interesting interactive work. They are less bound by the conventions of Big Fine Art galleries and impose less of their own context on the work at present. A shop window passed by thousands of people each day may be a far better venue for a playful interactive or reactive work than a gallery – it is both more public and less onerous. It makes no attempt to be more than an engaging diversion, a moment of play. It may say nothing about anything very much, it may, in short, be meaningless. On the other hand, it may drag people out of their daily drudgery for a sublime moment and illicit a playful interaction that they are too self-conscious to do in a gallery. In the book, *The Art of Experimental Interaction Design* (Cameron, 2004), Andy Cameron collected some of the leading interactive projects and most of them were intended for spaces outside of the gallery context. Even one of the largest-scale projects, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's, *Body Movies* (Lozano-Hemmer, 2001), a 400 to 1,800 square metre outdoor interactive projection, sits literally outside the gallery. Although the piece has a great deal of technical complexity when one watches the public interacting they play more with their own shadows than the projected figures – they engage with the earliest, most primeval screen as well as social interaction in the middle of the city.

When curators and galleries re-contextualise videogames and put on exhibitions of the latest and greatest or a retro historical collection, they usually miss the point of videogames and academics tend become excited about modified versions of the game engines. These modified versions are given a political angle, perhaps commenting on the acts of virtual violence and this legitimises their space in the gallery, but they are never as engaging as the originals. The real gallery for videogames is the lounge room or arcade, not a sterile white box. Modifying games so the 3D first-person shooter becomes a replica of the World Trade Center during 9/11 may be clever, but it is no longer a very playable game. It is fine art's attempt at 21st Century Pop Art using this era's most profitable popular cultural form, except that Warhol made his soup cans more interesting than the ones on supermarket shelves, not less.

Weblogs, photoblog, moblogs, Wikis, Tikis, mobile phones, social networks, text messaging, videogames, personal media spaces, BitTorrents, pirated media – all of these are the contemporary, fractured media landscape. They all come loaded with interfaces, content and meaning that is personal, conversational, social and ephemeral. They are an emergent reaction to top-down broadcasting and media ownership (Pesce, 2005). The Big Fine Art world is based on a similarly outdated economy of the object and preciousness. Interactivity as described above is still a young cultural form and one that is about action and participation, not soulful contemplation. These cultural forms simply fail to function in a gallery, they become abstracted from their origins like tribal totems inside glass cases. Ironically, museums are often the institutions that interactive projects thrive in because most have long since moved on from dusty glass

cases to interactive wonderlands, aimed at children and adults alike. Ultimately, when interactivity escapes a single-user and becomes a shared, network experience the work is no longer a single entity but a conversation between human beings and the artist shifts from communicator to facilitator. This leaves the question of how this can ever be exhibited in a gallery, the answer is likely to be that it no longer belongs there.

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