THE WAY IS NOT DIFFICULT, BUT YOU MUST AVOID CHOOSING

By Michael Hill

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T his is the Pergamon museum in Berlin. It houses the ceremonial walkway brought back from Babylon by German archaeologists late last century. Like a lot of museums, you can hire a cassette player with an audio tour, which provides a running commentary to the exhibits. Its a very simple way to tie together moments in time with places in space. The information on the tape is also there on cards beside the exhibits to be read, but the majority of people take this tour and prefer to be led around the place rather than spending time with each exhibit and letting the stones speak for themselves.

What does this mean when we see that all these people want to make their non-linear experiences linear? Unfortunately it seems to say that most people still like to be told things in a sequence. Perhaps this has a little to do with the centuries of television that people have watched, and we might start to unpick this as television's hold is lessened.

But what I think people appreciate from these tours is not so much the sense of order, but the sense of duration. The experience has been made linear, but it also has been made finite. For two marks, you can get closure on four thousand years of Assyrian history.

I want to talk about how the interactive form can begin to create more deeply emotional experiences than we are currently used to, and what may in fact be stopping us from reaching the depth of experience that, for example, the cinema offers. I like this image because it offers an example of an oscillation occurring between the roles of observer and participant. I think that we need to grasp the paradox of these two seeming opposites and draw them together if we are to create deeper and more emotionally affecting experiences within the interactive form. For the purpose of this talk, I'm only concentrating on those screen-based works on the spectrum between the video game and the interactive movie.

We tend to dismiss cinema as old media. We deny that we have more deeply immersive experiences at the cinema than at the arcade. Are these deep experiences only to do with the quality of the programs, the sex, the violence, the cinematic apparatus, the popcorn, or is there something else at work?
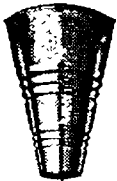
The predominant analogy for the cinema throughout its life has been the dream. Many people have drawn the similarities between the immobility of the spectator and the sleeper, the dimming of the lights in the auditorium and the descent into sleep, the dance of images in a void, and the inability of either sleeper or spectator to respond to a call to action.

We can look at the more contentious extensions of the analogy where Hollywood is a Dream Factory, the screen is a breast, the film is psycho-analytical material, and the entire chain from dream to cinema is a subject to be studied as though mentally ill. Which of course should not be discounted.

Even though the cinema/dream analogy may present more problems than it solves, what it does do is suggest that the cinema exists in a state of symbiosis with the unconscious. This connection is also a way of understanding why the ultimately passive cinema is more immersive than contemporary efforts in interactive media.

By preparing the spectator for what comes after by what comes first, the cinema can create a greater depth of feeling, a more direct road to the unconscious. Timing and placement can be carefully controlled to create epiphanies and realisations in the spectator. In good hands, the spectator feels spiritually renewed, in bad hands, the spectator feels manipulated.

I am interested whether we can create the same feeling in interactive media, or whether the constant call upon the conscious mind to make choices, actually short circuits our ability to stir the lower depths of the unconscious. I wonder whether there is a form of interactivity which can offer the deep, dreamlike state of the cinema, and still let us hold on to our new-found role as participants.

At about the same time as computers started to make it possible to make more vigorous explorations of non-linear narratives, dream researchers started to seriously examine the role of the lucid dream.

Lucid dreaming is where you are dreaming, and you know that you are dreaming. Your dreaming self can move within the dream and shape its content. Even though danger may be present, you feel protected because you know you can change the outcome of the dream, or even wake up.

In its most heightened form, the lucid dream is accompanied by sharpened sounds, strengthened colours, smells, tastes, and feelings in such a pronounced state that they are similar to waking hallucinations. There is an accompanying sense of clarity and of calmness.

Ancient cultures and now dream researchers also believe that the lucid dream comes from a higher plane. Mystics have used them as a place to find answers. You would ask the question before you slept, and then again in the dream.

Often your answer would come to you from a wise person or an ancestor in the course of the dream.

In many ways it is seen as a state to attain, like enlightenment. Significantly, the lucid dream is also always seen as psycho-pathologically healthy.

It may be interesting then to try to create an interactive work which operates like a lucid dream, just as many early film makers consciously tried to make dream cinema. While we know that there can be nothing less surreal than consciously evoking the surreal, this line of inquiry has left us some magnificent works of cinema from Melies, Bunuel, Tarkovsky and countless others.

If we wanted to create an interactive work with similarity to the lucid dream, we would want it to be totally immersive, to be hyperreal to the point of hallucination, we would want it to stimulate all the senses in a way which the cinema can stimulate our hearing and vision, we would want to be able to enter the work and negotiate it, even change it, we might even want to be able to ask a question before we entered the work that might be answered by our interactions, and most importantly, we would want to be able to choose when to be an observer, and when to be a participant and not be penalised for either.

I realise that works like Myst and Cosmology of Kyoto can be traversed without recourse to action and the user can pass between the states of simply looking around and acting within the world. Likewise the second Journeyman project CD has a mode where you can simply scroll through the environments without having to do all the tricks and gather weapons, but these works don't quite suggest how best to create a balance between observation and participation.

Interactive cinema artist Graham Weinbren grapples with the issues of continuous interaction in the program and the relationship of the unconscious to the program material. In his laserdisc installation, Sonata, Weinbren offers a number of streams of story which can be entered by the participant as they flow past. The work has duration, it offers continuous interaction, and instead of choosing options from a range of preselected outcomes, the participant feels that they are channelling a stream. You choose when you want to intervene. If you don't interact, you don't die. Small movements and changes are made which obviously have outcomes further down the track, but the feeling is of making small deliberations instead of life changing choices.

Weinbren talks of the importance of balancing the program's sense of continuity with the participant's desire for interaction. In Sonata he has managed to create a work which is interactive without being interruptive.

Interestingly, Weinbren describes his work as interactive cinema, as a temporal art form. And his metaphor takes the form

of an emotional and intellectual landscape to negotiate, rather than a depiction of a space.

To my mind this work offers the beginnings of a form which draws together the observer and the participant, much in the manner of the lucid dream. Material can be altered, meaning becomes apparent after the choice is made, the participant deals with the arrival of the next image or event, and places it in the context of a gradually increasing meaning.

So the question becomes, how can you embed the decision making process into the experience of the work? How do you keep the participant from stepping outside the work every time a choice is made. The model of the multi-path drama is wrong because it doesn't allow the participant to interact at any time, and the videogame model is wrong because it doesn't allow the participant the option of not interacting for certain sequences. Neither of these models are close to life. Life doesn't call upon us to make choices every second, nor make a decision under pain of death every time we turn a corner. Nor does it offer us cleanly branching paths. Life doesn't ever give us the feeling that we are in control for any longer than the time it takes it to see our parents.

Perhaps I am making too much of this distinction between observation and participation. In Heisenberg's universe perhaps it's even foolish to establish this separation. As we are getting very used to the idea of observers who change their world through the act of observing, maybe there is no longer a difference between the participant and the observer.

Yet, in our efforts to create a more viscerally interactive form , we seem to have let the term 'interactive' describe only those works which we manipulate with our hands. The way in which the audience projects their fears and desires onto the screen hero still remains one of the simplest and most elegant interfaces. The next stage of the interactive cinema has to re-establish the psychological connection between viewer and screen by helping the audience become active observers rather than remote and diminished participants. Until we restore the balance between observer and participant (and I suggest we look for clues within the lucid dream) the interactive form will sway between reflex-tester and novelty. In the words of the sage: The Way is not difficult, but you must avoid choosing.