

# INTERFACE METAPHORS & NEW NARRATIVES IN INTERACTIVE MEDIA

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*Digital Interactive media require metaphor based, organizational models by which to conceptually situate the viewer and to provide a way of accessing and understanding data. By knowing "the story" or metaphor, the viewer can successfully navigate inside the interactive program. As a result, these metaphor environments promise to be the key site for innovative developments of a linguistic, symbolic, aesthetic, sensory and conceptual nature, redefining the interactive viewer's experience within the digital environment. This presentation will discuss the relevance and conceptualization of interface metaphors with examples of the artists' recent works.*

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**T**he mechanized sound of an old movie projector is triggered by the flickering motion of an early 1950's black and white movie. A smiling woman turns her head towards the camera through a shower of film scratches. A man walks into the frame and they kiss. To the right of this scene a color panel comes alive with a fast moving camera pan of a graffiti covered wall and stairs, the movement accentuated by the sound of heavy traffic noises. The camera stops when it reaches the site of the kissing scene recorded some fifty years earlier. With the click of the mouse, the screen changes to an architectural floor plan animated by the sound of footsteps of what we imagine to be archivists silently moving around.

*An Anecdoted Archive from the Cold War* is an interactive artwork on CD-ROM designed as a museum exhibition display. The Archive features early 1950's Central European personal and official Communist material in the form of home movies, objects, family documents, Socialist propaganda, money, sound recordings, news reports, books, identity cards, photographs of public documents and video footage of Central European places and events. These have been part of my collection of objects and narratives related to the Cold War, gathered during the past twenty years. The items, grouped into some sixty topics, were



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organized thematically in eight rooms superimposed on the original floor plan of the former Workers' Movement (Propaganda) museum in Budapest, the original contents of which have been in permanent storage since the end of Communism in 1990.

Viewers experience this Archive both in the digital environment of the CD-ROM and in the real-world architectural space of the gallery in which the computer program is generally exhibited. The Archive's contents are listed in white letters on the darkened gallery's walls surrounding the table on which the computer is positioned. This visual cataloging serves to emphasize the installation's reference to a research archive environment. An overhead projection and loudspeakers amplify the computer's contents to engage the standing audience waiting their turn. Each viewer interacts with the computer archive by selecting stories according to their own interests and chance. As a result, they construct varying synopses of the archive's content and context determined by the sequence of their choices and the depth of their explorations.

The objects, sounds, publications and stories that make up the contents of the *Anecdoted Archive* were collected during sporadic visits to Hungary in the 1970's and 80's. They eventually evolved into a loose grouping of artifacts that came to embody a biographical narrative about an identifiable place and time. In the process of organizing the archive's contents, categories emerged which established their own sense. At this juncture, a transformation began to take place as the *Archive's* disparate elements of personal to official and ideologically diversified material began to coalesce through a set of internal links. The process by which diverse knowledges merge formally into an institutionalized discourse exemplifies the dynamic nature of the archive described by Michel Foucault as that "*practice* that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events." An interactive archive consisting of digitally encoded contents became the means to fuse the items and multiple references together to inscribe them into a unified form.

The somewhat irreverent idea of superimposing my personal narrative on the floor plan of the Budapest's Worker's Movement museum provided structural cohesiveness and a rich narrative potential. The appropriated museum's floor plan was subdivided into color coded "rooms" to establish thematic ordering for the accumulated fragments, stories and objects. These "chapters" created contextual meaning for the archive's contents, defining hierarchical relations and differences. The floor plan metaphor further emphasized the discursive potential of its interface as a site where the personal narrative could enter into dialogue with the formal structure and content of the museum's authoritative history. The intent to contrast subjectivities and interpretive commentaries in relation to the distant formality of official material functioned to underscore this archive's supposition that historical inscription as an act of narration refutes the notion of a single unified history, resulting instead in fragmented narratives that contradict and disprove one another.

On first thought, a digital interactive archive might not seem that different from its analog counterpart, for instance such as a standard library where one samples books in a non-linear random fashion by selectively pulling them off-the-shelf. However, near instant access to information across geographic space, simpler modes of information storage with greater precision, simultaneous retrieval of cross-media data such as sound, image and text, and the ever increasing superior sorting and ordering capabilities of structural databases over analog sequential models are some of the obvious advantages of interactive digital media.

The transition from the real-world information environment to the digital model involves an additional necessary component, the interface metaphor which functions as an organizational model that conceptually situates the viewer into a place and provides a framework or a logical way of accessing data. Some of the current familiar examples include "mail", obviously a system of sending and receiving communication, architectural environments, and adventure "treasure hunt" narratives, each of which functions according to the logic of their referential models. By knowing "the story" or metaphor, one can successfully navigate within it to access the information. These metaphor environments promise to be the key site for innovative developments of a linguistic, symbolic, aesthetic, sensory and conceptual nature, redefining the interactive viewer's experience within the digital environment.

Interface metaphors quantitatively transform the information that pass through them. They charge the information contextually with new meaning on both the symbolic and literal plane. When the viewer first begins to interact with the *Anecdoted Archive*, the articulation of the interface's navigational and visual structure becomes the initial experience of the archive's content. The museum floor plan reference, the interface design, the pathways, and architectural metaphor embody the environment through which the viewer must navigate in search of stories. One's focused attention to the interface quickly diminishes with the acquisition of maneuvering skills and becomes displaced by the search and consumption of the *Archive's* stories. But on further reflection, the somewhat taken-for-granted interface environment, consisting of title bars, selection buttons, color coding, defined pathways and sequentially determined events, reveals itself as the key component of the work - Its site of authorship. Without it, the *Archive's* stories, images, sounds and references would collapse into a meaningless mass of information; narratives without a place to belong, odds & ends without a context and framework.

The interface metaphor provides the context that weaves the stories together and gives the work its meaning. A narrative evolves in the viewers' minds, constructed through the sequential accumulation of their viewing choices and guided by expectations or a sense of truth or the real. In *Vision & Painting*, Norman Bryson argues that the real is that which "lies in a co-

incidence between a *representation* and that which a particular society proposes and assumes as its reality: a reality that involves the complex formation of codes of behavior, law psychology, etc. all those practical norms which govern the stance of human beings toward their historical environment.” In the digitally simulated environment where the viewer actively participates in shaping the outcome of the story as it unfolds, to function within an interactive archive is to engage in constructing a hybridized real, to make visible one’s beliefs within a reality articulated by metaphors.

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