

Dispelling the Ghosts of the Past: Stillness as a Gate to the New

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Abstract

This paper will argue that notions of artist, audience, creative practise and participation need to be redefined if substantial change is to be affected via the digital. Central to the redefinition of these concepts will be the status of participation within the creation of interactive products. This will be explored by drawing on the author's experience of teaching games technology and developing games related products as well as drawing on research that investigates service users' involvement in the commissioning of new work within the National Health Service.

Keywords

Play, Participation, Consultation

Introduction

Above all else, this is a position paper. The reason for this is that the demands of true interactivity are so radically opposed to traditional forms of artistic practise that another approach to these issues is now required. This paper aims to challenge these traditional forms of practise, these 'ghosts', through an engagement with the issues of play and participation. To this end it will explore participation as a central tenet of play (via computer games), leading to a wider consideration of participation and the consequences that this might have as a principle within new media. It is our contention that artists' appropriation of games technologies have so far missed participation as a creative principle and its experiments have been limited to the subversion (or the legitimisation of a craving for) popular culture and the political agendas adjacent to these issues. In fact the status of even the most traditional categories of 'art' and 'design' have become clouded when we are faced by the issue of interactivity. As a result we will first consider whether these terms are applicable to such an endeavour.

Simplicity

Within the world of interactive applications one demand now stands out, the call for simplicity. In *The Laws of Simplicity* Maeda addresses this by stating that

Perhaps this is the fundamental distinction between great art and great design. While great art makes you wonder, great design makes things clear. (Maeda 2006, 70)

The iPod's jog wheel has become the unofficial mascot for this call. The clarity to which Maeda refers is bound to an instrumentality that cuts directly from intent to action. But can such instrumentality facilitate a sense of wonder? Although we may not accept that we are passive when confronted by 'great art' - our ability to reciprocally interact with it rarely exists. 'Wonder' therefore appears to be directed at what we cannot grasp, a fugitive sensibility; where a sense of 'involvement' appears to arise from the insights provided by the work, leading to a 'remaking' of oneself and one's relationship with the world, rather than any interaction that affects the work itself. However digital media may be capable of moving us beyond this impasse; utilising complex and emergent phenomena we may discover that we are now capable of actively involving participants in the unfolding of such events.

But given this, one still has to ask whether interactivity has a place within the creation of ‘great art’. The present lack of digitally based candidates to receive the accolade of being great art does not suggest the contrary. Indeed many of the advocates for digital art have tended to proclaim what ‘will’ be achieved once technology has reached a certain level. Those doing so ought to note Bolter and Grusin’s observation that “they have inherited from modernism the assumption that a medium must be new to be significant” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 270). Such claims can be seen in the multitude of terms invented by those seeking to further these assertions. Ascott’s invention of a plethora of terms has led to the need for glossaries to inform readers of their ‘meaning’. However this has always remained speculative and rarely goes beyond these terms - a problem that necessarily exists within the context of a practise that is not yet existent; but as Bolter and Grusin point out there is a need to “resist the urge, so tempting when writing about new media, to make predictions” (Ibid).

William Gibson states in *Burning Chrome* “The street finds its own use for things” (Gibson 1986). Rather than pursuing the various forms of futurological speculation that have grown around this assertion, it is towards the reality of ‘the streets’ use of computing that we now turn.

What’s in a Game?

When a group of MIT students used the PDP1 computer to program *Spacewar!* (1962), gaming arguably became the original subversion of computing. After the introduction of the Sinclair ZX81 (1982), a machine intended to “to teach people about computers” (McCandless 1998), it became a phenomena as the street found its own use for this new technology. As soon as many learned to program, they began creating games (leading to what is often referred to as a generation of bedroom coders). Sinclair was dismissive of this claiming that “Games are a problem you solve... I have real problems in my life to solve. I don't need games” (Ibid). But in contrast to Sinclair’s rhetoric the economic reality of this new industry solved many problems for those who made small fortunes by selling their games by mail order.

This model seems to have become increasingly removed as the industry has grown to economically outperform Hollywood. Whereas a lone coder used to create a game, the new generation of consoles require teams of over 200 to create games for them. However the hacker ethos still pervaded aspects of the industry. Many titles contained modding utilities buried away with the games directory. Games like *Unreal Tournament* (1999), a first person shooter, installs UnrealEd, an application that allows users to create their own environments as well as a scripting environment allowing users to modify the way in which the game itself is played.

However this is not an isolated approach. Known as ‘sandbox’ games, rather than providing an overarching narrative structure players are free to wander and create their own pathways through an environment. One of the first was *Elite* (1984) a game written for the BBC Micro. This led on to more notorious titles such as *Grand Theft Auto* (1997). What one must remember that even within the most traditional of games it is the creativity of the player that brings the game alive.

Simulation games also lack defined narrative structures; with games such as *Sim City* (1989) and *The Sims* (2000) and *Viva Pinata* (2006) that play with alternative worlds and the logic of simulation. Having previously pursued the graphic capabilities of computer systems, the now high graphic performance of gaming systems has meant the growth areas in the industry are now AI (artificial intelligence) and physics. New titles such as *Bio Shock* (2007) create worlds with perpetual AI agents that wonder virtual environments rather than having them spring to life when we enter a space wishing to play the game.

The logical partner of sandbox games involve multiple players to develop and evolve a world via Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). Originally text based, these were first played on mainframe systems, then as connectivity improved these began to be played over the internet. These are persistent worlds that are maintained by the publisher. As of 2006 the number of players subscribed to these worlds were in excess of 12.4 million (MMOGCHART.COM). These titles have also developed their own economies that have bled into the real world as hard currency is exchanged for virtual goods. More infamously this has even led to a gamer being given a suspended death sentence after stabbing a competitor to death in revenge for the theft and sale of a virtual artefact (Reuters, 2005) . Despite such extremes, strong social groups have also emerged as players form clans in order to achieve their goals.

But is this sense of participation anything but illusionary? Within a highly competitive industry, game features are often a closely guarded secret until a game's release. For this reason, 'user testing' only occurs near a game's completion. Up until this point testing is conducted in house, largely to address bugs in the code; tests usually referred to under the rubric of quality assurance. As a result, *user* testing usually addresses previously unseen barriers to playability, introducing help at points that had been obvious to in house staff but that were opaque to those unfamiliar with the system. Ironically this seems to be one of the more limited forms of participation within gaming.

It is another form of play that shows us how a more involved relationship might be developed. When Lego introduced their *Mindstorms* (1998) robotic system its CPU was rapidly hacked and alternative programming environments and hardware hacking guides produced. Lego's initial inclination was to sue those involved; however they soon realized that this furthered the possibilities of their system. As a result when they developed the *Mindstorms NXT* (2006) system, they invited a group of these people to become involved in the early stages of the products development, affecting playability at a grassroots level.

Although often viewed as the *bête noir* of the software industry, Microsoft has been instrumental in trying to bring this kind of thinking to gaming. Their approach results from the fact that the economic success of games has not been without its problems. The dominance of dedicated games consoles has led to a situation where proprietary development environments are needed to create content; consoles are manufactured as loss leaders and profits made via royalties on games published (and the tight control of their means of production). Much like the film industry, games have tended towards predictable formulae and sequels to try maximise the returns on a publishers investment. In an attempt to bring back the innovation and creativity that originated in bedroom coding and with a view to the creation a YouTube for games Microsoft have been giving away the XNA Framework (2006) for the creation of games on their console and PCs.

From the publication of XNA to UnrealEd and MMOGs the aim of this survey has been to reveal the sometimes hidden levels of participation that are intrinsically bound within games. Far from an industry based upon the mindless consumption of entertainment, gaming generates a form of interactivity that goes beyond 'pointing' and 'shooting'. Participants become involved with the creation of worlds at a number of levels, from its creation through the activity of play to the creation of original content itself.

Clarity and Wonder

If participation and an involvement in the unfolding of events is central to play, we can begin to move beyond the false dichotomy of clarity and wonder that Maeda asserts. In fact given this, the clarity required in games is such that we almost never see it – a fact I often point out to students learning to program these systems: the better the standard of your work, the less it will be noticed. A little like Heidegger's broken hammer, it only becomes evident when it doesn't work. If a player

can move through an environment and perform their desired actions, it is what happens as a result of those actions, the way that they unfold to affect another world, that interests them.

Designing and building interactive ‘worlds’ that generate this sense of involvement and wonder has now become a goal that can be achieved. Indeed the capacity to achieve this state may be intrinsic to play itself. As Huizinga points out

Playing is no “doing” in the ordinary sense; you do not “do” a game as you “do” or “go” fishing, or hunting, or Morris-dancing, or woodwork – you “play” it. (Huizinga 1950, 37)

The benefits of this are not simply limited to how we might conceptualise interaction as play rather than just doing. Even though play ‘creates order, *is* order’ (Ibid, 10) it possesses its own logic. This does not mean it is an everyday logic, it is in its freedom *from* the everyday that play becomes capable of transforming its own rules. We need only think of games of make-believe to recognise the way that play can transform itself.

Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. (Ibid, 3)

The importance of this play element is often central to much of our work. As artists involved with technology, our work is often cross-disciplinary in nature. A benefit of this is that another discipline challenges the assumptions, if you like the unspoken determinism, of our own practises. Play provides us with a means to creatively question and transform the tenets of our own discipline.

Play is a thing in itself. The play-concept as such is of a higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness. (Ibid, 45)

If we accept that play forms a central tenet of interactivity, how should we move from being artists who have explored the nature of their inner voices, to becoming interactive designers where participation comes first?

Play and Participation

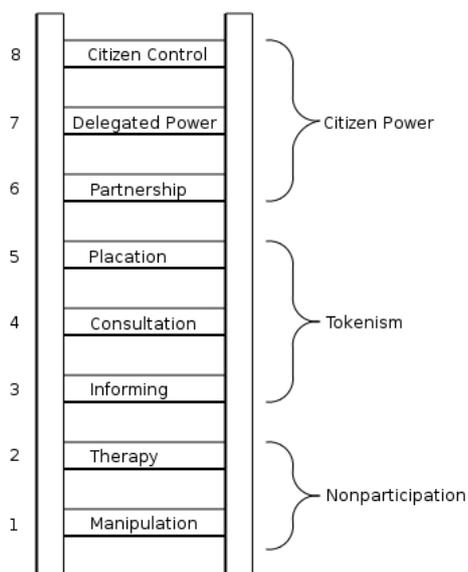


Figure1: Eight Rungs on the Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein 1969, 217 <http://lithgow-schmidt.dk/sherry-arnstein/ladder-of-citizen-participation.html> no copyright is asserted).

In invoking the notion of participation we have to be aware that participation means different things to different people. Although primarily concerned with issues of social deprivation in 1960's America, Sherry Arnstein's paper *A Ladder of Citizen Participation* introduces us to a set of fundamental issues concerning participatory processes. A cornerstone of her analysis is that

participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless (Ibid, 216)

Put fundamentally our involvement in the unfolding of events has no meaning for us unless we are involved with the unfolding of events. Games make varying attempts to articulate this and some mechanisms have become cliches as can be seen in the notion of 'power ups'. But what's really at stake here is that the player has a variety of choices and strategies available to them at any one moment. Real power isn't about exercising more of 'it' but an ability to exercise choice as to what one affects.

Over the past two years I've been involved with the evaluation of a commissioning program of new artworks within a Private Finance Initiative build of new health care facilities for Avon and Wiltshire Partnership (AWP). Although at this stage research protocol does not allow me to deal the outcomes of this research, there are a number of interesting documents already in the public domain. As a part of this Willis Newson, an arts consultancy specializing in healthcare and the built environment, were commissioned to write an arts strategy for AWP, and as a part of this service users were invited to become a part of this commissioning process. Within this documentation service users were presented in a number of different ways: as active participants in the arts programme; as people who needed to be consulted about the strategy; and as people with needs that had to be met through the strategy. Given this the documents identify a diverse range of consultation and participation.

In order to address these issues the strategy combined Commissions, Transition and ongoing Arts programmes. These were devised to encompass the provision of new work, the process of moving and the development of an ongoing arts provision in the new facilities. Whilst the commissions were a part of the secured capital funds, other strands became dependent upon a fundraising strategy after there were unexpected extra decommissioning costs. The result was that where there had been the expectation of participation in the production of artwork with the artists consultation was left in its place.

The problem is that where participation had left residents feeling that they might have some say in their environment, the notion of consultation left them feeling that they only had scant say in the approval of what was in effect an already done decision. If play is about the unfolding of events we can clearly see that consultation does not meet what we expect from participation. As Arnstein's points out, consultation is often used

to "prove" that "grassroots people" are involved in the program. But the program may not have been discussed with "the people." (Arnstein 1969, 218)

Identifying this as mere tokenism we need to ask ourselves how many interactive artists and designers have used even this level of consultation in their work, if they don't already view such an approach as unwanted interference? This has led to issues surrounding the commissioning of

traditional forms of practise, never mind those forms where such an involvement is meant to be central to its rationale. Positing partnership, delegated power and citizen control as the highest forms of participation, Arnstein moves many artists out of what might be considered to be their comfort zone, but the question needs to be asked whether this is precisely what interactivity requires?

Conclusion

If we return to the problem of art and interactivity, issues of ownership and participation become central. For participants to involve themselves, to experience a sense of wonder, they need to 'own' the experience in the sense that they are implicated in the unfolding of events; this requires a genuine playfulness and involvement that has no intermediary, no stepping stones between action and involvement.

However, with its focus on individual vision and expression, traditional art and design disciplines often coerce viewers into adopting a particular way of seeing. The notion of involving participants in the development of new work has been seen as an imposition upon the insight an individual creative voice is assumed to provide. However given the nature of interactivity it is precisely this involvement we should be encouraging in order to work creatively with interaction; an openness to these possibilities should be a cornerstone of interactive design.

The danger of pursuing digital media as if it were a traditional form of practice is that rather than leading to the genuinely new, it reinforces an artist centred approach. If we are to make the leap into dealing with genuinely interactive practises, artists need to open up in such a way that they are more playful, and involve participants in defining the nature of projects. This moves beyond the playfulness artists often involve themselves (as can be seen in shows such as *Serious Games*) towards a more serious commitment to the transformative power of play. Artists needs to stand back from a desire to be seen as a primary force within the creation of the new, to be still and see what is at play; only then can we experience the productive forces that lie at the confluence of genuine participation.

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Biographical Notes

Mark Palmer is a senior lecturer in Games Technology in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences at the University of the West of England. His undergraduate and masters degree were within Fine Art but his research degree saw him working within Modern Continental Philosophy and Virtual Reality. Since then he has worked on a number of collaborative projects as diverse as a New Technology Arts Fellowship at the University of Cambridge, research into the affect of commissioning processes for new artwork within PFI projects and new AI routines within Games Technology. These projects have been framed by a philosophical interest in complex systems and the need to move away from notions of creative practise based around notions of individual creativity towards the generative potential of collaboration.