CHAPTER TWO
THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Besides shaping my primary, early awareness of the Noosphere, Marshall McLuhan had profound effect on the creative development of *Messaging in the Noosphere.* As a storyteller himself, McLuhan passed down legacies of thoughts in his writings by citing scholars, who cited scholars, who cited scholars, filtering and distilling a message about the value of oral tradition in an "electric," or post-literate time, creating, as it were, an intellectual global village — repeating and embellishing what others had said to drum up a tribal response and validation for his compelling tales of audio-tactile experiential awareness enabled by electro-magnetic technology.

In the prologue to *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* McLuhan introduces the work of Professor Harry Levin as being a "continuance of the work of Milman Parry," whose study of Yugoslavian epics set out to prove the oral tradition of Homer's poetry. McLuhan cites Harry Levin's preface to Professor Albert B. Lord's book, *The Singer of Tales:*

> We live in a time when literacy itself has become so diluted that it can scarcely be invoked as an esthetic criterion. The Word as spoken or sung, together with a visual image of the speaker or singer, has meanwhile been regaining its hold through electronic engineering. A culture based on the printed book, which has prevailed from the Renaissance until lately, has bequeathed to us — along with its immeasurable riches — snobberies which ought to be cast aside." (McLuhan 1962, 10)

The questions this stirred up in my consciousness involved firstly how "electronic engineering" in the form of a human-computer interaction could help me develop a system to chronicle concurrent audio-tactile modalities for my project, secondly, if the "medium" could equal the "message" and still qualify as an engaging narrative experience.

Spreadsheet Matrices and Information Processing

Should a theatre art "play" be defined by its written text alone? Why can't other mediums of audio-tactile expression be given equal weight and value? My conjecture is that it's primarily due to the inadequacies of scripting systems for other textual modalities. This need to chart out a multi-modal theatre experience proved to be my first fully describable Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) of the *Messaging in the Noosphere* project. Through the computer-mediated customization of a system of spreadsheet matrices, I was able to document a dynamic time/action journey through the dramatic action that scripted the look, the emotional feel, the sounds, and the colours of the art — all before there was even a narrative text to put in place. In its early iteration, there wasn't even a cast of characters and yet I knew what it "felt" like inside this Noospheric space that was poised for an encounter with an artistic event.

The field of HCI concerned with human information processing is known as "Cognitive Psychology." According to the SIGCHI committee, this means "concentrating on the learning of systems, the transfer of that learning, the mental representation of systems by humans, and human performance on such systems." (Hewett et al. 1996) In a presentation given in July 2003 at the Banff New Media Institute entitled "Computer-Science Research and Development and Its Relevance to New Media Creativity," Dr. Andrew Salway of the University of Surrey noted that a significant contribution from computer science to new media creativity has been in the area of information processing

and making sense of the data. He demonstrated a computer-executable visual representation of multimedia artifacts, or assets, that allowed information retrieval by visual similarity along *x* and *y,* or time and action, axes. (Salway 2000)

Salway's "multi-modal matrix" user interaction suggested to me ways of documenting the facets of my production into an arrangement of textual modalities in much the same way that I had previously implemented budgets and project management charts. The same principles applied where many things happen at once, a linear and yet visually intense scenario of dynamic events that allow for intuitive retrieval, interaction, and creation. I settled into an arrangement of four elements on an *x* or vertical axis and a timeline on the *y* or horizontal axis in minute-based increments. The four elements that appeared as vertical-line items in early iterations of the spreadsheet matrices were the film mode, the performance mode, the scenography, and the sounds of the Noosphere. (For examples, see appendix item # 2.)

THE FOUR MODES AND THE FOUR TEXTS

Over several subsequent iterations, my modalities of film, performance, scenography, and sound began taking on characteristics of the "four texts of a play" as described by Professor Kathleen Foreman in her advanced acting class at the University of Calgary. I had become familiar with this script analysis process as the class teaching assistant and had seen progress of clarity and intention among her acting students when this methodology was introduced into class.

In an attempt to free actors from the confines of the verbal, or written texts of play scripts, Foreman would have them explore other avenues of expression — physical expression where they would "dance" the character's journey, aural expression where they would "sound" or "sing" the journey, and visual expression where they would form arrangements or "tableaus" that expressed the journey. Foreman believes that in any performance, the four texts function simultaneously and she acknowledges the

relationship this has to the theories of the great Danish theatre practitioner Eugenio Barba who reminds us that before referring to a written word or printed manuscript,

> … text meant a 'weaving together'. In this sense, there is no performance which does not have 'text.'
>
> That which concerns the text (the weave) of the performance can be defined as 'dramaturgy,' that is *drama-ergon,* the 'work of the actions' in the performance….
>
> When a performance is based on a text composed of words, there is a danger that the balance in the performance will be lost because of the prevalence of linear relationships…. This will damage the plot understood as the weaving together of simultaneously present actions. (Barba and Savarese, 1991, 68-69)

This also strongly echoes Marshall McLuhan's thoughts on the catalytic effect of new technologies that extend man's simultaneous sensory mode perception. through "dilation of eye or ear … a surprising new world which evokes a vigorous new 'closure' or novel pattern of interplay among all the senses together." (McLuhan 1962)

THE MEDIUM, THE MESSAGE, AND A NEED FOR NARRATIVE

At about the same time that the embryonic characters of the Noosphere were gestating in my mind — HexaKali, the creator; SatanKali, the destroyer; a teen-aged kid; a stock trader; and a computer artist — a nagging question around Marshall McLuhan's equation of the "Medium is the Message" emerged. Would it be enough to build a "medium" or artistic installation, in this case a three-dimensional computer with crystal doorknobs input devices and a plasma screen display, put an immersed audience inside it, have them interact with the machine and make a "message" out of it? I believe now that the answer to this would have been "Yes" if the Noosphere had been an electrified and *implemented* human-computer interaction whereby an interactive cause-and-effect dynamic between an audience participant and the computer would cause something, even something

simple, to transpire. The "content" of this experiment could have been as simple as McLuhan's example of an electric light, in itself a medium without a message, spelling out a brand name. McLuhan explains by saying

> Whether the [electric] light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the "content" of the electric light. This fact underlines the point that "the medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association. (McLuhan 1962, 9)

Instead, the tools and technology were *not* available and, despite the best efforts of my advocates in both the Department of Drama and the Department of Computer Science, I could not implement a simple interactive message of the sort described above. The Noosphere was destined to remain a *simulated* computer environment — there were no functioning sensors or gizmos — it could only host a *simulation* of a human-computer interaction. Its "rich space" of boundless, primordial, womb-like readiness was a fantasy world that would require a different kind of content medium bundled within — a magic narrative with action elements forming a cohesive plot told by believable role-playing performers. The audience would need to enter into this experience as they would enter into any speculative fiction — with a suspension of the disbelief in its actual truth.

In August 2003 story ideas started shape-shifting into my consciousness, occupying space firstly within a digital ebb and flow through various threaded email dialogues, secondly into an analog journal soup of ink and think, and finally nudging their way into the spreadsheet matrices firstly as line items entitled "Emotions" and then as items called "Gist of the verbal text" that were essentially early stages of plot development.

THE THREE STORIES

Not just one but three concurrent stories carved their journeys along with the dramatic action — three stories that had to interlace and connect to each other and still allow the non-verbal texts to express their voices.

Backstory number one was about a family of Hindu gods, involving Lord Shiva who falls at the feet of the dual-natured goddess Kali, Lord Vishnu's gift of riches, and beautiful Saraswati's road to enlightenment. This story came about mostly because of my decades-old practice of yoga and the spiritual essences that inform the practice, but partly because of an illustration of a digital-age goddess "HexaKali" that appeared on the cover of *Graphic Arts* magazine of which I will speak in chapter five.

This parallel family was, in backstory number two, the family of Job from the Bible — a story that I read many times when I was working in the snowy mountains of Japan for an entire winter with nothing to read but a little green Japanese/English Bible. Job confronts one of the worst trials humanity can face, a gruesome trial with Satan, and not only survives but doubles his prosperity allowing him to empower his daughters with "an inheritance among their brethren." Using this story allowed me to cohere with major inspirational influences of this project including the teachings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Marshall McLuhan, both of whom were faithful Christians.

Layered on these two subtextual backstories was story number three about an earthly family headed up by a guy named ASAP Feargod who commissions HexaKali Services to build the family a three-dimensional computer in their home media room in order to play the Noosphere Reality Game Show.

When connected, all three stories share a mythology. A cross-cultural exploration about trials and tribulations of family life, contests of strength against evil, matters of justice, and the power of love and friendship.

GODS AND FAMILIES

> *How can I trust in this distant God I cannot see?*
> *Show me, show me this God.*
> — *TLK2U in* Messaging in the Noosphere

The characters that I had partially fleshed out as residents of the Noosphere fulfilled each of these scenarios competently; however, the "Job" story had an almighty Judeo-Christian God in it too. A God that had to be part of the story and whose identity haunted me. Would this God reside only on the screen display? Would this God choose a character to be an emissary? Would this God be a God of all things or a God in the Machine or both? Would this God have a personification on screen, or simply drip words that might guide the character's decisions?

Here the creative process became a soul-searching experience. How could I depict a God in the Noosphere when I was so uncertain about my own thoughts and values about the existence of a God in my life. Would shifting the image of a Judeo-Christian God onto a plasma screen in a theatre be a blasphemous and vapid gesture under this cloud of spiritual uncertainty? I decided to let two things guide my decision: first, input and inspiration from the performance cast and project advisors, and second, consideration of a futuristic HCI model — or how a God might appear in a computer if there was such a thing as a divine, artificial intelligence.

Auditions and inspiration from the cast

I only had two pages of verbal text written when I held auditions for *Messaging in the Noosphere.* However, I knew from my modality spreadsheets that there were multiple, layered stories of families and gods, that the Noosphere had an integrated look, sound, and feel, I knew that it was a harmonious and mystical space, and I knew that there was

room in it for a population of believers who "messaged" each other. And that's when the Warrior, the Kalis, the Kid, the Muses, and the "Wizard" showed up.

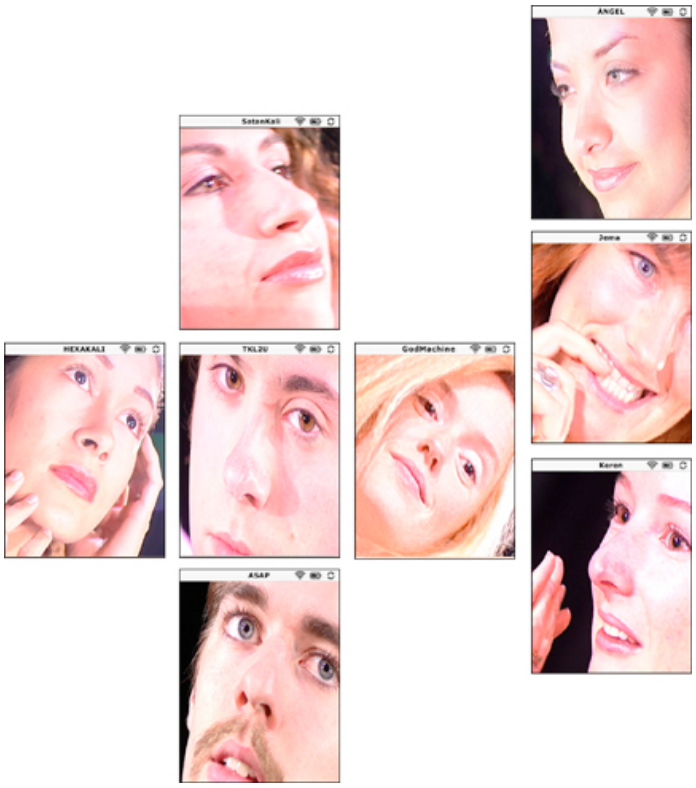

Figure 4. The cast of characters made into "aphorism" photo cards.

I discovered that these actors cast in the roles of these characters could help write the show. The abilities, appearance, breath and genius of the actors, when I put them in front of the camera perpetuated the characters' narratives. This was a period of computer-mediated research where I made the actors' images into photocard icons on my computer desktop and moved them around, gave them sets of emotions, and made them play little tarot "aphorism" games with each other. I stared at them hard, discovered the beauty of each soul, and put them to work talking to each other in a verbal text that, hopefully, retained connection with the physical, aural, and visual texts that were already in place. Once the rehearsals began, all the characters except the Wizard were engaged in

relationships with each other, with the flow of content meaning within an expressive scenographic medium, and themes of families and gods began to take shape. But I was still left to wonder … who was the God in the Machine?

The God in the Machine as an Digital Deity

It took a while to wrestle the God into the Machine as a plasma screen deity. It took serious thinking about speculative fiction and the permission it releases for artists to take leaps into the realm of complete imagination. I wrote a line into the verbal text where HexaKali says "Godly spirit, after years of exile in the universe, I set you free to wing your flight back into the machine from whence you came." And that was that. The god was a fictional digital deity. It had "come back" to the computer and it had a face, a personality and an intelligence.

After that was figured out, it took a while to release the god back out of the Machine and into live theatre art space as well. The "Wizard," character was re-thought, then vapourized and the actor's photocard, possessing a believable and beautifully photogenic expression of love, mystery and understanding, *became* the "God in the Machine" – a face and personality that would shine from the screen above and also appear as a live character in real space. Her role became that of an all-knowing and all-powerful personification of an intelligence within the Noospheric computer who effortlessly guides the dramatic action through a symmetry of human-computer interaction. However, since she originally came from the computer, was exiled to the universe, and was then granted freedom to wing her way back into the machine, is she an "artificial" intelligence? Who came first? The Computer or the Humans?

The closest I could come to at least keeping my head above water in this perplexity was by creating an additional narrative layer that I refer to, in this paper, as "the most elevated spiritual layer;" the story of the God in the Machine. I intentionally wove her into the story as I perceive God might have appeared in the Bible — the

familiar spirituality and morality of my birthright. The fact that God became female evolved in a natural and collaborative way using a cast member who was, it seemed to me, destined to fill the role. An actor, who at the end of the production said to me, "Thank you for unfolding me."

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Evolving concurrent sets of narrative content and adding them to the mix of a scenographic-environment medium was meant to provide a message about family and gods and human-computer interaction. I never really had anything more specific to say than that. Each subplot had a dramatic arch and a resolve in my mind but would audiences unravel the inter-woven complexities of these stories and would they really need to in order to attain satisfaction from this performance?