

Richard Povall, Convenor

Present at the Round Table

Peter Coppin, Carnegie Mellon University, USA
Todor Toddoff, Faculté Polytechnique de Mons, Belgium
Martine Corompt, artist, Melbourne, Australia
Jeran Rudi, Norwegian Network for Technology Acoustics and Music, Oslo, Norway
Keith Brown, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK
Martin Spanjaard, artist, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Niranjana Rajah, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia
Richard Povall, Oberlin Conservatory of Music, USA
Unknown1(U/K1), student from Utrecht
Unknown2 (U/K2), artist from Denmark

This roundtable attempted to address formal and aesthetic issues arising from the making of interactive work. The following is a rough attempt to document the discussion, paraphrasing much of what was said (despite the appearance of a verbatim transcription.) I hope this style of documentation gives a more accurate feel for the roundtable which seemed a welcome opportunity to discuss an issue in some depth with a relatively small group of delegates

The panel convenor began by framing the discussion with a number of questions:

- what exactly do we mean by the term "interactive"?
- what are the compositional/structural issues raised by the notion of interactivity?
- how does interactive work affect our sense of structure — of the composed time domain?
- is it possible to deal with linear structures within an interactive framework?
- does interactive work have an aesthetic, or even a language of its own?
- what genuine role does the user/interactor play in the shaping of the actual material of the piece? or of the overall structure of the piece?
- how can we go further in developing a compositional or structural language for these new media?
- how have interactive media affected notions of collaboration?
- just how much creative control should the artist give up to the user/interactor?
- are we interested in or willing to cede aesthetic content/structure to the user/interactor?

MS.talked about two notions or models of interactivity: i) the interactive object is like another human being — we have no idea how it will react, there is an element of unpredictability; and ii) the interactive object is like an instrument, which has a set of fixed expectations. The instrument, like any other, requires practice and familiarity to play well.

Most interactive pieces are like a crude version of ii).

RP:Is that because of intent, or is it more to do with the limitations of the tools available to most authors?

MS:Both. I build objects that try to use the human response model. My objects react not only to current stimuli, but to past events: they learn about past behaviour, and use that history when responding to current stimuli. In this way, the user

should be able to understand the response of the object, but not necessarily predict it.

RP:Are the majority of artists not so interested in this human-response model because they want to keep a greater degree of control over the final outcome?

NR:Wanted to take a step back in questioning the meaning of the work interactive. In the late 80s I visited an exhibition by Yoko Ono at the Riverside Galleries in London. The piece consisted of a blank canvas with a number of paint pots and brushes in front of it. I watched many people take part in this "interactive painting", but felt unable to take part myself. Later, I felt I needed to make my own contribution, as an artist, and wrote, on the wall not the canvas, "why stop at the edge?" in tiny lettering. A couple of weeks later, visiting the gallery again, I noticed my words had been whitewashed over. The illusion of interactivity is something to watch out for — it's really parameters of control — this is an aesthetic issue.

U/K1:Difficult to hear on the tape, but made some comments about interactivity and the desirability of simple, straightforward interfaces.

MS:Then isn't television interactive? We push buttons and get pictures — not always sure what the content will be. If we don't like the result, we can move on, push another button.

RP:Perhaps a great number of CD-ROMs are nothing more than television — they are essentially navigable video.

MC:The act of creating the CD-ROM is often more interactive than the final product, which is often very limited. I don't know how to programme, beyond a little Lingo, so I'm at the mercy of the programmer.

RP:Are we interested in opening up the relationship between artist and interactor?

KB:In an ideal situation, we should be able to offer the interactor an infinite set of possibilities. This in turn creates a certain degree of responsibility for the interactor. At this point, medium, tool, and artwork begin to merge together. My ideal is the building of a four-dimensional physical environment that the interactor can explore freely.

RP:I was forced into decisions about new formal shapes when I started making interactive performances. I'm still taking responsibility for the final outcome, but am giving the performer a level of responsibility too.

KB:Is it then possible to make a qualitative judgement of the final outcome?

RP:Absolutely. The compositional issues are primarily to do with how well I design the environment, or, as I often prefer to think of it, the interactive instrument.

KB:The job of the arts educator is to give the student the parameters to be creative given the right tools. In creating interactive work, are we simply broadening this training/access beyond the narrow confines of the Art School?

Many interactive pieces are so limiting that you get bored very quickly — you feel they are simply a waste of time in fact. How do you open up the parameters to solve this problem?

MS:One way is to make so much material to choose from that it becomes impossible to hear/see everything on offer, another approach is to make an algorithmic environment in which the possible outcomes or instances are almost infinite. The

real question to consider is how difficult these interfaces should be to operate, to work with, or to master.

KB: To some extent, then, the recipient becomes the creator, the artist?

MS: It's possible to make an environment that gives so much back to the interactor that the experience is effortless and pleasurable.

RP: So then, what is the role of the aesthetic — or, if you still prefer, what is aesthetic?

KB: Aesthetic is the opposite of anaesthetic, which is the dulling of the senses, or the dulling of sensation — the aesthetic refines or heightens sensation.

RP: How does that apply to what we're talking about here?

JR: This is extremely problematic. I saw a piece last night that allowed users to manipulate physical objects, or remote users to manipulate virtual objects via the internet, to control the soundscape we were listening to. So many users were able to take part that the end result was completely confusing — there was no understanding of how the interactivity worked. The piece was very unsuccessful. Very interactive, but unsuccessful.

MS: Aesthetic has a lot to do with the perception of beauty.

KB: No, not really beauty, but any sensation that can be qualitatively evaluated.

U/K2: The aesthetic of interactivity has nothing to do with beauty, but with experience. I have never experienced an interactive piece that was beautiful — in fact most of them were ugly.

RP: Does that necessarily have to be the case? Is it then impossible to make a "beautiful" interactive work?

MS: Does this have to do with how we receive work we don't understand? I often listen to contemporary classical music I have difficulty with, but with repeated listenings and over time I begin to find it beautiful. Aesthetic response can be conditioned by understanding.

KB: Responses to an aesthetic experience also change with mood, environment.

MS: So when is something unaesthetic?

KB: That's an illogical concept.

RP: So what's the role of aesthetic decision making within interactive environments? How do we deal with this while wrestling with the unique formal issues within interactive frameworks?

PC: A good composition is something that can be perceived as an interesting object at the end point by the viewer/user.

KB: It could be said that successful work of art includes all things that are relevant to it, and excludes everything that is irrelevant. Offering that for interactivity compromises that and will bring to it or take away from it what the author saw as necessary components.

RP: Isn't that the crux of this whole discussion?

NR: Some general discussion here about art vs. craft, the separation of art from realworld/ real life concerns, etc. Form and

beauty and the aesthetic of utility. Historically, fine art is designed for aesthetic contemplation.

Are we coming to a stage where "art" and "artist" are becoming irrelevant? The more we produce things that don't look like "art", the more interactive they become, the more we move towards a rapprochement of art and life, or artist and producer/manufacturer.

MS: Doesn't this depend on your definition of art?

RP: ...or your definition of "producer"?

KB: A work of craft is work with a known end; a work of art is a work with an unknown end — until it is finished.

NR: Before an interactive work can succeed, the notion of what we call "artist" must change.

KB: As a sculptor, I use CAD packages in ways they were never meant to be used — I subvert the programmer. In interactive work there's always a chance that the user will make unpredictable outcomes.

RP: There is an enormous difference between an artist subverting a tool, and an artist making a piece that is intended to be interacted with.

It's possible to make algorithmic interactive work with an infinite set of outcomes, but which still has the aesthetic stamp of the artist in each of those outcomes.

MC: I'm quite happy to make work with a very limited amount of possibilities. Especially in a gallery, it must be simple, very limited.

TT: The time required to master a work should be considered carefully in the design of its interactive interface. It's good to make work that is very coherent, with a limited number of choices.

NR: MC's "Sorry" is an excellent gallery piece because it's so simple easy to use, straightforward, engaging.

PC: It's a great piece because it makes it so clear what an interactive computer piece is.

NR: You get the experience rather than you see the object. I think of the artist, not the object, when I see that work.

MS: You feel pleased by this piece because the response is immediate, straightforward.

RP: Can we then differentiate between work that is primarily for public exhibition and work for more extended use typically in the home? Are there particular formal or aesthetic decisions to be made in this regard?

TT: Complexity is the key. Work for extended use can be much more complex. In a gallery there is little time, people are afraid of being watched. The opposite is true with a CD-ROM

PC: Again, "Sorry" is a good example because it engages a person in space, in a direct physical way. It would be totally different as an internet piece, for example.

MC: Yes, it's designed for gallery use, not for the small screen. You couldn't use those large designs if it were for single user computer use.

RP: In some ways this is like a lot of video art which works well in a home environment, not in a theatrical setting — and

vice versa.

At this point, RP showed some work on the computer, and some discussion ensued about the limitations of the authoring tools, and about the possibility of supporting "set pieces" within larger interactive frameworks. The overriding issues arising from the session seemed to be the essentially formal question about when and how the artist gives up control to the user