

A Conversation with Robert Edgar

In April 1995, Anna Couey and Judy Malloy invited me to be Art Wire's first interactive artist in residence. This is the text of that conference.

01-APR-95 20:09 Anna Couey

Judy and I are very pleased to welcome Bob Edgar to Arts Wire's Interactive Conference! We both got to know Bob in the Art Com Electronic Network conference on the WELL, where, some years ago, he was a frequent and thoughtful participant...and one who generally stretched many of our brains with the structures that he created and called art.

I first met Bob sometime in the mid-80s. He had come to Art Com to show us an art work he'd created. It was a computer program, that required an Apple // to run. At the time, I wasn't computer literate, nor did Art Com have a Mac. So Bob drew pictures to show the architecture of "Memory Theatre I" and explained to me what he was doing. It changed my notions about art forever.

Sometime later in the 80s, Bob created "Living Cinema," a configuration of media devices that enabled him to perform cinema. That is...a video work or other recorded image, might, during a performance, be digitally cut or maneuvered, repeated or not - the process of creation becoming a new work, a performance. It is hard to convey the power of "Living Cinema", the pace of the performance I saw was dreamy and evocative - a language of contemplation.

So...welcome Bob!!

Not too long ago, you completed a new media project - please tell us about it!

Judy Malloy 02-APR-95 11:40

Hi Bob! Memory Theatre was a seminal "artware" work that helped me see (was that about 10 yers ago, Bob?) how words could be used to create 3-dimensional effects on computer platforms. And I hear you have your own company now!

Robert Edgar 03-APR-95 16:20

Hi, thanks for the reception. Judy, Memory Theatre One combined 3-D graphics (wireframe at that time), 2-d illustrations, text, screen printing variations and a simple "explore" level of interactivity in a piece that wasn't a game or a help system. This was before Hypercard etc., and I programmed it in a version of Forth called "GraForth" by Paul Lutus. It took me a while to program, mostly because I came from video and film, and needed to learn what a computer was in order to learn what programming was in order to make it. Judy's interactive novels were great, because they showed a more open-ended understanding of how interactivity could be used in a delivered artwork. The structure of MTO is easily recognised today: a building comprised of a series of rooms you strolled through. Each room had an image and a text. Depending on which part of the building you were in, you got a different type of content. There was a library, where a viewer could go to see longer passages from texts that were introduced in the rooms. The idea of the memory theatre came from reading The Art of Memory by Frances Yates, who introduced me to a history of mapping cosmologies onto both conceptual and actual theaters. Yes, a new company, Iconceptual, where we make a living producing interactive applications.

Judy Malloy 04-APR-95 11:56

Great to see that you made it here! And I'm looking forward to hearing more about Iconceptual.

Robert Edgar 04-APR-95 14:52

For the last 3 years I've been at Computer Curriculum Corporation in Sunnyvale, CA, designing educational software. Some of us split from CCC and formed Iconceptual, located just down the street in Santa Clara. I designed a 17-CD application called "Choosing Success" (I didn't name it) for teaching life skills to kids at risk of dropping out of school. Wired magazine said CS "may just be the most inspired piece of educational software ever produced" in their February '95 issue, which is great publicity for us; we all worked on it in one way or another.

My hope is that we can get some funding to do some video-based interactive narratives; I have yet to see a decent software architecture implemented for an interactive cinema product. If anyone has, post it here, It's possible that I've missed it. Jesus protect us from another science-fiction churn-out.

It's not that I don't like science fiction--I love William Gibson--but I think it's like black velvet in those roadside paintings: it solves the problems of context, and of poetry, in a patent way that is most often uninteresting.

Judy Malloy 04-APR-95 17:25

I'm really jazzed that you've got your own company! Will the video-based interactive narratives be fiction or nonfiction?

Anna Couey 05-APR-95 2:24

What kind of delivery systems are you looking at for the video-based interactive narratives? Authoring tools for CD-ROM? I've been really online focussed for the past few years, but your query brings to mind authoring software that Ben Britton developed for an interactive videodisc...not sure if this was part of the authoring software or not, but his disc, "Je Suis Un Readymade," incorporated different types of interactivity - from overt buttons to ambiguous shapes to hidden buttons - the work tested its viewer's willingness to explore beneath the surface of the work.

Robert Edgar 05-APR-95 19:23

Judy: Iconceptual's direction will be somewhat market-driven; if we find someone willing to back a new narrative structure, we'll get to do it. If not, we'll work on what we can do. Most of the action so far has been in the area of educational software, but I'm hoping to get to do a piece I've got called "12 1/2 Minutes" which we've been shopping around. It's fiction.

On my own, I'm porting my piece "SAND, OR HOW COMPUTERS DREAM OF TRUTH IN CINEMA" to the Mac. Since I was at Commodore in the late '90's, I worked with a souped-up Amiga 4000 until I left CCC late last year. The Amiga platform was too far afield from any income I could get, so I sold it to a video company and bought a Mac 8100 Power PC. The Amiga was fantastic for delivering multimedia, I made good use of AREXX (an interapplication language that allowed me to use a range of multitasking programs concurrently and in collaboration with each other), and I had a good working knowledge of the Amiga tools. But anyway now I saved text, image, digital video files etc. from SAND and now need to reconstruct it all on the Mac. The + is that I can distribute it on CD-ROM once I get it all working, which was difficult to do with the Amiga.

Anna: I haven't seen Ben Britton's piece. I'm not sure what authoring system I'll use yet; probably a combination of something like Director or Oracle Media Objects and C++. I would deliver it on CD-ROM though; I had to quit flying to deliver Living Cinema because my equipment continued to get mauled during flights, and I don't have the \$\$ to keep buying new equipment.

Here's an idea for this chat: how about if I get a copy (videotaped) of SAND to you (Anna and Judy) and we can chat about it online? That's my most recent finart work, and it has been shown very little (and

won't soon, because I sold all the Amiga equipment it ran on).

Andrew Taylor, Bolz Ctr. for Arts Admin. 06-APR-95 9:05

Robert, Is there a way that more of us can get the video? It would be great to have a discussion involving more folk.

Anna Couey 06-APR-95 9:44

Hmmm. I'd love to see the tape, and it would be wonderful to share that experience with more people here. Robert..what do you think about making a web installation of your piece? The interactive conference has a web space... And maybe those of us who don't have the equipment to view video over the web could purchase copies of the tape? What seems fair to you, Robert?

Robert Edgar 06-APR-95 11:36

Well, this particular piece is too mediated to implement on the web. There is constant video streaming, constant MIDI audio, and frequent text and digitized audio playing. The tape I have is vhs, so it won't copy very well, but I could make copies from it if there is interest. I could digitize a few seconds of the tape for a quicktime movie, but I don't think the text would survive the spatial compression. If someone wants a copy, email me your name and address, and mail me a check for \$20. I'll have copies made, and when I get checks will send them out. The piece was really designed for performance, and I didn't think about immediately selling my Amiga until I put a price up on the internet, and someone immediately met my price. So I didn't have a chance to take my system into a studio for a proper dump to a decent format. Email me at REdgar@iconceptual.com, and note that you want a VHS copy of a SAND performance. I think sharing the piece is a good idea for this discussion, though. I'll look at putting something together asap on another format, but let's go with this for now. BTW: Tom Mandel died yesterday, someone with whom Anna, Judy & I conversed often in the early days of the WELL and ART COM online. Sorry to hear of his passing, his was a good voice.

Robert Edgar 06-APR-95 17:18

OK, here's another approach. I took one of several core video clips for SAND, and translated it into a flattened quicktime file. It will give an example of what SAND is, and it illustrates several ideas that are central to the work. The quicktime movie will play on either Mac or Windows, provided you have Quicktime 2.0 and a player.

Judy Malloy 06-APR-95 17:47

Oh I'm so sad to hear about Tom. I had some correspondence with him recently about his wonderful bad information (now up on <http://www.well.com/www/jmalloy/> along with a lot of other awful information) and he said something about linking bad info to the Mandel memorial web site and I thought it was just another mandel-like joke. Can you give us any details?

I don't have a QUickTime player but would love to look at the tape. I think we have space here. Anna, how shall we handle it?

Judy Malloy 07-APR-95 13:37

The having to transfer one's work from platform to platform with often as Bob describes an enormous amount of work involved is a problem for multimedia artists in this world where it is still unpredictable what platforms will be widely supported two years from now. I've got a nice collection of artworks on apple II disks (Memory Theatre is one of them) and it's pretty hard to use this collection these days.

Robert Edgar 07-APR-95 16:10

Yep. Since both software and hardware varies so much, it often feels like I'm starting over every 4-5 years. I've kept an old Sinclair, and an old Apple //, just so I can run a couple of older pieces. But for now, I've uploaded the quicktime file to Iconceptual's ftp site. The file is sand2RE.mov The ftp address is ftp.best.com/pub/iconcept/ It is something over 3 mb, so bring something to read while you download it.

49:17) Judy Malloy 07-APR-95 14:54

Thanks Bob! Meanwhile, I'm interested in your goals for interactive educational software. What is the state of the art in this field? What interests you?

Robert Edgar 08-APR-95 14:52

Educational software...well, there's a wide range of stuff out there. The earliest examples were right out of a behaviorist tradition, people who had designed "teaching machines" moved right into educational computing. The focus was to give a usually abstracted piece of knowledge out of context, but present it in such a way that the student would memorize it. A good aspect of this early work was that it usually was interactive; it got the students working right away.

However, this had some down sides too. When information is taken out of context, the student is often not introduced with its meaning. One side effect is that it can quickly become boring--"drill and kill." Another side effect is that the student is often not supported in creating with the info, just using it to solve a prepackaged set of problems.

Let's distinguish between training and education here. If we set someone down at a typewriter, and say "play with it for a few hours" and come back, the student probably hasn't gotten very far. A good behavioral training package is exactly what someone who needs to learn keyboarding should have. But if you want that student to express themselves, give them a pencil, and don't confuse the one task (keyboarding) with the other (composition).

Now, I went to art school. I had a range of teachers over the years, and some taught the craft of art, and some taught aesthetics as a practice. You need both, but it is important not to confuse the two.

What happens to folks who move from film to video to programming to multimedia, and from electric guitar to analog synthesizer to midi, is that we become very sensitive to the distinction between the craft and the aesthetics. I love the craft behind computer games, but there are very few that provide much of an full aesthetic experience for the user. I mean an experience that makes you doubt that you've known who you are.

Anyway, more recent educational software has been designed to allow the user to create his or her own problems: to provide them with both figure and ground. Did you ever see Rocky's Boots? When I first moved to California, I got together once or twice a week with some folks to play irish fiddle toons and bluegrass. The fiddle player, Warren Robinett, was an assembly-level programmer who worked at Atari. He created the first visual adventure game. He left Atari, and spent a year on an Apple II programming Rocky's Boots, the first popular construction set. It had kids 7 years old learning boolean algebra not by drill and practice, but by having them create logic machines that worked when you turned them on. This was the first of many such programs, like pinball construction sets etc.

I learned a lot from Warren. I wouldn't have thought of Memory Theatre without his visual adventure game; later at my company Still Current Design in Atlanta we made an authoring system that was influenced by Rocky's Boots. I think maybe I helped him learn to improvise on his fiddle, but he's a smart guy and would've gotten there himself ;->

There's a lot to say about educational software. It is usually underfunded; Choosing Success cost over \$5 million to create, and companies haven't been willing to put that kind of money into educational software. Edutainment, well...it helps if its not made by idiots. I think edutainment should be the domain of art. But

our society doesn't want art, and so it becomes the domain of condescending drivel. If you think bad art is hard to watch, try bad edutainment software.

Historically (but not essentially) behaviorists in educational software feel that multimedia gilds the lily. I've had many tell me that the best way to teach is through text, and that the media just slows down the learning process. As an artist, with an educational background steeped in Dewey, Lowenfeld and Bruner, I can't begin to understand that statement. I used to attend lectures by Skinner, and I can't believe that he would object to the use of media for closely modeling a real world stimulus. So even within a very behavioral pedagogy, multimedia offers rich tools. Its only when a behaviorist adds beeps and cutsy animations as positive reinforcement (?) to otherwise text-based drill and practice that multimedia is stupidly used.

Judy Malloy 10-APR-95 12:06

It's great to have you here, Bob! Can you tell us some more about Choosing Success? Also, did I understand you to say you actually have a working Apple II?

Andrew Taylor, Bolz Ctr. for Arts Admin. 10-APR-95 12:26

Bob, I'm glad to see somebody making the distinction between craft and aesthetics. So many of the multimedia products I have seen have frustrated me because so many questions and controls are decided by the producing company. They have made the decision as to how I want to view information, how I should progress through the material, and how much depth of information I require.

It seems to me that these products side-step the true appeal of non-linear, interactive multimedia, which is that the *user* can define what, where, and how the product will work. Of course, that kind of aesthetic interface is more difficult to create than the standard, predefined, semi-linear approach.

In other words, you're right: multimedia should be the domain of the artist. But perhaps I'm biased in that opinion.

Robert Edgar 10-APR-95 12:59

Thanks Judy--this is fun. Great being in touch with you and Anna again. Yes, I have a working Apple IIe: two floppy disks, 64k RAM. Wanna borrow it? I assume it works, I haven't tried it for some years.

Choosing Success is a 17-CD educational software series produced by Computer Curriculum Corporation and Dade County Florida. CCC had tried twice to develop it, and each time the outcome was an embarrassing prototype and a project leader who had to step out of the position due to too much stress. They did, however, manage to use up a good portion of the \$\$\$ available for the production. For a third try, CCC brought in a very competent and laid-back project manager from Florida, Dennis Thorp, and myself as instructional designer. A wonderful decision was also made by Video Producer Irina Yershov to bring in director Rob Nillson and writer Don Bajema. Rob has somewhat received the baton from John Cassevetes for making intense, personal cinema, and that was exactly what was needed here.

There was a concept that had been floated to make a "TV game show" where the students (kids at risk of dropping out of school) would be asked questions, and if they got them right, would advance...etc. The exact type of idea that makes me puke: why do people always use TV as a SOURCE of metaphors? One of the first sales training interactive video courses used the same metaphors, and was rancid.

Rob really wanted to make a feature film, and his idea was to make a 20-minute intro to each section, and then let the lesson handle itself.

So, at the beginning of this third attempt, everybody came in with very strong ideas about what to do. The design I came up with, and which we went with, had a unit (3 lessons) begin with an intro to a character--about 5 minutes long (and it could have been a bit longer, but most were shortened further due to heavy

editing by educational and marketing powers). Rob's opening dramatic video begins at a funeral, and follows one person into the community, where you are introduced to a problem they are having. After that intro, the student is asked to visit throughout the city, interviewing people who are either subject matter experts about the topic, or dramatic footage with people who knew the protagonist. They collect info, video clips, audio clips etc., and construct a suggestion for what the person should do. This suggestion is formulated in a video presentation that they create using a video editor we built into the software.

For a second part of the unit, the student goes to a "television studio"--we created it as a kind of public access cable head end--and critiques, and reedits, someone else's video report. I saw that as a kind of deconstruction of a text.

So that's it. Just Friday I heard that C.S. won the 1995 National Educational Media Competition for best educational multimedia product. Gee--and many of us survived its making!

Robert Edgar 10-APR-95 19:59

Andrew--it looks like GUI interfaces in general are moving in just that direction, more customization possible by the user. On the other hand, I've designed some stuff for Kindergarteners and pre-Kindergarteners, and while I'd be the last one to put them in a lock-step program, they also need a structure that they can depend on. Of course, it depends on what the program is for: is it a database of images and sounds, or is it a bowling game?

Living Cinema was really a tool I designed to give me instant access to a bunch of buckets of data: analog video, digital video, text, speech, sounds, music, images, animations, and processing and sequencing functions. I wanted to do real-time experimental filmmaking. It did that, and it got me involved a lot closer with problems of interface design.

Anna Couey 12-APR-95 4:15

Judy, Tom Mandel died of lung cancer I believe. It was a long time coming. There is a bittersweet twist to the story, too...on April Fool's Day, Tom & were married at last.

I'm off to bed...

Judy Malloy 13-APR-95 23:41

Just watched Bob's tape
How computers dream about truth in cinema
Thought it was great!
It does something well that is very difficult - combining of words sound images where they all have equal weight where they work independently but together. There is rectangular central moving image of sand manipulated/moved (I liked the child's hands in the sand the best)
Above this is a line of slowly moving/changing (blue) words.
Below this is a smaller line of slowly moving/changing words (red)
There is repetition of words
Forinstance:
Pans (on top)
in Palo Alto (on bottom)
and then later
I lick my finger (on top)
in Palo Alto (on bottom)
the table top (top)
in Mountain View (bottom)
sound track is usually electronic music but sometimes radically different to call attention to itself
All these things worked very well together - their whole adding up to something that was more than the sum of the parts.

Some echoes of Living Cinema. (Bob, can you talk about the content?)
I wasn't wild about the triangles that framed the video and words - found them distracting

Otherwise, I liked it a lot!

Robert Edgar 14-APR-95 13:39

The tape is a record of one play through the piece. The central images are all digital video. The quicktime movie I uploaded is the first central image from the tape. The triangles may be clicked at any time by the viewer--they navigate through the piece (but are only seen on the tape, of course). The texts on the top and bottom are independent of each other, but show u concurrently, creating a lot of cross meanings through their chance juxtapositioning. One set of texts is mostly diary format, the other musings.

Every so often, a digitized sound (earcon) is played. These are chosen randomly from a set of about 100.

The music is mostly midi.

My role, during a performance, is to play the guitar--you can hear the electric guitar over the rest of the sound track. I'm reacting to the rest of the soundtrack, images etc. I thought I'd have someone else use the arrows to navigate while I played--someone who hadn't seen it yet. I got tired of making decisions during a performance a/la Living Cinema, often things stood still while I decided what to do next. This piece flows, and the interactivity is to navigate the flow, and for me to play across the flow--in addition to the chance elements making choices.

The central theme of SAND: HOW COMPUTERS DREAM OF TRUTH IN CINEMA comes from a well-known quote that Cinema is truth 24 times a second. I grabbed stills (and sometimes generated images using 3D animation programs) of a sequence 6 frames long. I changed things in front of the camera between the shots. I then took the separate images and allowed the computer to imagine what happened between the frames--I did this using a morph program. Usually morph programs are used to change one object into another, but in SAND I used it to create an explanation (a visual one) for the changes that happened between the information that the computer had (it had only the separate stills). Of course, it didn't always guess right: things may move from left to right, when they actually were pulled apart, etc.

The mistakes--the artifacts from the morph--create their own poems, from their difference between what actually happened and what it "guessed" happened. My goal in the piece was to invent a new poetic space, which I believe I succeeded in doing here. And of course, there are parallels among all the media channels in the piece, as remembrances, arguments, occurrences, repeating riffs appear and advance in time.

I love the idea of one medium trying to understand another, but using only the data that it can access from its own architecture.

Judy Malloy 15-APR-95 11:26

Ah - a lot of things are clearer now. Actually I have never made videos of my computer pieces because it is something so different. Nevertheless, I really like the video of this work.

Robert Edgar 15-APR-95 13:15

Judy: there are good arguments for not taking an interactive piece to video tape. But all my pieces since Memory Theatre One have been a combination of specific hardware and software with large files, and as I mentioned before traveling with my equipment usually meant damaging it. So if I wanted to show it at all, that meant making a video tape of it. Living Cinema was distributed through Art Com, but I haven't distributed SAND at all. When I get some free time within the next month, I'll finish porting it to the Mac, and distribute it by CD-ROM. If anyone on here knows of any good fineart distributors who might be interested, please let me know.

Thanks for your kind words on SAND. I think it's a fairly unique piece, it probably deserves to exist.

I was in Berkeley a night or so ago briefly, to see Goddard's Two or Three Things I Know about Her, which was done in about 1967. I remembered it as being one of my favorite films of his. A couple weeks ago, I saw Pulp Fiction, which seemed to me to be Peckenpaw doing Goddard. Two things struck me about their differences: Goddard had no suspense, the film was one block after another, although there was a narrative. Tarrantino had no reference to the film as a physical medium, nothing going on in the area of aesthetic materialism. Goddard's main themes included what is Paris, what is a woman, what is a film, what is narrative; as well as his themes of worldwide politics and representation. Tarrantino dealt with many of these themes in a more contemporary way, and more like Cassavades than Goddard, but had no use for self reference, or the grain of the medium, at all.

Of course, most Hollywood movies don't have such references, but this wasn't most movies. In the early '80's, when I sold my Beaulieu and stopped making films, I thought that the previous generation of filmmakers had done everything that needed to be done, and that my generation was just repeating what had been done. For me, Pulp Fiction symbolizes the maturity of the medium; as it leaves aesthetic materialism behind--for the moment (the medium will change again, inviting new poetry in that area). But the computer is a new, different medium--or more accurately loose collections of media--and I believe there is great poetry to be mined through aesthetic materialist strategies, such as those practiced in SAND.

I understand now that what I thought was the death of cinema in the '80's was really the death of a phase of its development: one area had been overmined, and there was no reason to simply repeat the motions of the highly competent people who had come before (Brakhage, Snow, Goddard etc.). And I've never been interested in movies per se, so for me the medium was just empty. But materialist strategies don't just reduce to an idea: they retain the sensuality of their practice. This is why I believe that applying such strategies in computing, as I've been doing since the early '80's, is such a rich area: we haven't had this space to think in before. We've had aesthetic materialism in film, but it has not yet been widely dimensioned in computing.

Judy Malloy 17-APR-95 0:29

Oh I can hardly wait for Pulp Fiction to come out in video. (I haven't seen it yet because I'd rather not deal with my leg in theaters) Your feelings about film and the possibilities that computers have opened up are analagous to the way I feel about words and computers.

(and I left the video on Anna's doorstep this pm after spending a pleasant few hours on the beach with some Leonardo manuscripts that had been hanging around for way too long. The most interesting was by Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki - French multimedia/ film installation artists. Ttile of the paper is THE FEMININE, THE HERMAPHRODITE, THE ANGEL: GENDER MUTATIONS AND DREAM COSMOGONIES - on a mulitmedia projection and installation practice 1976-1994)

Robert Edgar 19-APR-95 14:34

When you first started with database novels, you used the medium for what only it could do with words. I certainly think you've had the right approach, Judy.

The trick is to find elements that have not been juxtaposed, and juxtapose them in a way that teases out their paradoxes in an interesting way. The deeper that paradox goes, the more important the engagement. The problem with most interactive art is that the interactivity is not itself used paradoxically, it is just a choice, which is usually worse than non-engaging, it's off-putting.

Judy Malloy 21-APR-95 2:05

paradoxically is an interesting way of looking at interactivity. Can you talk a little about how you are using paradoxes in your recent work?

Robert Edgar 21-APR-95 20:37

In the video example in SAND that we've put online here, there is a line that's drawn in the sand with a marker. Being sand, it didn't mark, it just displaced the sand. Now, the computer, trying to reconcile the video grab before the line and after the line was drawn, didn't know that the line started at one end and dragged across the sand; for it the line just appeared. So it simply parts the sand, like an earthquake, the crevice just pulls apart. If we reduce it to an engineering description, it's just a sampling rate induced error. But if we don't reduce it, there is something of a paradox, or a poem, in the difference. There are several such poems in just that one clip, and there are many more throughout SAND. In Living Cinema, I had a video grab of Merrilee changing her dress by slipping a new one over one she had on, then pulling the first one off from under. This was accompanied by a quote from Quine likening cultural changes to someone on a raft, replacing it board by board, while remaining afloat all the while. Then using Living Cinema I copied a bit of skin from her arm over the modestly applied dress. I see these layerings of meaning, language and physical sculpture as somewhat paradoxical juxtapositionings, which don't reduce beyond their poetry, it has an existence as a kind of poetic morpheme.

Just giving someone a branch choice is just mechanical. If the result of an action is a poem, the interactivity is much more interesting to me. There is the interactivity of a twitch game, where there is usually little poetry (except maybe in the code itself). Do you know Joyce's word "phoenish" that he made for Finnegans Wake, by juxtaposing finish and phoenix? That's the type of paradox I try to tease out of the media I work with.

Judy Malloy 22-APR-95 2:40

Ahh - thanks Bob for your words. Partially it is the being able to use so many elements as moveable, changeable building blocks that makes working with computers so very wonderful. (Don't you think?)

I am having trouble with a reoccurring Phoenix memory this weekend, so am pleased to be reminded of the excellent Joyce word "phoenish". (so thanks also for this particular word)

Robert Edgar 22-APR-95 15:18

I know my memory has corrupted it a bit, but the quote I remember is: "Fall if you but will, rise you must, and none too soon either shall the farce for the nuance come to a setdown secular phoenish."

RE: building blocks: take a read through Sergai Eisenstein's FILM FORM. Eisenstein was an early filmmaker who was particularly successful in elaborating an approach for creating cinema. He juxtaposes his style of montage--conflict montage, wherein the meaning is generated from the difference among the montage elements (light, form, rhythm, concept etc) instead of the gradual building of meaning through relating common elements, which he associated with the filmmaker Podovkin, and called linkage montage. He likened linkage montage to building a film from bricks of similar form. Now both were great filmmakers, but I've always used Eisenstein's concept of conflict montage as a strategy for creation; you can see its echos in Stravinski's polyrhythms, in Magritte, in Cage, and even in the new wave filmmaking of Goddard. With the computer, every channel (visual, text, speech, music, digitized audio, interactivity, digital video etc) has the potential for poetic conflict not only within itself, but among all the other channels--as well, as in SAND, as with the physical act that generated it (a kind of archeology).

Beth Kanter Arts Wire 24-APR-95 8:37

Did he create Alexander Nevsky or is my memory corrupt?

Robert Edgar 24-APR-95 12:39

Yeah, Nevsky was Eisenstein's. He had envisioned two films that were never made; Joyce's Ulysses and Marx' Das Kapital. Gee, wish he'd at least done a prototype...

Judy Malloy 24-APR-95 17:11

Poetic conflict is very different from my thinking which tends more towards building a unified whole out of many diverse elements. When one never knows what paths the reader/viewer/ user will take through a work. What parts, how much of the work will be seen and in what way, the unified whole goal is very difficult to achieve and involves keeping every part in one's mind much the way a composer would. Artists are different and I am not sure that I can think in terms of poetic conflict and yet I see that it is an excellent strategy/way of thinking for multimedia interactive work.

Beth Kanter Arts Wire 24-APR-95 23:57

I can't speak about the film from a maker's view (Nevsky), but have you ever seen it in movie theater, with very large screen and a live orchestra playing the background music? Breathtaking. Watching film with live music is wonderful -- even with a small screen and three-person ensemble. I saw metropolis in a small auditorium in Boston with live music composed by the ALLOY orchestra. They composed music for the film. The orchestra is all percussion instruments, there are three musicians who make up the orchestra.

Robert Edgar 25-APR-95 0:13

As a younger painter, Magritte wrote (and, I imagine, practiced) about focusing on the differences among objects in his paintings, in his later life he changed his mind and said he changed to focusing on what objects had in common. So you may be ahead of me, Judy :->

If objects are very different, I think we tend to look for common elements; if they are very close, I think we tend to attempt to differentiate them--there may be something to this. But also there is a sense of the whole: when I work commercially, I usually am trying to create something specific, and so I think in terms of a whole experience. But when I work on "my own" work (and these are almost always very different things for me) I tend to immerse myself in the content and the process, and want the medium and the process to give me something new, to show me a new way to think about life, an image, idea, rhythm that I didn't have before. I skip around a lot, and tend to work fairly myopically. I don't think this is necessarily good--or bad--but it seems to be what I do. The whole seems to come from the source of the content (much is diary-based collected footage) and the application of a compositional principle (such as the computer imagining the differences between frames in SAND). I think, when I finish a piece, I search it for a whole, I search it for meaning, to see what those unexpected patterns say about me, about the scope of my imagination and my living. It's a reason that I CAN look at my own work, if it were just conscious expression I probably wouldn't enjoy seeing the finished piece as much.

Your building of a unified whole is interesting to me, Judy, because your unity is in the parts devoid of syntax. I can imagine that with your format looking for common elements may be exactly what works as a compositional strategy. Media, and I include the process of composing in that, seem to offer certain approaches, and people seem to choose what "makes the most sense" for that medium.

Judy Malloy 25-APR-95 16:22

I really like your concept of searching your finished work for meaning and those unexpected patterns.

The phrase "finished work" brings up a question that someone in the audience at Davis asked a few weeks ago. Is a work of computer art harder to finish than other kinds of art? Is the continual tinkering that one does on these works integral to the process? How is the process different from working on a painting or sculpture?

Robert Edgar 26-APR-95 20:47

Beth: I've seen films with live music, both scored and improvised, and enjoy it very much. I enjoy improvising music live, such as I've done with SAND, it's a very active viewing. Like dancing to music.

Judy: There's a story about deKooning, who kept painting and reworking a single painting until his friends came and stole his painting out of his studio...I have an unfinished film that I recorded 45 minutes of original soundtrack for, that I'll never finish. How many unfinished novels do you suppose are out there? I don't think computer art is any more difficult than any other to finish, but I do think that 'hacking' in its original connotation of unstructured doodling doesn't always lead to completed projects. I'm sure there is much more that has been finished than has been shown...perhaps the web will evolve into an answer for that. Finally everyone will have a loft viewing space in their own house...and it will be everyone else's.

It usually takes longer to invent than to interpret, and longer to interpret than to copy, and longer to copy than to purchase.

Judy Malloy 28-APR-95 1:05

Yes, I said in my answer to the question that it is also very difficult sometimes to decide that a painting is finished but that that decision is part of making art. However, I find with my work that the words can be finished but I will still tinker with the interface. It is amazing what changing one line of code will do.

Robert Edgar 28-APR-95 14:59

Well, the month's almost up, so we're about at the end of this particular unfinished conversation. Anything we've left out?

Judy Malloy 28-APR-95 16:09

>anything we've left out lots and we'll miss talking to you. Do you have any thoughts about the future of interactive art?

Robert Edgar 29-APR-95 3:55

I've enjoyed it a lot. I seem to enjoy pontificating, hope it was relevant to folk's work. For the record: I can be reached at lull@iconceptual.com; and through the URL <http://www.iconceptual.com> I have a couple of notions about future interactive art. One is When I first moved to California, I worked with a guy who had escaped the Phillipines' martial law crackdown (this was in the later '70's). He had been a newspaper reporter. He was talking about instigating change, and noted that those who tried to stop the flow of present events were inevitably washed away; what he suggested instead was to act to divert the flow of the water, or some of it, in another direction.

With Living Cinema, I created a tool for manipulating within a frame of streaming data, rather than simply branching to different shots or scenes. Now that we're looking at creating for interactive television, the first things I'm seeing folks develop (for narrative structures) are branching activities. I think it should focus instead on mis-en-scene. : working within the frame. If that means that streaming video is only one element among many (only appearing in one part of the frame perhaps), then it will be worth it.

Eisenstein developed metric, tonal, overtone, and intellectual montage concepts. Today we're inventing interactive montage, which will grow as we develop an inventory of ways of choosing. It is not just what is chosen, it is the mechanism for choosing, conflicting with whichever streams or combination of streams are washing around you.

And if you're lucky, every now and then, the swirls and eddies of this, generated through interactive montage, will give you a gift.

Anna Couey 30-APR-95 4:13

Many thanks, Bob, for your presence & words here over the month. More than a few gifts in this item :-)

I watched the SAND video as well, and loved that the images were never really "of" something. Wondered

what the pattern was that brought this image, these words together in a frame. Tried to connect the meaning of the unrelated elements unified by proximity. As I layer your compositional structure back over my experience, I can see where elements came from - but not what they are in the particular instance of my viewing. As tho the composition & its output are different works, related solely by birth.

I think of the language of multimedia that I see in emergence on the web...as unrelated as the disparate media elements in SAND are, they form a seamless whole - a synthesized language that works because each element is removed from a context that makes it comprehensible on its own terms.

Interactive montage...ways of choosing...hm. I also think of chance, unexpected things that happen when you didn't choose, when you're efficiently navigating your information space, and somehow, you've ended up in a radically different place. And much more...like if interactivity is defined by each viewer writing the work...

Will miss you here, Robert.

-AC