Reading New Media Art

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Consider the dichotomy: an art object in a gallery setting versus a software program on a computer. On entering an exhibition of media art, we encounter signs that tell us that we are in the realm of Art: the overall exhibition space is dark, each installation is positioned in a separate, carefully lit space, each accompanied by a label with an artist's name. We know well what to do in this situation: we are supposed to perceive, contemplate, and reflect. Yet these initial signs are misleading. An exhibition of media art points us to very different cultural settings such as a computer games hall or an entertainment park (in each of these one often has to wait in line before getting a chance to "try" a particular exhibit) and also to a different type of cultural object (and, correspondingly, a different set of behaviors) — a software program in a computer. In approaching a media artwork, we typically discover some elements of standard human-computer interface (a computer monitor, a mouse; arrows, buttons and so on); we have to read instructions which tell us how to use it; we then have to go through the process of learning its own unique navigational metaphors. All in all, the behaviors which are required of us are intellectual problem solving, systematic experimentation and the quick learning of new tasks. Is it possible to combine these with contemplation, perceptual enjoyment and emotional response? In other words, is it possible to experience the work aesthetically while simultaneously learning how to "use" it?

The works in the NEWFOUNDLAND II exhibition provided a variety of different solutions to this basic problem of media art. One solution is avoiding an interactive interface altogether, as in Tamas Waliczky's installation THE WAY. The installation shows the third part of his stunning 3-D computer animation trilogy (the first two parts are THE GARDEN and THE FOREST) which narrates Waliczky's journey from the East to the West using specially constructed perspectival systems. THE WAY presents a rather grim view of the West: the typical sterility of 3-D computer animation turns out to be a perfect metaphor for the

sterility and regularity of the Western society; the inverted (as opposed to the central, as it is usually interpreted) perspective epitomizes the Western subject's self-sufficiency and isolation from his environment.

A different solution is exemplified by Toshio Iwai's PIANO-AS AN IMAGE MEDIA. A viewer of his installation does not have to struggle with a new interface because Iwai uses an interface already familiar to everybody: that of a piano. The installation can be seen as a playful response to the whole modern tradition of image-sound synthesis and also as a commentary on various relationships between the physical and the virtual which characterize the end of the twentieth century. Iwai sets up a whole network of these relationships: the physical affects the virtual (pressing the trackball creates computer-generated images of sounds) which in turn affects the physical (as the images of sounds "hit" the piano keys they actually become depressed as though being played by an invisible hand) which in turn affects the virtual (piano keys generate another set of computer-generated images).

Another challenge faced by media art is how to integrate various media. By reducing everything to the same binary code, digital computer, at least in theory, gives the same importance to text, still images, video, and sounds. In reality, existing computer programs emphasize one type of media over others: DIRECTOR adopts the metaphor of a slide show, PREMIERE forces on its user the conventions of video editing, while World Wide Web documents are text-based. We are still waiting for a true digital Gesamtkunstwerk which will take full advantage of the ability to interweave the distinct languages of different media. Among ARTINACT works, Luc Courchesne's PORTRAIT ONE and Jean-Louis Boissier's FLORA PETRINSULARIS represent particularly successful solutions to this challenge. In Boissier's piece, we are presented with a white page, containing a list. A table of contents for a book? A list of chapters? Clicking on each item leads us to a pair of video loops, moving off-phase like waves; clicking on one of these takes us to yet another loop: a rhythmically vibrating water surface. The form of a loop which structures the work on a number of levels becomes a metaphor for human desire which can never achieve resolution. A loop, which gave birth to modern cinema (all pre-cinematic apparatuses were based on short loops consisting of a few images) and which was then banished to the low-art realm

of cartoons, is resurrected by Boissier to become a fundamental element of a new multimedia language, an element capable of carrying rich and poetic meanings.

Courchesne's work elegantly combines the strengths of two visual traditions: modern graphic design and cinematic spectatorship. When a computer is waiting for our action, the black empty space between a silhouetted face of the character and sparsely positioned sentences becomes an active energy field — a negative space in the best tradition of modern design of still images. But as soon as a character begins to speak, we experience an intense cinematic identification which makes us mentally block the rest of the computer screen and even the rest of the room in which the computer is situated.

Another dichotomy which a number of works in NEWFOUNDLAND II begin to dissolve is between the traditions of collective and individualized viewing in screen-based arts. The first tradition span from magic lantern shows to twentieth-century cinemas. The second passes from the camera obscura, stereoscope and kinetoscope to head-mounted displays of VR. Both have their dangers. In the first tradition, individual's subjectivity can be dissolved in a mass-induced response. In the second, subjectivity is being defined through the interaction of an isolated subject with an object at the expense of intersubjective dialogue. In the case of viewers' interactions with ARTINTACT CD-ROMs, EVE and many of the installations in the show something quite new began to emerge: a combination of individualized and collective spectatorship. The interaction of one viewer with the work (via a joystick, a mouse, or a head mounted sensor) became in itself a new text for other viewers, situated within the work's arena, so to speak. This affects the behavior of this viewer who acts as a representative for the desires of others, and who is now oriented both to them and to the work.

EVE explores this situation most self-consciously. Its enclosed round shapes refer us back to the fundamental modern desire to construct a perfect self-sufficient utopia, whether visual (the nineteenth-century panorama) or social (after 1917 Russian Revolution G.I. Gidoni designed a monument to the Revolution in the form of a semi-transparent globe which could hold several thousand spectators). Yet, rather than being presented with a simulated world which has nothing to do with the real space of the viewer (as in typical VR),

the visitors who enter EVE's enclosed space discover that EVE's apparatus shows the outside reality they just left. Moreover, instead of being fused in a single collective vision (Gesamtkunstwerk, cinema, mass society), the visitors are confronted with a subjective and partial view. The visitors only see what one person wearing a head-mounted sensor chooses to show them, i.e., they are literally limited by this person's point of view. In addition, instead of a 360o view, they see a small rectangular image — a mere sample of the world outside. This visitor wearing a sensor, and thus literally acting as an eye for the rest of the audience, occupies many positions at once — a master subject, a visionary who shows the audience what is worth seeing and at the same time just an object, an interface between them and outside reality, i.e., a tool for others; a projector, a light and a reflector all at once. Similarly, EVE summarizes the whole Western history of simulation, functioning as a kind of Plato's cave in reverse: visitors progress from the real world inside the space of simulation where instead of mere shadows they are presented with a technologically enhanced (via stereo) image, which looks more real than their normal perceptions.

A viewer reading a work of media art is typically asked to utilize many distinct and opposing cultural codes at once. These include conventions for dealing with unrelated objects and settings (an artwork in a gallery versus a piece of software on a computer), opposing traditions of presentation (a rectangular frame versus a panoramic view; a movie screen versus a book page; a collective versus individual form of exhibition), and different mental processes and actions (perception and contemplation versus interaction and learning). This act of reading is always dangerous; like an acrobat on a tight rope, the viewer can lose his equilibrium and fall into the gap between the multitude of codes, interpretive conventions and cognitive skills required of him. Yet, by successfully meditating on what was previously thought of as distinct and unrelated a media artist can also discover new aesthetic possibilities. NEWFOUNDLAND II exhibition has given us many such discoveries.