

ARTIFICIAL CHANGELINGS

A WORK OF
RESPONSIVE CINEMA IN PROGRESS

By Toni Dove

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Archeology of a Mother Tongue, a virtual reality installation, was a collaboration with Michael Mackenzie and was sponsored by the Banff Centre for the Arts as part of their Art and Virtual Environments seminar. It is an immersive interactive narrative piece. It combines interactive computer graphics, laser disc video and slides with interactive sound. The work sample is a compilation of short excerpts from the installation which takes approximately forty minutes to experience. As a viewer you navigate the piece with a small plastic camera that allows you to "look" around the spaces and a glove that allows you to start and stop and to touch objects. In the first segment, a dream sequence, touching an animated figure takes you through a path in the architecture which has a narrative segment attached to it. You are in the point of view of the Coroner, one of the two main characters. It is her dream - a memory (forgotten in waking life) of being adopted as a child from the city to which she is returning to investigate the murder of a child. There are three environments. The first (the dream) is based on a Piranesi prison drawing, the second is a human ribcage that functions as the transport plane which brings the Coroner to the city. In this second environment orienting your virtual body in the space causes you to collide with invisible planes. These become cloud banks that trigger sections of narrative and bleed through memories of a child, the violinist, who has been murdered. The third environment is a copper wire hand. The hand is a short term memory construct built by the Pathologist, the other main character, who is overwhelmed by memory and can't function in the present. The objects in the hand are memories - some are of forensic details of the autopsy of the child and tell the story of her life in the city. The skull, with its wireframe brain inside, is the Pathologist's long-term memory. When you touch these objects they grow large and you enter them, moving around while you hear accompanying sections of narrative.

The experience of working on Archeology of a Mother Tongue left me with the desire to further explore certain interactive and immersive issues.

I was interested in working with a more transparent interface so that the viewer was free of the elaborate apparatus usually identified with virtual reality. This apparatus creates a hermetic experience and isolates the viewer from the real space and from other people in the space. I wanted to see if I could keep the sense of space and communal audience experience without losing the viewers sense of immersion.

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I was interested in working with a more accessible technology for purposes of distribution. The high end technologies used in the virtual reality installation made it very difficult to travel the piece or to exhibit it.

Finally, I wanted to use a different model for interactivity. The logic tree as a structure was labor intensive, rather like washing your kitchen floor with a q-tip, and created an illusion of choice that I felt was a dissimulation. Everything is pre-planned and pre-programmed. It gave a false sense of agency and empowerment to a viewer that was not a good model on which to base a developing syntax. I was interested in developing an environment with a responsive personality. If you pushed on it, it would push back. A narrative would be based on an accretion of character interactions. I wanted to experiment with ideas of body identification between the viewer and the characters in the piece and to experiment with, or use as a point of departure, ideas based on synesthesia.

This led to the piece I am currently working on: Artificial Changelings: the Boned Body, the Chaos of Flesh

“Chaque époque rêve la suivante”
- Michelet

An interactive laser disk and sound installation. The narrative develops along two parallel threads, one set in Paris at the turn of the century during the rise of the department store, and one set in a geographically undefined future. The character in the 19th century, Arathusa, is a kleptomaniac given to delicate self-cutting, dreams and flights of ecstasy. Her attempts at ecstatic transcendence are juxtaposed against the restrictions her body endures in the form of corsets, stays, and the extremes of tight-lacing. These physical restrictions become metaphors for the strategies of social control which were part of the tactic for the containment of women in that era and by extension — our own.

Arathusa dreams of a young girl in the future who is an anarchist in search of an enemy. This woman, Zilith, has a problem - her inability to find a target, a center of power, or something or someone to blame. Power seems to disperse like a gas. Her research is conducted on a computer which she carries on her hips like 18th century panniers. The computer's screen is a “smoke screen” that projects information as well as providing a protective cloud for her - figuratively like the octopus's cloud of ink and literally as a shield to electronically block intrusive surveillance.

Each woman is involved in a romance. Arathusa, who is already having an affair with a department store, becomes entangled in a romance that evolves out of a battle of wits with a man who is a gambler and an entrepreneur in charge of display in the department store. She becomes his greatest display as a performer of human emotions and her struggle for autonomy

leads her to partial freedom from social convention. Zilith, a polymorphously perverse multiple personality, plays out her romance on a network of electronically linked entities. The romance is here defined not by deception, but by projection. She projects her desire onto the object of her desire and he projects onto her in a tango of misapprehension and misconception. The spheres of cultural influence have moved from strategies of discipline to those of a gaseous and mutable permeation. Her lover re-uses the technologies of image projection that construct the realities of their world like a contemporary DJ scratches on record albums. His performances reroute existing technology and lead to a collaboration that allows the two characters to physically connect. She then dreams the past, an 18th century theater scene. The lights are on and verbal interactions with performers and audience become a reference or template for the audience behavior of the interactive installation itself.

Woven through the piece are references to audience behavior and public life at different moments in the development of spectacle - the 18th century theater scene; the 19th century audience, in the dark, passive; a 21st century audience watching a skilled “image-scratcher”/interactor as a performer in a VR piece and a live video feed of the audience for the installation. I would like to look at recipes of reception, to make them self-conscious and perhaps disrupt them or open some territories for approaching the social space of the installation with a fresh eye.

The intrusion of capital into the sphere of relationships, how this perverts human connections and how they survive in the margins of economic transaction in spite of this, becomes a central theme of the piece. It traces the changes in human interaction and the concomitant alterations in the construction of spectacle, audience behavior and public space from the industrial revolution to the technological revolution. The past becomes a model, an armature, a ruin and a continuum from which the future is imagined and the present critiqued.

Relationship of Content and Technology

I have always thought of narrative as a wandering accretion in a three-dimensional cube. I have in the past used the development of fictional metaphors for theoretical ideas as a story base that is driven by an escalation of emotional engagement. I am now, in addition, interested in exploring an engine that uses certain technical devices, such as virtual illusion based on action and response, to create an emotional metaphor that is played out in the body's memory - a type of synesthesia. The viewer will receive different reactions from the piece based on body movements and spatial positioning. As the author of the narrative and characters I am creating video androids that gradually reveal themselves to a user through somatic interaction, memories and speech. I am attempting to create a cinematic environment with a personality or personalities that accrete over time using a story engine or program based on the three act screenplay. This allows a development through time and the

creation of certain plot points and crises that surround somatic interaction with a narrative frame that fleshes out the experience with a richer content - a proliferation of detail that charges the physical experience. I am not interested in the metaphor of choice - the viewer does not choose who gets the girl. I am interested in an immersive somatic experience that triggers certain feelings of engagement that can be used to intensify narrative and critique. I am interested in attempting to "cube" the narrative for an interactive viewer and in surrounding the installation with a social space for audience participation and reflection. The piece can be presented as a feature-length performance event or in three segments as a serial.

The installation consists of a curved rear projection screen suspended in a room with some chairs in a semi-circle for an audience. It should be possible to walk around or circulate freely in the room. Interspersed with several non-interactive narrative sequences that frame the experience are segments that offer the audience an opportunity to have a responsive experience with the characters and environment. A projected map appears on the floor in front of the screen; the outline of a phrenology skull for the 19th century that dissolves to an MRI brain map for the 21st century. When an audience member steps into a character's head there are labeled territories - memory, speech, body and trance/dream that produce different images or sounds based on movement. A video motion sensing system translates location, speed and amount of movement into programmed behaviors that produce sound and image on the screen. Movement close to the screen will produce intimate revelations - close-up images and whispered sounds, movement away from the screen will create memories clouded by layers of time - transparent images and washes of sound. The characters become like marionettes with unpredictable reactions based on the movement of the viewer on the map. In the body section, for instance, if the viewer moves their body left and right it will move the character's body. If the viewer speeds up movement the video speeds up - if they slow down the character moves in slow motion.

There is the possibility of moving back and forth between the centuries as if they were parallel realities suspended in a universe where time has no linear direction - the trance/dream space takes you through a time tunnel to the memory section of the character in the alternate century. The viewer does not change the narrative events, but develops a more immersive relationship with the characters and environment based on physical behavior. Different viewer responses will produce different aspects of content, emotional tone and information.

I think there are within some of the current developing technologies trajectories that have possibly frightening yet fascinating ramifications. What does it mean when a machine responds to you as a human being does, or seems to? What does it mean when a machine produces a sensual engagement usually reserved for a relationship with another person? I'm interested

in the idea of a somatically engaged connection with a responsive machine that has been programmed by a person. There is an interesting dislocation in this relationship, mediated by technology, that echoes the themes of the narrative of this piece: the perversion of human connections and their reformations in a continually changing context.

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