Logical Operations: And ! Or

Jack Stenner, Ph.D
Digital Media Art, School of Art + Art History
University of Florida
stenner@ufl.edu

Introduction

In 2005, I began work on a hybrid video game and installation environment called *Playas: Homeland Mirage*, which was exhibited at ACM Multimedia 2005[1] and ISEA/ZeroOne 2006.[2] During the course of development, and after several iterations of the project, I became aware of intrinsic problems when using the video game engine for the purposes of an interactive installation, as I had conceived it. The use of video game technology in the production of certain artworks reveals deeper problems related to issues of immersion in virtual spaces. I sought to engender a critically reflective experience that encouraged participants to reconsider their notions of the world and their place within it; often, the technology seemed to thwart that desire, mirroring a familiar critique of video games in general. As a result, I embarked on a trajectory of research concerning the functioning of this work. Along the way, I learned important lessons about the importance of contextualizing my work using the logical operator && rather than ||.

Playas

Playas: Homeland Mirage is a hybrid installation and video game that conflates issues of security within the context of suburbia and our recent obsession with terrorism. Playas, New Mexico was a company railroad town, established in the early 1900s. It was abandoned and then reconstructed as a "suburban-style" mining town in the seventies. Abandoned again in 1999, Playas was purchased in 2004 as the site of a training facility for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. As if the history of this place was not surreal enough, the DHS has employed a small group of residents who remained there to participate in anti-terror simulation exercises, in effect becoming professional victims.

The installation consists of a video projection at one end of the space and a chair with video game controller in the center. A security camera observes the scene and monitors the entry and exit of viewers within the exhibition space. The projected image is composed of a video game combined with effects that are dynamically driven by parameters extracted from the game, as well as video tracking information taken from the security camera. Depending on the performance of the game player, whose goal is to survive and explore the environment, the imagery responds, suggesting a desert town obscured by a mirage. Virtual game characters include civilians, terrorists, and Department of Homeland InSecurity (DHI) agents.

The Playas construct is composed of nine homes along Mesquite Street. The scenario is built upon images and information taken from its real world double. Environmental background information and imagined family scenarios are available as one approaches objects left behind in the abandoned homes. These objects trigger in-game video imagery that reflects themes suggested by the idea of this place as a mirage. A video tracking system monitors visitors and composites a ghostly form of their image over the video game imagery, and for each visitor, a new virtual character is spawned into the game.

Rules of Play

The use of video game technology in the production of this artwork revealed deeper problems related to issues of immersion in virtual spaces. I noticed that for a subset of viewers there seemed to be very little critical engagement with the concept of the work. Oliver Grau,[3] Marie-Laure Ryan,[4] and others have recognized the effect immersion has on the critically reflective engagement of viewers. Combining art practice with research, I performed a qualitative analysis using methods from Naturalistic Inquiry in order to better understand the workings of critical reflection within the artwork. I learned about the importance of "rules of play" in video games and the many limitations of current human/computer interfaces. The research taught me the value of a hybrid role for artists working with technology that combines practice, criticism, and research. But, the subject of this paper is perhaps most important: despite some claims to the
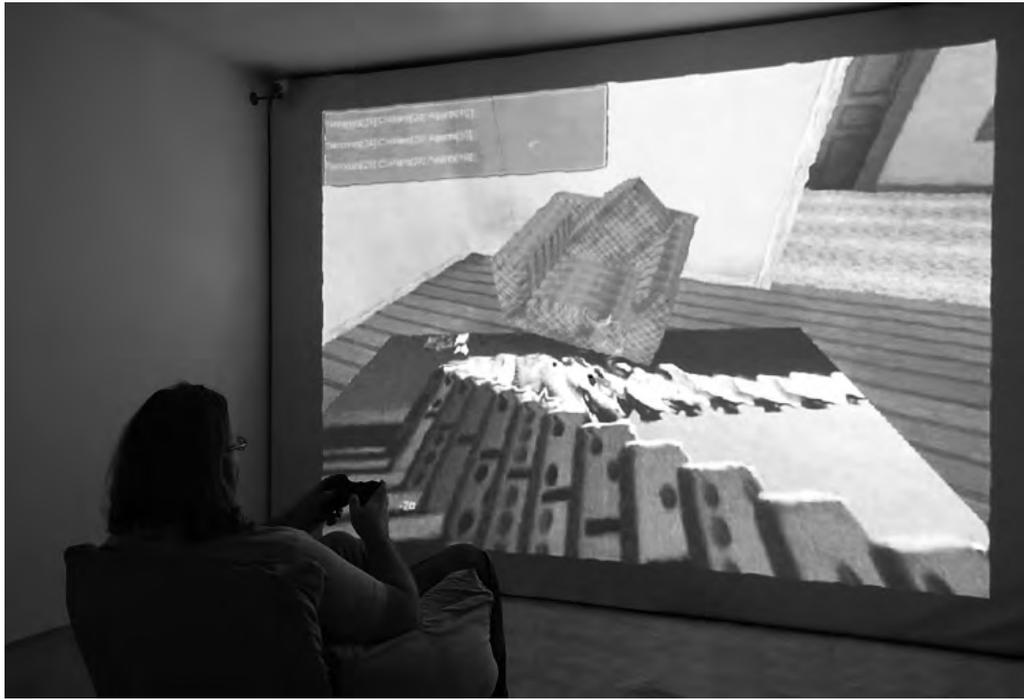
Figure 1: Playas — Homeland Mirage installation view

contrary, mediation requires us to re-address fundamental art-historical issues such as critical reflection. Rather than approaching media with an essentialist "||" (logical operator, or) disposition, we must incorporate lessons from the past, synthesizing a future that takes advantage of the meaning-generation potential of digital media using the metaphor of the logical operator, "&&".

Ecosystem

A tendency exists within digital media for theorists to dismiss the relevance of the dialog of art to the field. Perhaps it is a reaction to the incestuous nature of the art world and all of the inadequacies of the system that defines it. Perhaps it is a reaction to a perceived "snub". A common refrain is that we are part of a paradigm shift and art no longer matters. Others naïvely dismiss art as the bastion of autonomy that was exorcised with post-modernism. Yet others succumb to the allure of

a democratic media that invests culture with its own immunization. It is always easier to colonize the future by starting with a "clean" slate. Unfortunately, these positions situate digital media outside an important dialog and contribute to the perception that digital media art is irrelevant or misguided. I choose to use an ecosystems approach that situates the work holistically.[5] In *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*,[6] Rosalind Krauss characterizes the current environment of artistic production as the "post-medium condition." Rather than focus on the formal qualities of a singular medium, today's artist synthesizes ideas drawing from a variety of materials. As Hansen points out in *New Philosophy for New Media*,[7] hers is an intermediate position in comparison with Friedrich Kittler, who dismisses, wholesale, the importance of the medium in favor of "digital convergence." Krauss's "differential specificity" does not deny the importance of media, but recognizes the need for the artist to be aware

Figure 2: DHI agents mistake a civilian for a "terrorist."

of the specific characteristics of the medium chosen. With respect to Playas, I was confronted with a situation that is not new. Kracauer identified immersion as problematic in the early cinema.[8] As a medium that arguably descends from film, a video game in the form I was proposing to use it suffered the same problem. Viewers were entranced by the imagery but seemed unable to engage beyond the surface narrative. It was apparent that I would need to use some of the same strategies developed to address this problem by early experimental filmmakers. This is not unusual. Many of the dialogs that are taken to be unique to digital media have precedent in the conversation that surrounds art. An awareness of the discourse can benefit the artist as well as the development of the medium. Beuys envisioned participatory media well before the advent of the Internet and certainly before we could imagine its impact. The early '90s discourse of Relational Aesthetics has renewed relevance in a world of Open Source software and Web 2.0.

Conclusion

Rather than an ideologically driven, reductive conception of production, the process of creation is analogous to the logical operation &&. It is a process of synthesis rather than elimination. We must combine what we have learned about visuality and culture rather than reject the context. Art contributes to knowledge heuristically by exploring the mechanisms of meaning generation. This characteristic has important implications for a culture that is undergoing the changes we see today. Technology affords opportunities to address the condition of meaning in our lives; the logical operation = digital media && art.

1   Stenner, Jack, Andruid Kerne, and Yauger Williams. 2005. "Playas: Homeland Mirage." In *ACM Multimedia 2005 Interactive Art Program*. Singapore, Republic of Singapore.

2   Stenner, Jack, Andruid Kerne, and Yauger Williams. 2006. "Playas: Homeland Mirage." In *Thirteenth International Symposium of Electronic Art and ZeroOne San Jose: A Global Festival of Art on the Edge*. San Jose, California.

3   Grau, Oliver. 2003. "Immersion." In *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p. 23.

4   Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2001. *Narrative as Virtual Reality : Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

5   Kerne, Andruid. 2002. "Interface Ecosystem, the Fundamental Unit of Information Age Ecology." In *Paper presented at the SIGGRAPH 2002: Art and Animation*. San Antonio, Texas.

6   Krauss, Rosalind E. 2000. *"A Voyage on the North Sea."* In *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition, The Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures; 31st.* New York: Thames & Hudson.

7   Hansen, Mark B. N. 2004. "Introduction." In *New Philosophy for New Media.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p. 1.

8   Kracauer, Siegfried, and Thomas Y. Levin. 1987. "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces." In *New German Critique* 40, pp. 91-96.