

Engaging Characters at Art Interactive

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Media-based art exhibitions are becoming more and more prevalent in the cultural arena. After all, these are the tools of our times. However, even given this fact, there seems to be a prejudice against, or at the very least, a tendency away from, showing narrative work. Perhaps this is because it can be challenging and problematic to exhibit such work in public spaces, partially because the work is often meant to be experienced privately, as a single-user experience.

Many such pieces also offer technical challenges in their technological requirements and modes of display. We've probably all gone to an exhibit and tried to view a work that was experiencing technical difficulties—that is, one that's not working at the moment, due to a myriad of potential problems that can arise and, in fact, might just come with the territory of showing technological art.

Perhaps, it's also because much of this work requires more of the viewer's time. Time-based narrative works take time, which seems like an anathema to our current hyperspeed way of experiencing almost everything.

Last year, when Emanuel Lewin, Art Interactive's director, invited me to curate a show, I welcomed the opportunity to explore these ideas. (I've been following the intersection of art and technology for many years and am now a floating agent—that is, institutionally unaffiliated.)

And so I thought it would be important to provide a platform for viewing some of these

time-based narrative works. (A related panel at Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab also explored this topic. See the "Related Discussions" sidebar on p. 4 for more details.)

Defining the venue

Art Interactive is a nonprofit art space founded in 2001 by Boston-based entrepreneurs Emanuel Lewin and Irene Buchine. Situated at the heart of Central Square, a lively neighborhood between MIT and Harvard University, Art Interactive provides artists a supportive venue for showing cutting-edge work. It also offers the community in the Boston area—an epicenter of ground-breaking technological development—unparalleled opportunities for experiencing innovative art forms. Its arts advisory board members include Joe Paradiso, associate professor of media arts and sciences and codirector of the Things That Think research consortium at the MIT Media Laboratory; George Fifield, director of the Boston Cyber Arts Festival and New Media curator at the DeCordova Museum; Joseph Ketner, director of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University; and myself.

Art Interactive's mission is to provide a public forum that fosters self-expression and human interaction by developing and exhibiting contemporary, experimental, and participatory art. *The Boston Globe*, in a review coinciding with the gallery's public opening in 2002, commented, "Viewers here become part of the art ... There is nothing exactly like Art Interactive elsewhere in the United States."

Setting the stage

The exhibition I curated, *Engaging Characters*, presents various strategies where artists are working with media and new technologies to create and develop characters, playing with storytelling

continued on p. 4

For More Information

Engaging Characters was on view at Art Interactive from 26 July to 5 October 2003. For information on past, current, and future exhibitions at Art Interactive, visit <http://www.artinteractive.org>.

Related Discussions

Coinciding with the final weekend of the exhibition of *Engaging Characters*, there was a panel presented at MIT Media Lab entitled *Engaging Characters: Between the Virtual and the Real* at MIT's Bartos Theater on 2 October 2003. Presenters included Toni Dove and Julia Heyward (two of the artists from the exhibition) and two researchers from MIT, Bruce Blumberg and Joe Paradiso. Bruce Blumberg, head of the Synthetic Characters Group as well as codirector of the Digital Life Consortium at the Media Lab, is a frequent lecturer in courses on artificial life techniques for interactive characters. Paradiso, who directs the Responsive Environments Group and codirects the Things That Think Consortium at the Media Lab, is an expert on sensing technology. Paradiso has developed various systems that track human activity using electric field sensing, microwaves, laser ranging, passive and active sonar, piezoelectrics, and resonant electromagnetic tags.

The evening panel explored questions that both artists and researchers are addressing vis-a-vis the nature of interactive work: How does interactive, responsive work shift a viewer's relationship to narrative and character? How are character, time, and space altered in these kinds of works? What are some new methods for conveying narrative and character in non-linear and interactive forms of art, entertainment, and communications?

continued from p. 1

and narrative concepts in ways that go beyond the linear concept of plot and storyline. The works underscore the multidimensional, mutable nature of character. Viewers become active participants in constructing, driving, and activating the characters—and subsequently the narratives—in a range of interesting ways.

Many of the works offer a responsive quality, whether through the use of sensors, speech recognition and synthesis, robotics, or the now ubiquitous computer mouse interface. The driving force is the interchange between the viewer and the work, where the viewer becomes a collaborator in imagining and developing a character. Thus, the work isn't static, just as a character or personality isn't static, but is dependent on a dynamic exchange. And the experience is unique each time.

The title for this exhibition is intentional in its double meaning because the works offer multiple views and paths into engaging characters. Consider the multiple definitions for these words. If something is engaging, it's considered attractive, pleasant, winning, or charming. To engage somebody in something means to draw into, involve, win over and attract, and to hold the attention of something. Character can denote a well-known person, but a person who's peculiar or eccentric can also be a character. Character also refers to a person portrayed in an artistic piece, such as a film, drama, or novel. Additionally, it can mean the combina-

tion of qualities or features that distinguishes one person, group, or thing from another, such as a particular disposition or quality. Idiomatic expressions also exist, such as when someone is considered acting "in character" or "out of character."

In *Engaging Characters*, viewers have the chance to be both in and out of character, and they can literally enter in the character's world as well as experience it from without. These works confront viewers with questions of authorship, physicality, identity, and space. In traditional media, the viewer's position is usually physically passive or still, and the body isn't really considered. But with a responsive interface, the body becomes active and the experience becomes embodied, something that is more intuitively and viscerally felt. When a viewer physically navigates the story space through movement and direct engagement, there is an accretion of information that builds knowledge of the character. Here, the viewer becomes immersed in a world of storytelling where the nature of character, time, and space are altered.

Displaying the characters

Julia Heyward's *Miracles in Reverse* (see Figure 1) investigates ways for the viewer to enter the cinematic plane in a merging of multimedia, performance, and music. It's a time-based self-portrait in the form of an interactive audio-visual album—a hybrid of a family album and a music album. *Miracles* is programmed in the language used by game designers but is more like a movie in its aesthetics and points of view. There are over 75 scenes in *Miracles*, with multiple characters and paths that viewers can follow.

The piece is structurally and conceptually composed of loops that include the interactive viewer who can literally play the artist's life movies like a musical instrument (which evokes sounds and pictures). By scrubbing (clicking and dragging the mouse back and forth) within the frame, the movie animates at the player's chosen speed and direction.

The piece is designed to dissect and examine the mechanics of memory. In *Miracles*, a correlation exists between the human brain's random accessing of fragmented and sometimes distorted memories and the computer's ability to mutate, duplicate, lose, and retrieve stored information. How we survive, distort, store, and access the memories gets equal time in this life's reflections. *Miracles* aims to poetically simulate the artist's internal mental theater and stars the following characters: visionary Christian parents, pedophile

neighbors, Jesus, the Devil, Adam and Eve, an alien, and indirectly, Heyward herself. The interactive player has to play the program proactively (like a game or musical instrument) to animate the characters and trigger the narrative elements. This active relationship is similar to the dynamic between live performer and audience. The prize of this personal game-playing is to know the artist. *Miracles* is a self-portrait, but a self as a process, not a fixed entity, where the interactive player is a critical part of the process.

Toni Dove's *Sally* or *The Bubble Burst* (see Figure 2, next page) is an interactive DVD-ROM that uses speech recognition and synthesis to let viewers enter the world of Sally, an inhabitable responsive narrative character based on the 1930s fan and bubble dancer, Sally Rand. In three interactive zones, viewers manipulate a hypnotic performance of Sally's notorious bubble dance (recreated from research, photos, and newsreels of the original Sally Rand), hear observations about the Great Depression and the unconscious of consumerism from a chorus of objects voiced by well-known downtown New York City performers, and speak directly to Sally in an interactive conversation using a microphone. Viewers can also use the keyboard to make Sally speak any text or change her attitude and expressions.

Sally creates a unique, intimate kind of interactivity as viewers speak and sing and as they use a mouse and keyboard to inhabit and converse with the unpredictable Sally. Sally is inhabited like a digital puppet, where the viewers see their actions reflected on the screen. The structure is based loosely on the model of conversation, where the viewer engages with the character, which gradually reveals something. A wireless head microphone lets viewers navigate the video space with vocal commands, sing to Sally with pitch and amplitude tracking, and talk to this smart character (who will talk back) with speech recognition and synthesis. Constructions of gender, the human, the robot, and the machine collide with each other, creating a tension between expecta-



Figure 1. A triptych of characters—Mom, an alien, and Jesus.—from Julia Heyward's Miracles in Reverse (Courtesy of Julia Heyward, © 2003.)

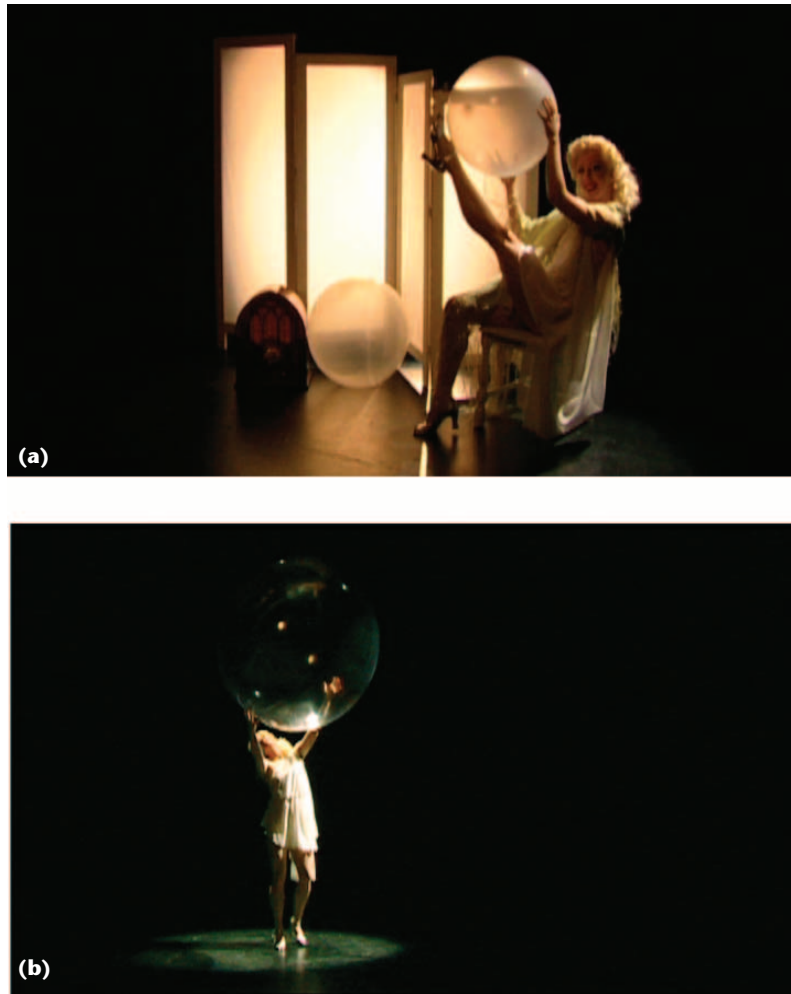
tions of human versus machine representation.

Technology is often used to spin unrealistic utopian fantasies. In *RL (Real Life)*, Janine Cirincione and Michael Ferraro subvert that delusion, creating a conflicted view of a technologically driven world. *RL* is a meditation on the schism between what we envision and what we see; what we imagine ourselves to be and what we are; the ideal and the real as expressed through and contrasted between human intimacy and the cultural residue of idealized public spaces; and grandiose public displays of power and the humdrum, quotidian normalcy of real life.

RL features a pair of animated characters who live in a tiny, abject world. We're voyeurs into the lives of these characters who behave as people do when they're alone and unwatched. Their conversations are filled with the mundane banalities and arguments that occur between couples who have too little to say—all of which reveal the small details that make up the fabric of everyday life. Viewers are encouraged to stay and hang out with these characters for a while. As viewers spend time with the characters, their movements trigger sensors placed throughout the room. The viewer's behavior is fed into a computer and processed so the characters respond to the stimuli in their environment. Thus, the animated spectacle is composed on the fly, different for each viewer.

In *RL*, the interactive relationship between the viewers and the animated characters is crucial. In this way, the work attempts to expand what interactive means by combining a cinematic landscape with computer code to generate the imagery in real time. The installation presents

Figure 2. (a) Sally in her dressing room and (b) doing her bubble dance, from Toni Dove's *Sally or The Bubble Burst*. (Courtesy of Toni Dove, © 2003.)



windows onto the characters' lives and creates a kind of living animated theater. The characters and sets are programmed to exist, speak, and act differently each time they respond to the audience. Although the piece is interactive (viewers' movement throughout the gallery trigger the characters and the sets to engage according to the activity in the room), its improvisational spirit is reminiscent of theatrical traditions of *commedia dell'arte* and theater of the absurd.

Pussy Weevil, by Marina Zurkow and Julian Bleecker, is an individual software character/persona, a screen-based 2D animated character, that also responds to the viewer's distance or proximity. *Pussy Weevil*'s behaviors respond to certain parameters that define its characteristics; *Pussy Weevil* reacts to the viewer's position, which influences how the character acts and behaves. The piece involves choreography in space and deals with subject-object relationships vis-a-vis the viewer. *Pussy Weevil* variously ignores you, derides you, or runs away in fright.

Pussy Weevil is otherworldly, like a Darwinian specimen or a freak on display. At the same time, its prelinguistic behaviors are horribly familiar: *Pussy Weevil* is pure Id. It's a proto-Tex-Avery character, whose form is malleable and virtually indestructible. It mutates, splits, spits, and glitches; as an immediate object of a viewer's interventions, it never finds a middle ground between dark heckling and pitiful fear. *Pussy Weevil* lives in the zone of biologically hazardous materials—or maybe it's only a danger to itself. It might be just a sorrowful, botched genetic experiment that has about as much sense as a dull, reactive house pet.

In *Pussy Weevil*, the artists draw from char-

acter development and narrative inquiry in several contexts: the animated cartoon, the physical object, and interactive space. Like *RL*, *Pussy Weevil* questions how digital characters can be affected by interactions in analog spaces and examines the relationship between the real and computer-made worlds.

In 1992, Chico MacMurtrie founded Amorphous Robot Works, a collaborative group of artists, technicians, and programmers who create multifaceted machine sculptures that interact in their uniquely designed environments. The work involves a kinesthetic inquiry into the human condition, which has resulted in the creation of more than 200 mechanical sculptures that assume anthropomorphic and abstract forms.

The robotic sculptures or characters created by Amorphous Robot Works have a low-tech/high-tech quality of contrast, synthesizing a garage-machine aesthetic with computer technologies. These characters often interact in uniquely designed environments where some of the

machines or characters have complex feedback signals so that they know where they are. The character's action is often activated in response to viewer movement in proximity to the sculpture.

YoYo Berimbau, which was on view at Art Interactive, is a computer-controlled robotic sculpture, part of a community of 59 others that perform in technological concert with one another. It's part of a larger piece called *The Ancestral Path*, and in the piece the members rely on preprogrammed sequences with room for audience participation through a vision system that produces a technological spectacle of sound and motion. Powered by electric signals and compressed air, these figures can tumble, draw, drum, seizure, and paint. The characters developed by ARW—a range of metal and plastic humanoid, animal, and anthropomorphic forms—reveal the awkward and tragic lyricism of the human relationship to machine and the profound mythology that humanity has bestowed on machines.

Central to Claudia Hart's art practice is the development of feminist antiheroines. *E* is one such character, a woman of the future who can change her face to go with her clothes. *E* is a virtual being with an extensive wardrobe; she mutates and deforms her body from image to image, and dress to dress. Representing the contemporary woman's condition in today's postindustrial, technological society, *E* is beautiful, but she's nevertheless the ultimate fashion victim: her face is so mutable that its transformations render her actually faceless—ultimately the state not just of women (although particularly of women) but of everyone who participates in our sybaritic, consumer-driven world with its endless parade of technological products and entertainments peopled by the cosmetically reconstructed movie stars that we adore.

In the series, *E Meets the Photography of Larry Bercow* (see Figure 3), Hart has collaborated with photographer Larry Bercow to integrate *E* into atmospheric street scenes of urban malaise set against the backdrop of anonymous modern architecture. Converging the potential of bio-engineering with present-day reality of marketing cycles, Hart proposes *E* to be the ultimate consumer product in a dystopian future world in which the artificial has uneasily crossed the boundary of the real. Although the work presented at Art Interactive is in the form of still photographs, Hart used 3D software to create the character. Conceptually, the work can be considered interactive in its construction of charac-



ter in the same way that a book can be considered interactive in that it lets viewers add their own imaginings to aspects of the character's life or story.

Looking to the future

Is it live or Memorex? Is it real, or is it virtual? Just like the mirror in Alice's looking-glass world, the boundaries between the real and the simulated are becoming less distinct. Exploring these boundaries, artists and technologists are using new technologies and interactive paradigms to redefine the notion of artist and viewer, of character and narrative. In many cases, the art experience is no longer passive but requires active participation.

The work in *Engaging Characters* presents a sampling of artists who are working in multiple disciplines, working cross-platform, creating new forms from hybrid combinations, defying the labels of definition, inventing new languages, and advancing new concepts in narrative forms and interactive art. The hope is that viewers will find the characters in these works engaging as they take the time and become immersed in the experiential nature of these works. **MM**

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Figure 3. *E* with Jug Ears in Thierry Mugler Apron Dress. *Concept and 3D by Claudia Hart. Photography by Larry Bercow.* (Courtesy of Claudia Hart and Larry Bercow, © 2003.)