

# Stepping Down from the Screen

## Interactivity and the Art Game

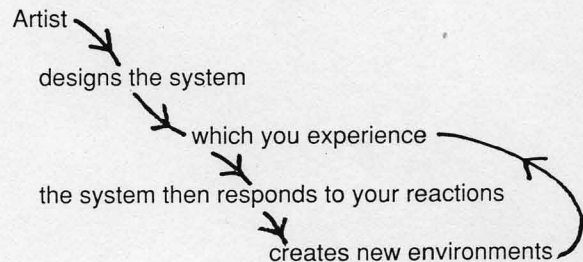
### Algorithm Clive Gillman

Imagine an article in which each word led, not onto the next word in the sentence, but to two other words. In which the choice of sentence construction was not the author's alone, but an interactive process. Tricky to read, devoid of the responsibilities of authorship, would this be more open - or less coherent.

Amongst those of us on television there is an ambivalence towards the presentation and delivery of time-based cultural products like film and TV. It is conveniently interpreted by one of the two common reactionary stances. We watch television and feel secure to indulge in it because we do not want responsibility in it, feeling it to be beyond salvation, becoming cynical consumers. Either that or we dismiss it as being trite and outside our sphere of influence, refusing to consume at all. Popular film is often viewed in much the same way. Many artists caught up in this ambivalence find more reward in criticism than in production, quietly shifting onto another foot and adhering to the other, closer, market forces of critical acknowledgement. Artists make products, and like any other product its design and development is tempered by the needs of the market. Many artists construct for a very small market, but because that market extends little beyond themselves they do not engage with a wider audience. Other artists design their product for a more complicated market, an amalgam of client, funder and critic, roles which parallel with consumer, share-holder and promoter. This places no value upon either way of being, as each artist has the right to engage or not to engage, but, it you can excuse the military language, what if the rules of engagement are fundamentally altered? Almost every artist uses tools that speak to the person and not with the person. Communication is almost exclusively through rhetoric and not dialogue, whatever is claimed by the artist. But consider the possibility that the technological base of the craft-form is shifting to allow for a genuine, or at least a further degree of, interaction.

Imagine a film in which the characters on screen respond to the whims of the audience. *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, Woody Allen's film about movie obsession in a small town is one of the few works that has confronted interactivity at least as a psychological reality. The character on the screen is able to reciprocate the love of a woman in the audience and eventually decides to leave the film for life on the outside, but after he has stepped out of the screen and into the small-town cinema he discovers his reality to be different from her reality. Although they become thoroughly engaged they still do not inhabit each others worlds. He becomes involved in a fight only to discover that when he is in her world the punches hurt. Given that the technology for partial interactivity is arriving fast it is time that we prepared ourselves for the potential of this medium. It seems distinctly possible that situations

like the *Purple Rose* incident could be forced in a hyper-real environment. In an environment that offers an entirely artificial reality. A fantasy world in which the twists and turns of your journey through an event are controlled by a feedback circuit that monitors and interprets your desires and reactions. Imagine an artwork in which the artists controls not what you see - but in which what you see is determined by your own psychology.



This type of system is often described as hyperspace and the computer industry is gearing up towards providing a new environment for the ultimate interactive experience - gaming. The history of fine art provides us only with examples of consistent adherence to the principles of writing and/or reading, of the evidence of language as an intermediary for expression. The traditions of art forms that are based only in exchange and not in product rarely survive, but are retained in the arts of gaming and of dialogue, hence the desire for more artists to engage in the critical environment. The environment in which the exchange is of more importance than the artifact. With the popularity of concepts like structuralism and post-modernism artists have become closer to consumers than producers. This is a frightening concept to many, but it seems fully justified in a situation where the crowded and sophisticated layers of product interaction leave us with little possibility of fully appreciating the quality of art products.

Installation works like Daniel Reeves' *Well of Patience* or Andrew Stone's *Class* have tremendously complex layers of interpretation and cross-referencing which often make little or no concession to the audience. Many of us respect the works particularly for their ability to confound and to offer contemplation of ambiguous interpretation of intent. In a media marketplace where the promotion of consumer products aims to give us nothing but certainty and confirmation, this can be very refreshing. But these works are much more than this, and the problem remains that only a small percentage of the audience will ever approach an understanding or appreciation of the work that closely resembles the intent

of the artist. Is this asking too much? Well, if an artist is only intent on producing works that make no compromise to communication then do we begin to choose between static works of art and more efficient methods of communicating experience. To offer up a simple answer here could be a little too ingenuous, but I feel there is no contradiction here - an artwork provides us with an experience and if that experience is one of ambiguity and confoundment this could be the correct response if that is what we need or want from it. But if the situation is one where the artist has created something that is buried deep in its own design, there can surely be a system that offers broader opportunity of access. Imagine an installation work which includes a responsive interface to the individual. A viewer enters the space and begins their appreciation of the work by allowing themselves to be interrogated by the work. Their honest reactions are used as a basis for what the work presents to them. Does this mean a tacky hypertext interface with patronising and ill-considered platitudes? It need not as artists become truly conversant with the tools of communication (and not just those of expression) and as technology advances towards intelligent systems that use algorithms for the processes of analysis.

If I were to count all your reactions to what you see, I could record these as confirmed responses. I could enter these responses into the categories that I had created to find your viewpoint. There are key problems in this approach. When I ask you a question I am presupposing a limited range of answers that are defined by the question. Most questions exist to find an answer and serve no real function if one answer is not appropriate. If I hand you a questionnaire that says:

1. Did you enjoy this work? Y or N
2. Have you been to a video gallery before? Y or N

### 3. What is your favourite TV programme?

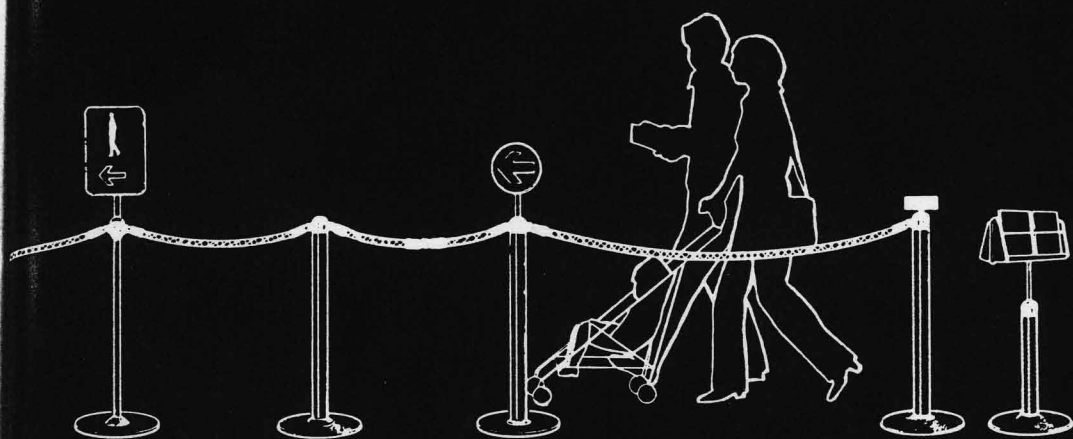
This would provide me with a small amount of knowledge about you and would provide a possible basis for an analysis of your appreciation of the work on show. If, however, I were to give you a questionnaire which said:

1. Draw a picture of your favourite animal eating your favourite meal in a happy place.

I would be connecting with a totally different place. What you did first in response to this, compounded by what you did second and third and so on to infinity would provide me with all the necessary information to assess your response. Now it is at this point that the game creeps back in. My skill at creating a work of art is governed chiefly in turn by your skill in creating a work of art. I only know what you feel by your production of an infinitely processed algorithm, - ie by the product of your creativity<sup>1</sup>. Remove the craft inequalities in the equation and we are gaming, we have created with algebraic simplicity an inter-personal art network - in a way, an acknowledgement of the current system, which masquerades as something altogether different. What exists currently can never be disguised as something more universal, more objective. It is locked into its own subversive cynicism. The production of art is a game, but with interactivity we have the confidence to pronounce it is such and to use its form and its power.

#### Footnote

1. This system is under development - initially as a way of using chaos formulae and fractals to produce complex algorithms from a simple formula. These fractal algorithms are then used to compress data - most importantly the compression of real-time video onto conventional computer media.



**The intuition of space is overdetermined  
by the intuition of time.**

