Away with the Pixels

By Stephanie McBride

In the first of an occasional column exploring the increasing convergence of artforms and technology, Stephanie McBride looks at the language that has developed to describe digital media

Let's start with the "user" - and no other medium is talked about in terms of users (as in "are you a theatre user?" or "this will definitely appeal to book users"), is it? This user sits in front of an "interface", a "screen" and a "mouse". The screen has windows, icons, buttons and a limited set of navigational choices. Click on the mouse, you've made a choice. Click, another choice. Click, it's interactive.

But much general discussion about digital media tends to get bogged down in slippery notions of what this interactive experience might be - and is often based on a surprisingly narrow idea of "the interface".

Why is an interface only 800 pixels wide by 600 pixels deep? Surely an interface can also be a theatre space, a radioscape, a big top or a small Walkman?

Did these new clicky-mousey media really sprout overnight, with little or no relationship to older media? The "interactivity" buzzword is relatively recent (late 1980s, mainly from the CD-Rom industry), yet ubiquitous. It is an obsession among media producers and is treated as a giant conceptual innovation. In fact, it's part of a long history of media evolution, from early cinema to cybernetics and automation. Art was interactive for centuries before the joystick was invented.

Other ways of thinking about interactive interfaces were central to a recent show by Cindy Cummings and Todd Winkler at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin. It consisted of two separate pieces, Hitch's Bitches and Falling Up.

Hitch's Bitches involves a "remediation" (new media partially replicating and reworking older forms) of Hitchcock's films. Combining dance, video and sound, it conjures with images of Hitchcock's blondes, heightening their significance as icons of female perfection and anxiety.

The performer masquerades as a blonde icon (with strong echoes of Cindy Sherman's early Film Stills), dancing and struggling with these powerful images. Her movements are at times fluid, at others puppet-like, both fearful of and fascinated by the film images projected onto her body.

Meanwhile, the cries and shrieks of the Hitchcock heroines echo throughout the theatre space. The intense replaying of dialogue and images from the films (Vertigo, Marnie, North by Northwest) immerses the audience in her reworked story. Her final gesture of defiance or exhaustion - tearing down the screen image - is abruptly cut off as the houselights break up the immersive environment.

Hitch's Bitches, first seen in 1998 when the Project was in exile on the northside (at the Mint), was rewritten to capitalise on the new possibilities offered by advances in technology. It's another reminder of how Hitchcock has become part of the canon, a classic ready-made to be taken off the shelf and reconfigured for the 21st century.

Already the British artist, Douglas Gordon, has mined Hitchcock's repertoire to create the shock of the old, and "Hitch's Bitches" refocuses the spotlight on those "women who knew too much".

The performer's movement controls the sound/video playback. To be technical for a moment, it uses the Very Nervous System for motion sensing; Max.MSP for audio processing and video playback; and NATO for video processing. The computer "watches" the performer through a video camera on the stage, reacting to speed and location by playing pre-set audio and video files. Since these are dependent on the performer's movements and gestures, the performance is open to some degree of randomness, so each performance is unique.

The second piece, Falling Up, explores the boundaries between the physical body and technology, and deals with themes of gravity and flying. It has a complex choreography, fusing the mechanics of the physical body with the extended possibilities of the virtual body. The performer can alter her own image, extending and distorting it in a hall-of-mirrors effect. Watching the movements, we are invited to view the performer as an avatar, in whom physical and virtual are merged, morphed and reconfigured as her body flows across the space and is projected on to the screen.

These pieces open up fields of possibility for media convergence. They move beyond the straitjacket of the flat screen, and stretch our perceptions of the interface and interactivity. Although the main interactive dynamic appears to be between performer and computer, it can transport us into other worlds of history, invention, fantasy and the impossible.

Falling Up, as part of a work in progress, underlines the fact that these examples are not stable or fixed, but contingent and exploratory. They are not trapped in some machine for playing mass-produced coded commodities, but an open interplay of technology and body, transforming our perceptions.

The Cummings/Winkler performance is just one of many instances of increasing convergences between art and technology. It offers radical new ways of thinking about interactive interfaces, rather than just recycling the lazy and fatuous buzzwords of a cliché-ridden industry.

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