

Engaging with Experience

Lizzie Muller

"By one of the ironic perversities that often attend the course of affairs, the existence of the works of art upon which formation of an aesthetic theory depends has become an obstruction to theory about them... [T]he work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience. Since the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience, the result is not favourable to understanding." (Dewey 1980: 1)

In the opening paragraph of John Dewey's *Art as Experience* he argues that research in art mistakes its own object by focusing on objects rather than *experience*. He describes the dual existence of art as growing from the experience of the artist, and manifested in the audience's experience of the work. This is not simply a collapsing of the distinction between producer and consumer; rather it is an acknowledgement of the similarities of the lived experience of making and perceiving, and of their mutual inter-dependence. Richard Shusterman has pointed out how Dewey's move away from a closed artistic product to an open and transformative aesthetic experience anticipates later theories associated with post-structuralism (Shusterman 2001). Certainly Dewey's words foretell a general movement in contemporary culture towards a privileging of experience.

For research in art the implications of this shift are profound. Taking the active and creative role of the audience seriously necessitates a research focus on the audience's lived experience, which is often perceived as amorphous and difficult to study. The Engage symposium and the diverse and exciting collection of papers that it has attracted address this need from the particular perspective of interaction. The emphasis is on computer-based interactivity in art but this is framed by the recognition that interaction, in its broadest sense, reaches to the heart of experience itself.

Interaction is central to Dewey's pragmatist account of experience, and to other accounts that emphasise the fundamental fact of our embodied existence in the world, notably J.J. Gibson (1979) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002). For Dewey art is expressive of and constituted in the interaction of the "live creature" with the world; "The first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it out

because of it, through interaction with it.” (Dewey 1980: 12). Computer-based interactive art is an art-form where the nature of experience and interaction is particularly and often self-consciously explored. Interactive artworks come into being and exist in their full form when they are *used*. One of the great contributions that interactive art has to offer contemporary culture is as a test bed for learning more about the nature and operation of interaction and experience in art. Artists are leading this experimentation. David Rokeby, for example, describes his engagement with interaction and experience thus;

“I’m an interactive artist; I construct experiences. Since the early 80’s I’ve been exhibiting my installations in galleries, trade shows, science museums, and public and private spaces. These exhibitions serve as a public research laboratory where my ideas about interaction and experience are tested, affirmed or shot down.” (Rokeby 1998:27)

The Engage symposium places special emphasis on the reflections of practicing artists. A number of artists’ papers describe their attempts to induce particular effects and emotions in the audience’s experience of their work. Anna Davies reflects on the creation of social anxiety in her work “*In the house of the shouters...*”. She shows how an iterative creative process allowed the “behaviour” of the installation to evolve symbiotically with that of the audience. Alex Davies describes how the design of his work “*Dislocation*” subtly leads its audience to situations where perceptual illusions create virtual worlds in which real and fictional people are felt to momentarily inhabit the same physical reality. Tina Gonsalves and Sarah Moss both explore ways to generate and test for affective responses in their work. Gonsalves describes how collaboration with neuroscientists in the use of bio-feedback technologies is allowing her to interpret and work directly with participants’ physiological responses as an input for interaction.

Other artists’ papers use particular theoretical frameworks to describe the relationship between their artwork and their audience. Mari Velonaki applies Jean-Louis Baudry’s conception of the relationship between the spectator and the projected image in cinema to the audience’s engagement with the characters that inhabit her interactive installations. Roman Danylak equates the relationship of sign and signified with the foundational role of touch in the creation of meaning in gesture-based artworks.

Ian Gwilt and Janet Marles both explore the emergence of new formal characteristics through the impact of digital technologies. Marles describes the effects of the conflation of linear and non-linear narrative in interactive documentary. Through his reflexive and provocative artwork, “*Untitled Media*”, Gwilt engages the audience in identifying the

properties that might make up a new visual taxonomy of mixed-reality artworks.

The production of creative social and technical environments is the focus for other artists. Andrew Johnston et al describe the creation and evaluation of responsive system for stimulating musical exploration. Kazuhiro Jo et al, describe how different environmental conditions affect the experiences of participants in performances of their “*Sine Wave Orchestra*”. Reflecting on her work in the “*Avoca Project*” Lyndal Jones’ describes the creation of a site specific experience that allows participants, through interaction, to consider the effect of their actions on the world around them.

Theorists and curators are also using interactive art as a focus for experimenting with new ways to understand the role of aesthetic experience in a highly technologised and rapidly changing world. The symposium features several theorists who are taking on this challenge: Kathy Cleland explores the way that different media constitute and encourage new forms of subjectivity and new ways of seeing ourselves as visible entities in the world. Joanne Jakovich and Kirsty Beilharz show the relationship between architecture and interaction and present a framework for implementing techniques and materials from interactive art in architectural practice. Su Ballard posits emergence, interruption and noise, as the processes through which viewers experience art installations. Mike Leggett compares interactive art practice from the last decade with contemporary examples to ask whether a more mature relationship to audiences has emerged.

From a curatorial perspective Natalia Radywyl draws on empirical research in a gallery context to demonstrate emerging forms of visitor agency and experience in the museum. Julianne Pearce reflects on curatorial strategies for engaging audiences through interaction in public spaces.

Cross-overs between the field of interactive art and disciplines such as Human Computer Interaction (HCI) are providing access to useful new methods for understanding and studying interaction and human experience. In her book “*Plans and Situated Actions*” Lucy Suchman has described how people achieve meaning in their encounters with interactive artefacts through action. This achievement is absolutely dependent on the contingent resources of the situation. To address the situated nature of interaction Suchman emphasises the methodological need for empirical approaches to understanding experience (Suchman 1987). The Engage symposium highlights the potential of quantitative and qualitative methods from HCI for gathering and analysing primary audience experience data. Daniel Fallman uses the Reparatory Grid technique, Zafer Bilda employs Protocol Analysis and Yun Zhang demonstrates a coding technique based in discourse analysis.

Tools and techniques from the “user-centred” approach in HCI also offer valuable production and evaluation methodologies for the development of interactive artworks. Nick Mariette describes the iterative design of a series of location-sensitive, mobile sound works called “*Audio Nomad*”, and their evaluation in terms of user-perception. Garth Paine describes the development and testing of a new kind of musical instrument in terms of its cognitive perceptual affordances. George Khut shows how two HCI frameworks for understanding user-experience can be applied to the audience experience in his art-work “*Cardiomorphologies*”. Based on this analysis he shows how interactive art acts as a medium for critical enquiry.

The papers published in this volume represent a significant contribution to our understanding of interactive art experiences. The impact of this diverse collection of perspectives reaches beyond the field of interactive art and of HCI. Dewey posits aesthetic experience as a heightened form of experience, through which we can understand the nature of *experience itself*. For Dewey art reflects our adaptation and growth within a changing environment. Using the example of Impressionism he argues that changes in our world-experience relate fundamentally to the emergence of new forms of art;

“[The Impressionists’] new subject-matter demanded a new form. And because of the relativity of technique to form, they were compelled to experiment with the development of new technical procedures. An environment that is changed physically and spiritually demands new forms of expression... the very meaning of an important new movement in any art is that it expresses something new in human experience, some new mode of interaction of the live creature with his surroundings...” (Dewey 1980: 316)

In interactive art we see the emergence of a new form of expression which responds to a new, highly technologised form of lived experience. In studying and coming to understand the experience of interactive art, we are coming to understand better our experience of the world.

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Forward

Ernest Edmonds and Lizzie Muller

"The idea for the Creativity & Cognition conferences began on a small Dutch island, Terschelling, at a New Year gathering at the end of 1991 ... The problem that was identified was... the scientists (interested in creativity) and the artists (interested in computing), did not meet together. The computer-oriented meetings were not informed by creative practitioners and the art-based meetings were not informed by computer experts. The Creativity & Cognition series was created in order to bring all of the stakeholders together." (Candy and Edmonds, 1999)

The Creativity and Cognition Conference has grown to become a regular, international ACM SIGCHI event. The 2007 meeting will be held in June Washington DC, chaired by Ben Shneiderman (CC2007). In parallel to the Conference, a series of Creativity and Cognition Symposia has been launched and held in Sydney Australia. Each Symposium is focused on a specific problem within the scope of the Conference concerns. Engage is the fourth such meeting. It is concerned with research into audience engagement with interactive art.

The experience of the audience is at the heart of interaction and, in particular, interactive art. Computer-based interactive artworks come into being and exist in their full form when they are used. They cannot be understood only as objects, but must be thought of as time-based experiences, or periods of engagement. There is an increasing interest from practitioners and researchers in the field of interactive art in learning more about audience experience from theoretical, empirical and applied perspectives. This symposium reviews the latest work in this area and future directions for the field, drawing together different disciplinary approaches and perspectives including artist led research, curatorial and theoretical research, human-centred design perspectives.

The topics covered in Engage have arisen in large part from Beta_space, CCS's exhibition and audience research initiative in partnership with the Powerhouse Museum and supported by ACID. Beta_space is an experimental exhibition area for interactive art at the Powerhouse. It extends CCS's practice based research in art and technology into a public context (Edmonds et al 2006).

Many people and several organizations have made invaluable contributions leading up to and enabling the Engage Symposium. The Powerhouse Museum has been an exciting and vital partner in the development of Beta_space and the concepts that surround it. A number of staff have made important contributions, but we must specifically thank Matthew Connell, whose untiring support has enabled much of that work.

ACID, the Australasian CRC for Interaction Design, has been extremely helpful in joining with UTS to fund much of the research around Beta_space and now to specifically sponsor this Symposium. ANAT, The Australian Network for Art and Technology, are a vital source of support for digital art initiatives in Australia, and have generously sponsored the attendance of Tim Boykett. We also thank OZCHI 2006, as Bill Gaver appears courtesy of this leading forum for work in all areas of HCI.

We thank our invited speakers, Tim Boykett, Andrew Brown, Bill Gaver, Beryl Graham and Mike Stubbs, and all of the contributors for their stimulating papers.

Shigeki Amitani has made an important effort, on all of our behalves, by building and maintaining the web site and paper management system. Finally, we are very indebted to Deborah Turnbull, our Co-Editor of the Proceedings, for her tireless, always enthusiastic, administration of everything to do with enabling Engage to take place.

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ENGAGE: Interaction, Art and Audience Experience

A CCS / ACID Symposium

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CONTENTS

List of Contributors	v
Symposium Committee	xi
Forward <i>Ernest Edmonds and Lizzie Muller</i>	xv
Engaging with Experience <i>Lizzie Muller</i>	xvii
Reflections on the Nature of Interaction <i>Ernest Edmonds</i>	xxiii

INVITED PRESENTATIONS

Physical or Virtual, it's all Real <i>Tim Boykett</i>	4
Modes of Creative Engagement <i>Andrew Brown</i>	6
Probes and Commentators: Placing Interpretation at the Heart of Design <i>Bill Gaver</i>	8
Participatory Systems <i>Beryl Graham</i>	10
The Economy of Interaction in Public Art Galleries and Museums <i>Mike Stubbs</i>	12

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Long Presentations:

THEORETICAL AND CURATORIAL APPROACHES

Emergence: The Generation of Material Spaces in Anthony McCall's 'Line Describing a Cone' <i>Susan Ballard</i>	16
---	----

Media Mirrors and Image Avatars <i>Kathy Cleland</i>	28
From Audience to Inhabitant: Interaction as a Medium in Architecture <i>Joanne Jakovich, Kristy Beilharz</i>	40
The Promise of the Arty Little Microfish <i>Natalia Radywyl</i>	50
ARTIST LED RESEARCH	
Touch as the Act of Signification: Naming as a Key Design Concept for Gesturally Intuitive Interactive Space <i>Roman Danylak, Ernest Edmonds</i>	62
Frolicking with Phantoms: Illusion in Mixed Reality <i>Alex Davies</i>	68
Creating a Social Anxiety Interface in the Artwork 'In the house of shouters' <i>Anna Davis</i>	80
Towards a Visual Taxonomy in Mixed Reality Art <i>Ian Gwilt</i>	90
Partial Reflections: Interactive Environments for Musical Exploration <i>Andrew Johnston, Ben Marks, Linda Candy, Ernest Edmonds</i>	100
Styles of Participation and Engagement in Collective Sound Performance Projects <i>Kazuhiro Jo, Yasuhiro Yamamoto, Kumiyo Nakakoji</i>	110
Some Digital Media Approaches to Non-Linear Narratives and Interactivity <i>Janet Marles</i>	120
INTERSECTION OF HCI AND INTERACTIVE ART	
Eliciting Audience's Experiences to Improve Interactive Art Installation <i>Hanif Baharin, Ann Morrison</i>	134

Catching the Interactive Experience: Using the Repertory Grid Technique for Qualitative and Quantitative Insight into User Experience <i>Daniel Fallman</i>	144
--	-----

Interactive Art as Embodied Inquiry: Working with Audience Experience <i>George Poonkhin Khut</i>	156
---	-----

Short Presentations

THEORETICAL AND CURATORIAL APPROACHES

The Bairdboard Bombardment: A Decade of Engagement <i>Mike Leggett</i>	172
---	-----

Surface, Site, Screen: Interactive Art in Public Space <i>Julianne Pierce</i>	184
--	-----

ARTIST LED RESEARCH

An Exploration into Deeper Engagements of Audience and Creative Process <i>Tina Gonsalves</i>	196
---	-----

The Avoca Project: Place and Art and Interaction <i>Lyndal Jones</i>	208
---	-----

The Reflective Practitioner: in creation of a presence based experience <i>Sarah Moss</i>	218
---	-----

Identification-Projection-Interaction: The Participant in an Interactive Art Environment <i>Mari Velonaki</i>	230
---	-----

INTERSECTION OF HCI AND INTERACTIVE ART

Evaluating Audience Experience <i>Zafer Bilda</i>	248
--	-----

Perceptual Evaluation of Spatial Audio for "Audio Nomad" Augmented Reality Artworks <i>Nick Mariette</i>	260
--	-----

The Thummer Mapping Project - ThuMP <i>Garth Paine</i>	270
Investigating Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Case Studies in Art and Technology <i>Yun Zhang, Linda Candy</i>	282
APPENDIX: ACID – Designing the User Experience	292
AUTHOR INDEX	294

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