

Between image and dialogic form: intermedia in a multi-user environment

by Carol-Ann Braun,
independent web artist.
carol-ann.braun@wanadoo.fr

Abstract

This paper will consider the juncture between the “digital” and the “interactive” by means of a careful analysis of two augmented chat spaces entitled “**City Paradigms**” and “**Sandscript**”. Our focus is artistic, situating the websites in the larger cultural context of intermedia practices current throughout the 20th century.

Introduction

From an artist’s point of view, the juncture between the digital and the interactive is best formulated by the concept of intermedia, popularized by Dick Higgins in the 50s. One of the founding members of the movement “Fluxus”, Higgins situates intermedia “in the field between the general idea of art media and those of life media” (*Hannah Higgins, Fluxus Experience, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, p 21*) Although similar to the word multimedia, intermedia is less preoccupied with what lies between one art form and another, and more focused on the limit between what art is and is not. John Cage’s piece “4’33” – four minutes and thirty three seconds of silence – is an example of this : by refusing to propose or represent anything, Cage underscores the presence of an audience who, by listening attentively to the ambient sounds and out doors traffic, fills the void left by the artist. Cage harkens back to Marcel Duchamp’s 1920s parody of the photographic gesture, which, with a simple “clic” elevates a slice of life to the status of an art object. In sum, intermedia shifts the emphasis from strictly formal considerations to the dynamics of a situation and the relationships among those who participate in making a work of art what it is.

One finds other sources in the writings of the Englishman Gordon Craig, who in 1910 hoped that one day audiences would demand plays without actors or directors (*Edward Gordon Craig, De l’Art du Théâtre, Collection Penser le Théâtre, Circé, Paris, 1999*) Fifteen years later, Vsevolod Meyerhold began to practice what had already been imagined by the Russian Cubo-futurists, creating works where spectators participated in the act of representation (*Les Cités du Théâtre d’Art, Académie Expérimentale des Théâtres, Théâtrales, Paris 2000*) Another twenty-five years later, Alan Kaprow put his audience center stage, spraying them with water hoses or boxing them into cattle cars. By the sixties the audience had become an explicit component and “content” of what would be known as a “happening”.

During the same period, French writers and poets applied the principle of audience participation to literature, launching the OULIPO movement (Ouvroir de Littérature

Potentielle, including Queneau and Perec among many others - <http://www.ouliipo.net/>). In the eighties, a spin-off group called ALAMO, which included mathematicians and programmers, created applications based on tree-structures and generative principles (<http://indy.culture.fr/alamo/presentation>).

Video installations of the 70s and 80s also qualify as intermedia, in so far as they transform the gallery space into a stage, incorporating images of passers-by in “real time”, opening the work to spontaneous contributions from the outside world. Today, over twenty years later, artists have cast aside cameras and looped feeds, and, shirking the weight of representation, have turned to what Higgins called “life media”. This latest variation on a theme is called Relational Aesthetics, a term coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, current curator at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Pure and simple social interaction has become a form of art.

Image, interactivity and dialogue

The prototypes we are presenting cannot be separated from this broader context, even though they do not fall into any known category of art work. They are situated at the juncture between multi-media and inter-media, between representation and social interaction.

In the context of a series of class exercises, the first step of our research was to analyze types of interactivity characteristic of painting, sculpture, architectural space, radio, TV, magazines, etc. We concentrated on the technical and material parameters of each medium, related these to their internal organization, then diagrammed the spatial relationships between the viewer and the object itself, considering the factors of time and perception. These “parameters” then served as the basis for thinking about how we perceive a screen-image (of a sculpture, or a painting, or an architectural space...) and determining a “medium-specific” interactive exploration of that image.

Such an approach disassociates form and surface, operating in the space between the image and the viewer. The act of drawing is in the user’s hand, guided only in part by an author-programmer’s pre-scripted scenario. Indeed, because digital interactivity parodies the reciprocity characteristic of all the arts, it redefines form. Form becomes a mode of exchange between a user and a virtual object : the two create between them a hyper-linked movement among images, words, rhythms and sounds.

Our next step was to associate interactive multimedia with current notions of intermediality, merging the notion of exchange with that of dialogue. We sought to transform an interactive but solitary experience into a shared and collective situation, characterized by dialogue, or more accurately, “polylogs” among small crowds of people.

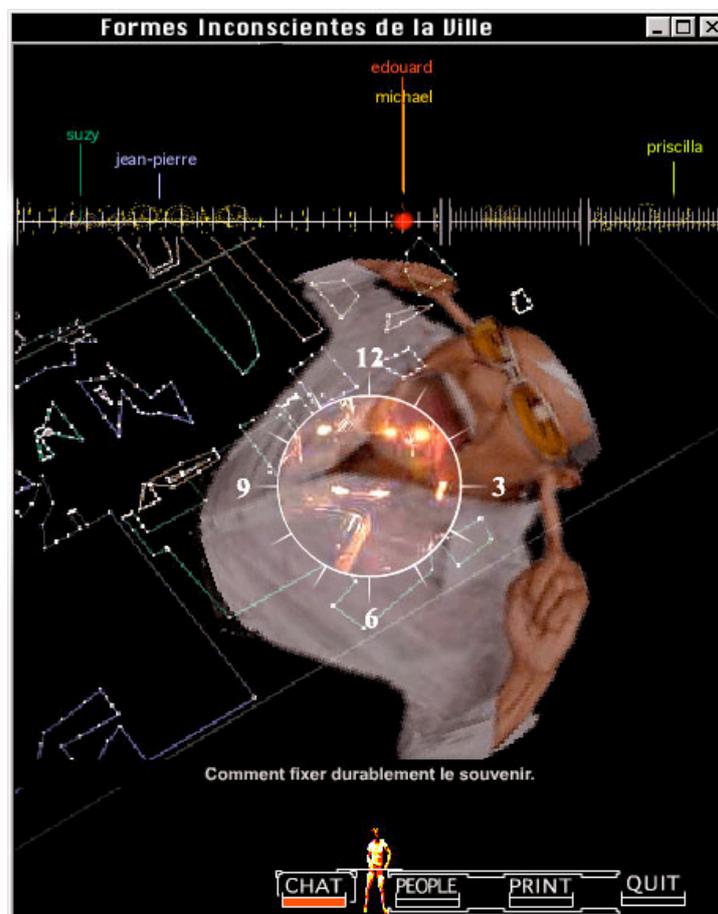
To this end, we created two prototypes, “**City Paradigms**” and “**Sandscript**”, bringing together individual artists, researchers in the social sciences at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Télécommunications in Paris (ENST), a private engineering firm called Timsoft, and students from a wide variety of social backgrounds. The projects were spearheaded by Dr. Annie Gentes at the ENST, Paris. Several grants funded this work, realized over the past three years: one from the **French Ministry of Culture (2001)**, and two from the **Fondation**

Louis Leprince Ringuet (2002, and 2003, thanks to an ongoing collaborative effort with Paris' ENST.) Parenthetically, it is telling that in France, where spontaneously organized interdisciplinary work is near impossible, a top engineering school should attribute funding to create an artistic prototype. The fact is that today's frontiers are less technical (though nuts and bolts issues persist...) and more conceptual. New ideas help define new problems, which generate new solutions with potentially market-worthy applications...

Prototype I: "City Paradigms"

The first project, entitled "**City Paradigms**" addresses the design problem of how to represent the relationship between people and information, on several different levels :

1. How to define who is "reading" what, when.
2. How to move as efficiently as possible to areas which seem to attract more or less interest.
3. How to provide a means for exchanging views on shared interests. No more "searching for a needle in a haystack": the idea here is to make it so that meeting online is predicated on having things in common.



<http://cityparadigms.timsoft.com>

(PC, IE 5.5, Flash 5, download applet for chat)

4. And finally, how to use interactivity so as to reinforce or re-define residual art forms. After all, the impact of still or moving images on the web (or off-line for that matter) is highly diluted by their sheer number. Digital art is a matter of organizing access to content – our approach is formal and provides a more sophisticated view of interactivity. How can a “click” of the mouse be photographic, or a hyper-link by essence musical ? Hence the word “paradigm”, in so far as “ways of seeing” organize any number of media, from any number of sources (including databases).

We turned to sound organized along a simulated band width to create a shared space (setting aside mapping metaphors because affinities have nothing to do with spatial coordinates) ; we divided the sound into three zones (evoking the city heard from afar, the city heard from up close, the city represented by abstract sounds) which unfold like an accordeon ; and we divided each zone into ten paradigms (highly inspired by Villes Invisibles by Italo Calvino.) Each paradigm is represented by an icon, characterized by a type of interactivity. The nicknames of those visiting the web site float above the band width and are grouped around paradigms depending on each visitors’ interests. When two or more people are on the same “wavelength”, a little fictional character at the bottom of the screen bends down and picks up a menu that allows any one seeking to meet others with the same interests to chat together.

The solutions found here are not all technically implemented, but they are illustrated by the prototype. “**City Paradigms**” has had a certain success in France, and was shown at International Symposium of Electronic Arts, 2000, Paris, and the subsequent MILIA 2001 in Cannes (international interactive fair - <http://www.milia.com/>). In addition to young engineers (rather skeptical at first about the project we had launched...) we worked with several groups of far less privileged students (École Multimedia, a vocational school in Paris) who created most of the graphics. Their input was crucial, and their enthusiasm quite inspiring.

Prototype II: “Sandscript”

The second project, still underway, is entitled “**Sandscript**”, and is structured around a chat space, in turn buried in images of a wind blown desert. It was developed thanks to the collaboration of a small company named **Timsoft**. Together with the team of artists, Timsoft engineers adapted their chat technology to create a “back office” authoring tool that allows one to create fictional “avatars” who contribute to an ongoing chat by means of timing devices or key words. The application, called “Tchat-Scene”, also allows artists to choreograph changes in surrounding frame sets, or create hyper-links between the chat space, the graphic environment and pop-ups. Once again, students from Paris’ ENST participated in the project, as well as a research group comprising linguists and semioticians.

We addressed several issues in this prototype (still on-going) :

1. We first tried to hone in on the idea of “co-presence”. What criteria might be used to create a truly collective experience where each individual’s arrival, presence (however passive) and departure would be noted, and affect the perception of a shared space ? Again, we turned to music. Each user has a nickname which is associated with a sound. By simply logging on,

every one “makes music together” . Each new arrival on the web site is adds to the sound track; the departure of someone logging off is also heard by all.

2. Our second concern was to link the dynamics of a fictional space (containing characters and bits of an ongoing plot) to the activity of chatters among themselves, more or less aware of the orchestrated “scene” in which they are participating. In “**Sandscript**” typing equals scratching the surface of things, and the more one “digs”, the more is revealed. In some instances, the content is limited to one user’s screen, in other instances, the changes are shared by all. Some characters are anonymous, indistinguishable from the average “user”; others are more conventional, imposing their own narrative space.

3. On a more theoretical level, we studied rhetoric as an intermedial form. Greek and Roman philosophers have a great deal to say on the subject. It is also fascinating to compare the writings of medieval scholars and contemporary play-writers on the forms speech can take, whether highly crafted or spontaneous. Controlling the timing of who says what when, opening subjective parentheses to interrupt an overall “picture”, allowing patterns to emerge over time, but not necessarily sequentially – all these factors, characteristic not only of chat spaces but also of much contemporary drama, are particularly interesting when analyzed in terms of rhetorical modes.



<http://www.concert-urbain.timsoft.com>
(PC, IE 5.5, Flash 6, download applet for chat)

By linking chatter to fiction, by mixing spontaneous and preprogrammed events, we've attempted to explore the limits of open forms on the World Wide Web. By transforming nicknames into harmonious ensembles, we've begun working on the idea of a collective voice. By triggering the appearance of a variety of digital and interactive media, we're boosting the act of writing into a type of performance. Via fictional characters, we've simulated a fictional

audience, whose reactions contribute to the overall emotional tonality of the site. Digital interactivity has helped us redefine what an on-line “situation” could be, blending movement, architecture and human presence. Our definition of form has evolved accordingly, shifting from static notions of shape to the types of flow between one representation and another. Even in an age where traditional notions of form have been replaced by the ubiquitous term “image”, internet’s magma of 0s and 1s offers a new platform for orchestrating sound, shape, narrative, and social interaction.
