

ENGAGING DYNAMICS

FRANCES JOSEPH

This paper addresses some practical and theoretical issues arising from the development and implementation of a pilot programme of new works for an interactive screen environment sited within a performing arts complex. The notion of performance as embodied practice functioning both as a metaphor and an analytical tool activates a series of social, technological and cultural framings.

This paper addresses some practical and theoretical issues arising from the development and implementation of a pilot programme of new works for an interactive screen environment sited at The Edge Performing Arts Complex at the Aotea Centre in Auckland. The 'Digital Art Live' (DAL) programme is an initiative supported by The Edge in partnership with CoLab Creative Technologies Research Centre, which is based at Auckland University of Technology (AUT).

Struppek (2006) has written about the differences between public and individualised forms of screen display. She has suggested that the zones between virtual and physical public spaces could be used more constructively for 'the creation and exchange of culture and the formation of the public sphere through criticism and reflection.' [1] She recognises that new co-operative relationships are needed to enable new approaches and to challenge conventions. The collaboration between The Edge and CoLab is exploring some of the opportunities and requirements needed to support such cultural exchanges in Auckland, New Zealand.

The location of DAL in the Owens's Foyer of The Aotea Centre outside the ASB Theatre is distinct from urban screens in public squares, from interactive art in gallery spaces and from interactive games that are increasingly found in educational and domestic environments. The environment of The Edge as one of New Zealand's leading performing arts, entertainment and convention facilities, engages many different communities and introduces some particular considerations and opportunities. The notion of performance as meaningful, embodied practice that functions both as a metaphor and an analytical tool, activates a series of distinctive social, technological and cultural framings that the DAL pilot programme has set out to explore and analyse.

Earlier in 2010 The Edge council reallocated some funds earmarked for buying more traditional artworks like painting and sculpture for the theatre foyer for the purchase of interactive screen technology. At a meeting between CoLab and The Edge in mid 2010 the potential of both organisations working together to establish a flexible technology platform and a sustainable exhibition programme of interactive works was recognised. While The Edge management had already made decisions as to the type and configuration of the screen, there were several critical issues that required further consideration. Firstly, the curation of a programme that would not only present new interactive art works, but might relate thematically or formally to the Edge's ongoing performing arts programme including city wide cultural events, such as festivals. Secondly, the development of a content management platform that could support a range of different software and approaches taken by artists. Thirdly, while The Edge was keen to support the development of an ongoing programme, it needed to identify what was required to do this. It was decided to run a year long pilot programme, supported by The Edge, CoLab and AUT, to research, develop, test and evaluate strategies for engagement, content generation, funding and programme organisation of the interactive screen environment. With the screen scheduled for set up in the foyer in

December 2010, an initial test programme to open in February 2011 as part of Auckland Festival was proposed. A more formal programme would be launched in April.

The Digital Art Live interactive screen consists of 12 x 46 inch Samsung thin flat screens organized into a large composite screen. Each screen panel measures 1025mm x 579mm including the bezel. The overall size of the wall is 4100mm x 1737mm. It's a 12 screen display layout, being 4 screens wide by 3 screens high. Each screen has a 16:9 ratio, but the overall ratio of the entire screen is 21.3 x 9, or 2.37 (cinemascope is 2.35 so it is close to this scale). Each screen has a native resolution of 1366 x 768. However the screens can support a splitting system by stretching the image across the entire wall. This means that the overall resolution of the screen is 1366 x 768 pixels. The initial set up included a Logitech HD web-cam C510 positioned below the screen. It was agreed that additional sensor and input devices or camera configurations could be considered for incorporation into the system. Subsequently a ceiling mounted camera has been added. While the multiple screen set up presents certain challenges for artists, it has other advantages including the clarity and definition of image, and the opportunity to produce single or multiple screen works. The grid format of the screens echoes the grid in the history of painting.

Inquiries made by CoLab identified iion, an Auckland based company involved in designing an interactive management system. 'Media HD,' which had been developed for the advertising industry. It supports presentation across a wide range of file formats and interactive modes, to provide programme options to ensure continuous delivery and viewer analytics. A basic platform would be provided and additional functionality to support different software and hardware inputs would be added as required, supporting the programme roll out. Processes were put in place to appoint a part-time interactive programme curator. In the meantime, the DAL management group, made up of representatives from CoLab and The Edge, began the programme development.

Three emerging artists were identified and invited to exhibit between mid February and mid March 2011 in a program me titled 'Screenplay at the Edge' as part of the Auckland Fringe Festival. The programme included: 'The Ruru' by Naomi Lamb and The Wanderer Productions; 'Speaking Trees' by Anselm Bradford and 'Magic Garden' by Robert Carter. These three works used very different interactive strategies and presented diverse challenges related in part to the short timeframe, the different levels of experience of the artists in exhibiting interactive content and to the set-up and testing of the Media HD platform. For example one work used a text interface on an iPad. This limited interaction as audience members first read from the iPad rather than experimenting directly with the work. While each work had its own integrity, collectively they did not work as a coherent programme. The Media HD platform functioned well in supporting a range of software applications and hardware devices and the automatic, sequential display of each work (programmed to show for one hour at a time) while also allowing the audience to manually select from the programme. However the Screenplay event presented a number of problems, notably some confusion for the audience in understanding the three different interfaces and interactive strategies of these works. While printed information was provided, it was realised that a simpler strategy, presenting a single work/type of interface in an exhibition would be more effective. It was also recognised that the particular space and configuration of The Edge system would inevitably require some adaptation by iion to support the presentation of new works, particularly if they used software that needed to be added to the system. However a distinction needed to be made between this necessary level of technical adaptation/system development and a more fundamental need to support artists working in other media forms in developing greater understanding and experience working with interactive media. CoLab was in the process of setting up an interactive media suite for teaching and research at AUT. The Media HD system was installed as part of the suite for artists, students and researchers to access for workshops, experimentation and testing of new interactive work.

In April ‘Chirp’ an original interactive work by Wellington based artist Stewart Foster, was presented at the formal launch the interactive wall. Stewart’s work explores real time interactive environments infused with bodily sensations and computer technologies. These hybrid spatial environments explore the limits and interface between physical and digital space: ‘We are entering a new realm of digital connectivity where our bodies are extended into digital networked space. The ubiquity of mobile internet connecting devices, electronic displays and social networking spheres all contribute to the rupture from the corporeal body into a constructed digital self.’ [2] The work used camera vision and live feeds from twitter. Tweets that included the word ‘happy’ were automatically harvested and displayed. Motion tracking traced the outline and movement of people moving in the foyer space, plotting a series of blue circular shapes across the screen. The representation of participants in the work was important in that it gave them insight into one of the works interactive strategies. The conceptual impetus of this work and its aesthetic demonstrated Stewart’s long-term involvement with interactive media and prior experience in developing large-scale public interactive digital art.

In May curator Nolwenn Hugain-Lacire was appointed to direct the DAL project as a one-year pilot programme. Confirmation of the next two exhibits was set in place, with exhibitions confirmed by Auckland artists Kim Newall and Clinton Watkins. The Edge agreed to an artist’s fee for each exhibitor, a policy that the DAL committee saw as fundamental to the longer-term sustainability of the programme. A curatorial strategy was formalised, which included a public call for artist’s proposals as well as a summer season of work by students and workshop participants. Supporting the call for proposals, a technical manual for artists was published. The call for proposals invited artists to create work that supported engagement with a public audience through technological experience. It identified a special interest in work that responds to gestural input, supporting performative interaction between the user, the physical space and the onscreen content. It also encouraged works that involve text input, audio, real time or social networking technologies from artists or collectives producing professional creative works. [3]

Planning has also been initiated for a series of workshops to be conducted at the CoLab Interactive Suite in 2011 and over the summer break. It was recognised that emerging artists and those working in other media that they might wish to extend into interactive formats, would be more effectively supported through a workshop programme. The DAL pilot programme will present innovative creative works that were conceptually and technically resolved in order to establish and promote support for a long-term programme. Experimentation and capability development, supported through the CoLab workshop programme is crucial to developing a broader community of practice. A process outline was developed to ensure dialogue between the artist, curator and iion, to be followed by a series of tests of works-in-progress at the Interaction Suite to trouble-shoot any issues ahead of the opening date.

The DAL pilot project is a work-in-progress. Organisational we are learning through this process. Documentation will soon be available in an online archive on Cola’s website. While it is too early to provide a fuller analysis and evaluation of the programme some insights have been gained to date. These include the increasing levels of positive audience feedback and audience response, the formalisation of support provided by The Edge for artists fees and recently from Creative New Zealand for funding to commission new interactive work as part of the DAL programme.

We are currently exploring a number of different strategies including corporate and institutional sponsorship, as well as international cultural programmes to contribute to the ongoing support of the programme. There is potential to commission interactive works for specific cultural events like the New Zealand Readers and Writer’s Festival or the Pacifica Festival, which are closely linked to The Edge’s ongoing programme. These events present opportunities for the exploration of different performative

modes (for example poetry or dance) and for extending beyond the spatial and conceptual limitations of a 2 dimensional screen into multi-dimensional cultural forms and spaces. The potential for ongoing research into interactive forms, interfaces, curatorial strategies and cultural enterprise, supported through academic funding, is another area that can contribute to the outcomes and value of this initiative. In a small country like New Zealand, a multifaceted approach that builds on institutional collaboration and local networks is essential.

References and Notes:

1. *Miriam Struppek, "Urban Screens – The Potential of Public Screens for Interaction," in Intelligent Agent Vol. 16, No. 2 (2006).*
2. *Stewart Foster, Exhibition Notes on Chirp: Interactive work for the CoLab | THE EDGE, Auckland, 2011.*
3. *Nolwenn Hugain-Lacire, "Digital Art Live Call Out," 2011, CoLab Website, <http://www.colab.org.nz/node/940> (accessed September 2011).*