

INTRODUCTION

A HUMAN, A COMPUTER, AND AN ARTISTIC SYNERGY

Imagination is more important than knowledge.

— *Albert Einstein*

For well over a dozen years I have been using computers as tools of creativity. The first time I sat down at a Mac Plus in the mid-eighties, I was impressed by the capabilities it had to organize and distill my dissonant thoughts into a harmonious accomplishment of ideas that could be printed or displayed on screen. Soon I was working with not only words and pictures, but sound effects, music, and animations out of which I created simple games and puzzles by using a remarkable software called “HyperCard” that was shipped free with every Apple computer between 1987 and 1992.

I had just come off a five-year stint as an international theatre impresario, directing and choreographing stage shows for resort hotels in the Far East and Micronesia and was stranded in Vancouver — happily enough mind you — by love, family, and a home-based career in computer-mediated communications. Buying into the early promise of computer “Multimedia,” I kept up my hobby of programming Hypercard games with the thought that it may eventually carve a path for me back into the entertainment industry. At about the same time in the late eighties, another interactive game environment emerged called multi-user domains, or “MUDs,” where I was able to connect with people from all over the world to improvise stories and play out character roles in an imaginary, virtual space. These were my diversions while I taught my children

computer literacy and built my career skills as an “Integrated Media” professional — a human, a computer, and a digital synergy of art, work, and play.

Hypercard made way for a stunning parade of multimedia tools and technology, from music composition to non-linear video editing and, over the same decade of the eighties, MUDs made way for “cyber-you-name-it,” from Internet video streaming to virtual reality and the computer started looking more and more like a way to express myself as a creative artist. Life presented changes and, in the early nineties, I returned to Calgary to start up Sundial Media Ltd., a full-service corporate communications and multi-media production company. In 2002, I recognized an opportunity to re-assert myself as a practitioner of theatre art by entering the Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) in Theatre Studies at the University of Calgary in the Department of Drama. My declared intention in my application statement was to “produce an artistic series of interactive multi-media projects that explore theatre/drama subjects and merge the creative talents of actors, musicians, dancers, artists, and technicians.”

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEORETICAL CLAIMS

As described above, my main interest at the outset of my post-graduate study was to find ways that computerized multi-media activities might contribute to live theatre art performances. This curiosity, combined with subsequent course work and creative projects, spawned the initial thesis research question, “How can computer-mediation create opportunities for theatre art?” As part of the research background, I briefly reviewed what had already been done in this field, including my own previous creative work in theatre and new media. This was followed by basic philosophical conceptualization of “Project X,” an interim idea that combined theatre art in a general way with computer science and electronic technology.

Research in the area of computer science led to the emergence of a theoretical claim that the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) could offer innovative support

to the creation of theatre art. A second claim, which emerged primarily from my own professional media industry work, was that through the use of integrated electronic media, it was possible to create new opportunities for theatre art.

These theoretical claims initiated the creative processing and eventual production of the artistic theatre art work *Messaging in the Noosphere*. The general goal of this performance was to collect evidence to support the claims that “Integrated Electronic Media and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) can create opportunity and promote innovation in Theatre Art.”

My daily journal writings, along with course work in Creative Process, Performance Media, and Human-Computer Interaction, an assistant-teaching assignment in Advanced Acting, and analysis of previous work done by myself and others, formulated an intersection of knowledge that informed this project and subsequent thesis investigation. Different parts of this investigation were set in slightly different research paradigms that shaped the viewpoint of the findings, but are all manifestations of a qualitative, interpretivist methodology based on an uncovering of subjective knowledge.

CONTENTS OF THIS RESEARCH PAPER

In the first section of this paper, corresponding to chapters one through six, the thesis claims are explored by observing results of the live theatre art *Messaging in the Noosphere* in the areas of creative process, scenography and integrated multimedia, character development, and performance creation as they related to HCI and integrate with media art. During the performance series, three special explorations were also conducted; in cellular phone interruptions, audience-initiated interactivity, and live Internet streaming. A full script of the show and storyboards of the “Integrated Multimedia” are also found within this section.

In the second section of the paper, chapters seven through nine, the resultant integrated media products and services will be discussed in connection to the way they

function within the range of creative possibilities for the theatre art. These products and services, as mentioned above, are the Web site service and its “Future of Tomorrow” game, and the Interactive DVD Documentary.

The final section draws conclusions from these various explorations and offers substantiations of the theoretical research claims. Also included are insights into the progress I have made of my own journey as a creative artist and glimpses of possible future research endeavours based on both the discoveries and challenges revealed through this research.

WHAT MAKES THE PIECES OF THE PROJECT “INTEGRATED?”

In its essence, an integrated electronic media project can be thought of as a series of art or communication events, services, or products that have a coherence of presentational and representational design elements, and thematic content. Here is the breakdown of integrated electronic media elements within the *Messaging in the Noosphere* project

- The main “event” was the theatre art, which, in itself, combined live performance with “Integrated Multimedia” video and sound art. “Integrated Multimedia” is discussed in chapter four along with “Scenography.”
- A secondary integrated electronic media “event” was the streaming Internet broadcast that is discussed in chapter six.
- The integrated electronic media “service” is the interactive Web site that functions as a promotional tool and as a delivery service for the “Future of Tomorrow” game. This is discussed in chapter seven.
- The main integrated electronic media “product” is the interactive DVD that functions as an archival documentary for the production. This is discussed in chapter eight.

Each of these elements in the series has its own audience and its own platform of delivery. However, they share representational design sensibilities such as the use of visual metaphors, for example the cosmos and its blackness and spherical shapes; and presentational design aesthetics such as general type and visual organization. Thematically they all share the story of families and gods and all deliver up experiences of the Noosphere Reality Game Show.

The script, the program, the various posters, information releases and other printed material generated for the show can be considered yet another set of products in the integrated media series. The common denominator is computer-mediation and the interface between one human, one computer, and all the digital and intellectual property assets that were created, re-created, manipulated, mixed up, re-purposed, re-assembled, compressed, and de-compressed — all within the digital walls of a high-level directory on my computer hard drive entitled “Messaging.”

On the subject of the aggregation of digital media, Steve Dixon, in “Theory and Contexts: Ontologies of Online Theatre” published in *Performance Arts International*, asserts that “Once the computer becomes an agent of performative action and creation, there is a distinct blurring of what was formerly termed communication, scriptwriting, acting, visual art, science, design, theatre, video, and performance art.” (Dixon 1999)

He says, in effect, that “distinction of form” applies less in a computer-mediated environment. He cites Toronto-based digital theatre experimentalist, John Reaves who claims that

... in the digital world you cannot distinguish different disciplines by the physical nature of the media or by which work is created Theatre has always been an integrative collaborative art which potentially (and sometimes actually) includes all art: music, dance, painting, sculpture.” (Reaves 1995)

Reaves concludes with a challenge to practitioners of theatre art by adding, “Why not be aggressive in the tumultuous context of the Digital Revolution? Why not claim all interactive art in the name of theatre?”

With computer-mediated technologies such as virtual reality, globally expanded cyberspace, or computer-generated integrated multimedia becoming catalyzing factors in the work of third-millennial creative artists, theatre practitioners world wide are faced with the dilemma of either embracing new models of theatre art or dismissing them — a situation parallel, in many ways, to the first appearances of electronic media made on the horizon of the cultural industries at the beginning of the last century.

SECOND-MILLENNIUM THEATRE AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA

I can well imagine the love/hate relationship theatre practitioners must have had with electronic media such as cinema and radio when they made their appearance as entertainment disseminators in the early part of the 20th century. Embrace it or dismiss it? Incorporate its power or vehemently disdain it? According to Walter Benjamin, theatre innovator Bertold Brecht evolved his “epic theatre” in the 1920s as a response to montage editing techniques in film where, “like the pictures in a film, epic theatre moves in spurts The songs, the captions, the lifeless conventions set off one situation from another.” (Benjamin [1939] 1995, 419) Likewise, it could be implied that playwright Tennessee Williams’ magic lantern “screen device,” that projected scene titles in *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944, might be an offshoot of filmic scene openers of the day. Brecht and Williams were two early 20th century playwrights who, from my perspective, accepted and embraced the inspiration brought about by the cinematic form.

Here in the early years of the third millennium, it’s incumbent on theatre practitioners to come to terms with an infinitely more-advanced electronic media and the massive audience that is seduced by the charm and convenience of television, the Internet, game consoles and so on. This is an audience that scans its wallet and then has

to decide whether to hire a babysitter and go to a play or kick back and watch a *Law and Order* rerun — an audience that checks www.nakednews.com and has to decide whether to brave the minus-thirty degree elements to see Shakespeare at the civic centre, or do the laundry and keep surfing the Net. These are the decisions that time- and money-squeezed theatre-going audiences face daily.

What's the answer? How will theatre survive these onslaughts? An interesting perspective on this is contributed by Tori Haring-Smith in the collection of essays *Theatre in Crisis?: Performance Manifestos for the New Century*. She postulates that

In order to survive, theatre must remember that it was born so that communities could tell their stories to each other. It goes back to storytelling. ... theatre is a human event. It relies upon breathing, changing human beings — an actor and a spectator — coming face to face. It's a living, transitory art. (Haring-Smith 2002, 102)

Intimate storytelling is, without a doubt, seminal to theatre's audience appeal. But does it need to be "transitory?" Through the use of electronic media, we can develop, deliver, and archive dramatic narratives. One way of doing this is to utilize computers to take theatre into entirely new territory by repurposing and innovatively archiving the theatre art for delivery on home entertainment systems, giving it longevity, convenience, and essentially challenging theatre's "transitory" nature.

Throughout this paper, I will be introducing case studies of artists and scientists who have made discoveries and pioneered new artistic ground in theatre and art through their use of computer-mediated electronic technology. These examples will correspond to my own creative explorations and imaginings in human-computer interaction and use of integrated media.

DEFINING HUMAN-COMPUTER INTERACTION (HCI)

The Association for Computing Machinery Special Interest Group, Computer-Human Interaction (SIGCHI) defines Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) as “a discipline concerned with the design, evaluation, and implementation of interactive computing systems for human use and with the study of the major phenomena surrounding them.” This SIGCHI committee goes on to say “From a computer science perspective, the focus is specifically on interaction between one or more humans and one or more computational machines.” (Hewett et al. 1996)

As a computer-mediated communications professional, I find this description provocative and involving but as a creative artist, it isn't until further along in SIGCHI's description of HCI that compelling evidence between HCI and many aspects of computer-media theatre art begin to emerge. The SIGCHI committee states, “It is clear that varying what is meant by interaction (of) human and machine leads to a ‘rich space’ of possible topics.... HCI in the large is an interdisciplinary area” and then proceeds to mention psychology (cognitive processes), sociology and anthropology (interactions between technology), and industrial design. Furthermore, on the 2004 SIGCHI conference Web site, the committee elaborates further into topics of ambient intelligence, games, and mobile communications.

These topics and this “rich space” reduces HCI's strict association with the “hard science” of computers, thereby encouraging my involvement in HCI as a creative artist, and also giving promise to the intellectual investigation inherent in my thesis claim that human-computer interaction (HCI) can introduce innovation in theatre art. The “rich space” says to me “Volume,” “Energy,” “Electricity,” “Connections,” — some of the words that I jotted in my journal when all I knew about “Project X,” as *Messaging in the Noosphere* was initially called, was that I wanted to spill light on an array of crystal doorknobs in a big black theatre, transform it into a three-dimensional computer, and allow my imagination to run wild.

JOURNALING AS ARTISTIC DATA COLLECTION

Everything points to the conclusion that the phrase “the language of art” is more than a loose metaphor, that even to describe the visible world in images we need a developed system of schemata.”

— *E.H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion*

E.H. Gombrich, in *Art and Illusion*, points out to us that we need a developed set of schemata to describe the world of artistic endeavour. (Gombrich 2000) The schemata that I developed for collecting my data for this research project was a series of artist’s journals that I started in early 2003 and wrote in daily — reflecting and analyzing everything from plot idea fragments to project expenses, scholarly citations, set designs, spiritual illuminations, fits of anger, and drawings of big upside-down question marks.

This “language of art” that I adhered to in my recording methodology came from Natalie Goldberg’s *Wild Mind: Living the Writer’s Life* that included “losing control,” “going for the jugular,” and allowing myself to “write the worst junk in the world.” (Goldberg 1990). She also insists that one ought not to be concerned with spelling, grammar, punctuation, or editorial excellence in personal journal writing, so throughout this thesis paper, when citing my own work, I will be consistent with the flow of the prose as it corresponds to the scribbles in the original source — mistakes, dangling participles, and all. These journals were, without a doubt, the most significant tool I used to set goals, ramp up courage, and connect to a source of wisdom and inspiration within myself.

As I opened my creative channel through my journal writing, powerful changes occurred, not the least of which was a discovery that bits and fragments of other people’s writing, mixed in with my own, unleashed a creative energy far greater than the sum of its parts. Some writings came in by email from the cast and crew, some came as

extractions from profound religious treatises, and some came from other artists who had thrown ideas at a screen just like me. Sometimes the words became mixed inextricably with my own, making my journal into a multi-user domain of interactive storytelling. In the summer of 2003, I wrote in my journal:

Level Two...

The creator whispered to the warrior out of the whirlwind, “Wash yourselves with the cloud of whirling words and phrases and confront them for answers and all that is under the Noosphere will be yours.”

The believers roll and frolic in the words and phrases as they pluck them from the sphere, still warm from the breath of the creator.

Exalting in a circle, they volley the words back and forth and round and round. “Truth” and “faces of the judges” colliding then bounding off “summoning with a golden conch” and “filleth me.” The believers are overcome with pleasure and laughter as the words hover and gently fall to the ground—forming question fragments.

The warrior gravitates to the questions that exude the musk of a tribal epic. Her tribe gathers around and echoes a melody that floats through the sphere and surrounds these question fragments with the passion of discovery...The warrior holds her magic crystal aloft and the sphere resounds with a new harmony “VAAAAM,” as an ocean blue circle lights up the inner space, surrounded by six fragrant lotus petals.

Much of this dream came true ...

THE SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

Messaging in the Noosphere was performed as “Live Theatre Art” on five occasions in the Reeve Secondary Theatre at the University of Calgary, Canada, from January 19, 2004 to January 23, 2004 and twice during the “Happening” New Music Festival on January 29, 2004. *Messaging in the Noosphere* also appeared on the Internet as a streamed broadcast and Web site “cyber-art” game experience, and has been

subsequently repurposed and repackaged into “entertainment media art” in the form of an interactive documentary DVD.

The events, services, and products of *Messaging in the Noosphere* span tenses and media. In the past, *Messaging in the Noosphere*, was a live theatre art event and a one-time-only streaming media broadcast event. At the time of thesis writing it exists as an interactive DVD movie, a Web Site service, and a typeset script. In the future, screenings of the film, facilitated by the video artifacts archives on the Web site and on the DVD, will bring it back to life as an event. These are the elements that qualify *Messaging in the Noosphere* as an “Integrated Media Series.” In order to provide a consistency of style throughout this paper, I have chosen to represent the phenomena in the present tense, a journalistic style, to be sure, but one that suits this project and will avoid confusion.

Messaging in the Noosphere is a multi-layered and cross-media legend that embeds a story that takes place in the “near future of tomorrow” about the family of ASAP Feargod who hires a company called HexaKali Services to create a “Noosphere” — a three-dimensional computer in their media room. A horrible virus named SatanKali666 invades the machine, kills ASAP’s brother TLK2U, and disables ASAP. ASAP takes direction from the God in the Machine to neutralize SatanKali through a surprising display of faith. Consequently, ASAP doubles his prosperity by playing the stock market and gambling online, presents his sisters with a “digital gift of enlightenment,” and develops a spiritual connection with an Artificial Intelligence — the God in the Machine.

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In order to provide background into the motivation of *Messaging in the Noosphere* and the due diligence that informed its creative process, the upcoming chapter will contextualize my related work in the field of electronic media, especially as it related to

integrated performance events. Tallying up the artistic, commercial, and industrial “Integrated Media Series” that I have produced professionally for my company Sundial Media in the past dozen years, *Messaging in the Noosphere* is approximately the twelfth installment in this lineage of computer-mediated communication projects.