

Critical Issues in Interaction Design

By Ann Morrison ann.morrison@hiit.fi

At this point I offer a mish-mash of ideas that have been included in publications as responses to interactive art works, my own and others, I've included critical theory as an approach, not as a separate thing in itself, consequently I've found it difficult to isolate and discuss... but here goes.

Inter-disciplinarity: the long way home

In my research and artistic practice I aim to include Critical Technical practices, cultural practice and theory, as well as critical theory. I have studied broadly: undergraduate in English literature, sociology, anthropology and education theory and then postgraduates in visual arts (sculpture, performance and installation) gender studies and computer science; more recently I came to Interaction Design via teaching Studio Process and Tangible Computing. I moved initially from the art world to an Interaction Design Research group in an IT school in order to access more ubicomp for my interactive installation work. I then moved more recently to Ubiquitous Interaction Group within an IT research facility. Here various psychologists, engineers and IT specialists predominate. In order to work where and how I do somewhere in between Interactive Art, Ubiquitous Computing and Interaction Design I currently work in a researcher role leading a team working on two projects that produce interactive mixed reality and cultural artifacts, environments or experiences for public, urban and pervasive environments. This is not domestic scale work. By their very nature the teams are inter-disciplinary, and there are constantly periods of dis-comfort with mis-communication, where the same words hold very different meanings; discussions that appear to represent opposing view points are in fact in agreement and 'the long road home' becomes par-for-the course with any meaningful discussion. Some times it seems like a long way from my earlier more 'traditional art practice' of performative installation which included public art installations—but I still work with similar concepts—urban spaces, the everyday object, aiming that people 'notice' the world around us, getting audiences to participate in cultural activities or environments. Like many artists working with interactive technologies it is not IT or HCI, rather Post-object art, performance art and site-specific art, that form some of the core understandings from which a work is then built. Within the fabric of the institution, time stretches until trust and commonality and respect for 'enlarging the conversation' between the inter-disciplines forms. Each new 'collaboration' seems to have its odd moments—although we are placed in groups as if it is only skills that are required—but somehow we emerge at the end of a project timeline with a shared and expanded language and results.

Evaluation and the content are at the crux of this dis-comfort. For me there needs to be a 'point' to making something beyond having the technology working and beyond function, beyond play even. People come to interactive works, and in particular to certain kinds of technologies, with their own sets of expectations. They anticipate things will work in certain ways, and initially may see the work as failing if this doesn't occur. Over time, and by playing with the work, they may arrive at an understanding of the idiosyncratic nature of the work. Once they do this, they 'give over' to enjoying a different type of experience than they had expected.

To understand how participants engage with the work, and coupling HCI evaluation techniques, currently I am including doing full profiles on the participants to manage expectations and comprehend what is that they bring to their understanding of the work and how they engage. When I look upon or make a work, it is not how the technology works that interests me—it is how lost the participants can become in a work, how much of themselves they can give over, how affected they can become.

Take for example a work where gesture is the interaction that triggers the work, embodied thought and action—there are many ways to read the meaning of gesture—some more or less 'science' than others. They are all interesting, but the most interesting to me are those that add an understanding of the depths of human experience: that in some way try to explain, appreciate or understand the illogical, whimsy, impulsive, creative, expressive uniqueness of our selves—and some of the most interesting works are those that play to these aspects. These kind of readings rest within the the understandings of people and their ways of writers, such as Luce Irigaray, Levinas, Wittgenstein, Searle looking at speaking in turns as speech acts with turns as moves in a game. Emmanuel Levinas is one twentieth-century philosopher for whom embodied gesture becomes critical in order to think about thought:

*Thought itself is inserted in culture through the verbal gesture of the body which precedes and goes beyond it [...]
The body is the fact that thought is immersed in the world that it thinks and, consequently, expresses this world while it thinks it. The corporeal gesture is not a nervous discharge, but a celebration of the world, a poetry. [14: p.525].*

The role of physical gesture in an interactive installation is at once poetic, interactive, verbal, material, temporal, and implicitly linked to thought and reflection. Indeed gesture provokes reflection—bodily movement provokes mental contemplation. participants' self-reflection being induced by the gestural act. In her 1964 essay on the films of Robert Bresson, literary theorist Susan Sontag provides a valuable definition of reflective art, which "detaches" and "provokes reflection." Although reflective art requires or elicits a kind of detachment on the part of the viewer, Sontag maintains that "great reflective art is not frigid. It can exalt the spectator, it can present images that appall, it can make him weep." What characterizes reflective art is the mediated nature of its emotional appeal, which results in the emotional

involvement and gratification of the participant being “postponed.” Nevertheless, according to Sontag, in truly reflective art, this “detachment and retarding of the emotions, through the consciousness of form, makes them stronger and more intense in the end.” [20]

Interactive work that utilizes gesture as its primary interactive tool creates a productive tension between gesture and reflection, and makes the viewer’s body an active and a necessary part of the artwork.

As Gaver points out it is important to not answer to “immediate needs”. Ambiguous or unclear works often provoke interpretations that are unexpected and unplanned for, and it can be “difficult to predict what people might do with them”. [4] Interplay between participant feedback and authorial intent reflect also the philosophical shift that has reshaped the roles of artist and participant (or author and reader) since the advent of poststructuralism. In 1967, Roland Barthes wrote his seminal essay “The Death of the Author,” in which he argued that trying to understand a text purely by reference to the author’s intent or biography inherently limited the reading of that text. A text, he maintained, should not regard the capital-A Author as the primary originator of meaning within a work. Removing this God-like author figure from the text would liberate the reader and open up multiple critical readings of the text, which is itself multiple and not singular [1]. In regard to art and the role of the artist, once the work is out in the world, ownership and the author’s/artist’s intent becomes as if irrelevant. Interpretation is placed in the hands of the active readers of the work.

There can be differing parameters for success. In an interactive art work (and art works generally), it is not necessary for every participant to have engaged with the work, for the work to be seen as successful. If some participate and enjoy the experience then this is a good outcome. The works need not necessarily be made with the idea of eliciting one homogeneous experience, but rather a range of experiences. For it is not expected that an artwork will need to please everybody, or that the artist will have set out to achieve this. On a first reading this may appear as arrogant, however the reverse is often true. The artist would not automatically expect others to understand their self-expressions. Often with works that seek to elicit play, the responses may be ambiguous, or there will be an assortment of experiences for different people, recognizing that the end-experience is also an indication of the experiences an audience member brings to the work. In communicating their ideas, and by exhibiting the work, the artist researches the experiences it will in turn cause or produce as a response in others [2]—often building further work as a result of these explorations.

As a result, it is important to consider different ways of thinking about successes and failures. Where there is a “focus on gathering a multitude of interpretations” and presenting these “in all their confused richness”, the designer surrenders their authority to the audience. [4] This brings the perspective of the designer closer to that of an artist, who, once the work is placed in the public arena, can no longer control the meaning of the work. Interpretation is placed in the hands of the active readers of the work—and the author as conduit is long-dead. [5]

Yet there remains a complex interplay between author, text, and reader or artist, artwork, interaction designer, interaction design and the participant.

+++++

- [1] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965.
- [2] Searle, J. *Speech Acts*. Cambridge Univ Press, 1964
- [3] Lyotard, J. *The Postmodern Condition*, Univ.of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- [4] Wittgenstein *ibid*, secs 65-84.
- [5] Gaver, B. (2002). *Designing for Homo Ludens*. 13 Magazine No 12, June 2002.
- [6] Hook, K, Sengers, P, and Andersson, G. (2003) *Sense and Sensibility: Evaluation and Interactive Art*, Proc. CHI '03. New York: ACM Press.
- [7] Gaver, W, Boucher, A, Pennington, S, and Walker, B. (2004). *Cultural Probes and the Value of Uncertainty*. Interactions, Vol X1.5.
- [8] Gaver, W, Boucher, A, Pennington, S, Walker, B. (2005). *Evaluating Technologies for Ludic Engagement*, Proc. CHI'05. ACM Press.
- [9] Barthes, R. (1977) *Image/Music/Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday.
- [10] Morrison, A, Mitchell, P and Muhlberger, R. (2006) *Talk2Me: The Art of Augmented Conversations*, ACM Multimedia 2006. Proc. ACM Press.
- [11] Jaimes, A, Keshvani, N. (eds) (2007) *LEA - ACM Multimedia Interactive Arts Program Special*, Leonardo Electronic Almanac, Vol 15, Issue 05.
- [12] Berleant, A., 1991, *Art and engagement*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.