

IF ONLY I COULD TOUCH THE MOUSE, MY LIFE WOULD BE PERFECT

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INTRODUCTION

In collaboration with Per Platou, I work as co-director and choreographer of Motherboard. Since 1995 we have created performances and installations which utilise and relate to digital technologies, pop culture and social interaction. We have been investigating the potential uses of technologies, both those specially designed for the performing artist - notably BigEye and Image/ine softwares developed by Tom Demeyer at the Steim Institute in Amsterdam - and general applications and properties inherent to the Macintosh computer.

I will describe two experiments in developing cable-free interfaces for autonomous bodies to create dynamic networking environments in which performance can take place. While sharing common technical interfacing elements for their execution, both have clearly defined parameters of performer/audience roles, technology visibility and relationship to the screen. They both rely on common-ground associative responses to thematic content in order to communicate with the public.

BOTBALL



(Developed at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art, Norway, 1998.)

This highly mediated installation is paradoxically immediately engaging to the public. Direct associative access is offered by the inevitable recognition of a green bot-arena, complete with TV-goals, as a miniature football pitch inhabited by a host of small, battery driven, three-wheeled robots. There is adequate space for the public to move around the arena.

Easy to love

The small robots are easy to love. They are made of plastic and metal and bare little resemblance to the muscular bodies of human football players. A strange soundscape is underway, which the bots seem to be reacting to. When their protruding microphone noses register sharp sounds, they reverse and swing to change direction before moving on. A small ball is sporadically nudged around by the moving bots. The computer is out of sight.

Technicalities

BigEye is a computer application designed to take realtime video information and convert it into Midi messages. Through the monitoring eye of a video camera, BigEye recognises the ball and botplayers as objects, and as they move through designated hot zones on the pitch, Midi messages are generated and sent from the Mac, via a Midi interface, to a sampler, triggering a collection of sounds. These are then manipulated by the bot-movement to produce various fluctuating audio qualities. The bots consequently generate more sound, which is the source of more bot-movement. From time to time, the bots can be seen scratching on their own sound. Collisions with hard surfaces also cause the players to change direction, and colliding bots may be seen clinched together, until a strong sound releases them from their embrace.

Ground rules

The rules of the game lie in the symbiotic play of autonomous bodies of mechanical, electronic and fleshy nature with the interface. There is no referee. Competitive elements arise through associative response of the public and their direct intervention with the fuzzy-logical environment.

Competition and Hooligeeks

Any ballplay that occurs between the bots may seem coincidental, but by giving the audience intervention possibilities, it is possible to cheer, clap or wave the players into competitive activities. We choose to call the audience Hooligeeks. The more noise the public makes, the more the game is influenced or disrupted. A particularly raucous audience can disrupt the rhythm of the game completely at any given time, but in order to control the botplayers' movements the public must zen-in to the fluctuating rhythm of the game, and engage in a symbiotic relationship with the environment.

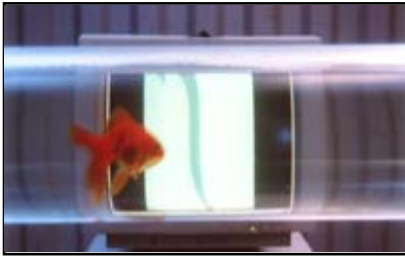
A media goal!

Football's Media aspect is reflected in Botball by using two TVs as goals. Image/ine, a program that allows a user to manipulate visual source material in a digital video environment, controls the images shown on the TVs. A video camera captures live feed of the botpitch which is superimposed at fluctuating levels of transparency onto images of notorious football games. Whenever the ball is nudged into a goal zone, sounds of cheering are triggered and the TV screen displays images of famous goals.

Timed out and exhausted

The botplayers are driven by battery. As the batteries wear flat, the bots get sluggish and are pulled off the pitch for rejuvenation by an attendant. Reserves are sent out, fully charged and ready for action.

FISHBROWSER VERSION 1.0



(Developed at the Machines and Migratory Bodies workshop at the Chichester Institute of Higher Education, England 1998.)

Physical appearance

A computer monitor stands on a podium and displays a Netscape browser. A cylindrical aquarium containing a lionhead fish (aka "Geekfish") hangs in front of the monitor. The browser image appears upside down when seen at a distance through the tube, but can be viewed normally when seen close up. A small video camera monitors the tube.

Migratory Body

At the time of acquisition Geekfish had already undertaken a migratory experience, imported from Singapore. I suspect that Geekfish had not an inkling of a thought about its finny relations native of ocean, lake and stream. I suspect that Geekfish has no recollection of anything, but lives in a constant present. Geekfish travels by tube. (A single line.) But within this seemingly dead-end journeying back and forth along the watery channel, Geekfish performs a migratory internet surf.

Choreographical structure

Geekfish improvises within a simple structure; a horizontal path with vertical and rotational diversions implemented at will. Bodily movement is defined as coming from a central source, rippling out to peripheral body parts enabling smooth projection through space, with gestural movement occurring mainly around the mouth area. The performer reacts spontaneously to environmental stimulation, such as change of light levels from the flickering monitor, and the presence of audience, who also tend to interact with additional finger-flicking of the tube.

Technical details

Big Eye tracks Geekfish whose transition through hot zones trigger voice samples, evoking the notion that Geekfish can actually speak to the public, and to the computer, or vice-versa. Simple statements are registered by the Speech Recognition extension in the Mac, consequently opening designated html documents in the Netscape browser. The thematic content - video, animation, image, text and sound, based on sushi, sex, junk food and danger - of these pages allows the audience to relate the randomly triggered webpages to the personified fish.

COMMENTARY

FishBrowser plays with the notion of random juxtaposition of sound and visual elements and the role of the performer and/or user as a passive clicker of switches, including the tendency of superficial internet browsing. The fish is a catalyst for machine-to-machine interaction and human fantasy. I can define both these installations as formal dance works. We have applied choreographic principles of structured improvisation to them both. Despite the fact that the performing bodies are not necessarily human, they have been selected because of their specific movement capabilities and qualities.

<http://www.notam02.no/motherboard/>