

The Myth of Interactivity or the Interactive Myth?: Interactive Film as an Imaginary Genre

Kristoffer Gansing

Malmö University, School of Arts, Culture and
Communication – K3

E-mail: kristoffer.gansing@k3.mah.se

ABSTRACT

This study tries to go beyond the dichotomy of analyzing digital media in terms of the shift from "passive viewer" to "active user". This common ideology of the interactive seems today to fall perfectly in line with a global consumer culture. Within the topic of interactive film as an imaginary genre, I will consider the relationship between narration and interaction design, in order to pinpoint different structures of control that form criteria for the supposedly liberating interactivity. From this I will try to present a view on how interaction in digital media is becoming a kind of everyday practice, producing rise to actions which are not immediately visible within these structures but which can offer the consumer instruments for subversion.

INTRODUCING THE INTERACTIVE FILM IMAGINARY

In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen J Aarseth criticises the widespread use of the word "interactive" to which he ascribes an underlying industrial ideology:

This industrial rhetoric produced concepts such as interactive newspapers, interactive video, interactive television, and even interactive houses, all implying that the role of the consumer had (or would very soon) change for the better. [1, p. 48]

Aarseth's study concerns digitally expanded textual forms but his theoretical perspective could as well be applied to film, especially in the light of recent developments of new media theory which draws heavily on the relation between cinema and digital media. Actually, it could be argued that Lev Manovich is doing exactly this in *The Language of New Media* [11] when he describes interactivity in digital media as a way of externalising mental processes. According to this argument, what earlier took place as interactivity of the mind is now equated with a click of the mouse. Both Aarseth and Manovich are hinting at the consumer connotations behind the word interactive but after having exposed its conceptual weakness, they both proceed to largely ignore it. I'm not going to try to prove them wrong in this since I agree with the view that there is an ideology of the consumer society connected to the promise of liberation through interactivity, with slogans such as Microsoft's "Where do you want to go today?" leading the way. What I would like to do is to focus more specifically on this notion and investigate how the consumer aspect of digital media manifests itself. Instead of dismissing interactivity, or arguing about what it 'really' is we might look upon it as an important cultural rhetoric that attaches itself to digital

media. Interactivity might not be a very exact term to describe any specific functionality of digital media, but through its everyday use, it has come to possess a kind of *imaginary* power – denoting a desire for the 'new', as it seems to emerge through the possibilities of computer mediated actions.

In the transformation of old media into new media by way of digital technology, the desire for the interactive is strong, especially in the medium of film. Gene Youngblood expresses high hopes for the interactive aspects of cinema as expanded through computer technologies already in 1970 [14] and with computer games like Access software's *Tex Murphy* series from the late nineteen-eighties and onwards, what used to be "interactive fiction" became "interactive movies". Another, more contemporary example, is the recent *Future Cinema* exhibition at the ZKM, Karlsruhe, where "the cinematic imaginary after film" is explored, mainly through different installations depending on direct physical input from the audience. This accentuates the imaginary dimension, as artistic works are laid out as a collective fantasy about the interactive cinema future. Going back to the very birth of film, and even before that, to pre-cinema moving-image technologies, it could be argued that the function of public cinema has always been about playing with this consumer desire for peeping into, and even *using* the future. It is in the light of this that I propose the study of interactive film as a powerful imaginary genre, which seem particularly present in today's digitally global consumer culture.

METHODS AND TERMINOLOGY

My investigation is carried out through the construction of the 'imaginary genre' of interactive film, including different digital productions such as computer games and 'net art', which incorporates filmic modes of expression. More specifically the works that I include in this study are:

- Computer Games

Considering primarily the "Adventure game" genre through its evolution from text based to graphical interaction, on to multimedia CD-Rom and DVD productions.

- Expanded and Future Cinema

Incorporating artistic practices on the Internet (net art), digital filmmaking, CD-Rom, DVD and installation work.

The imaginary dimension used to define the category of 'interactive film', thus also becomes a method to temporarily disband the difficulty in defining film in the digital age. My approach does not try to resolve the question of what interactive or digital cinema 'really is', but I do address the need "to re-conceive where and when we take up film as an object of study", as Lisa Cartwright writes in a recent paper concerning film as subsumed in a broader category of digital media. [2, p.9] With this as the context, I will consider film as a medium that is being rethought and reshaped into a specific *Digital Zeitgeist*. This is a *Zeitgeist* where interactivity is sold as an 'empowering' phenomenon, but which in reality function as a basic constituent of a regulative consumer society.

Besides interactivity, 'digital' is *the* buzzword here,

since it denotes the technological change which enables the convergence in which as Peter Lunenfeld puts it: "...all representational systems are recast as digital information". [8] If the field of society and its relationship to technology was once populated by harsh scepticism against the techno-utopian visions of McLuhan, Youngblood et al., it seems that much of the thinking about media today yield to the Digital Zeitgeist. While overtly idealistic approaches, as those found in the outposts of Californian Ideology, can still be criticised for their elite type of thinking – you cannot as easily argue against the immense impact of the computerisation of society and its political impacts on a global scale. Now the hot topic of media convergence is not only a business model, but also a field for thinking about how, as Lev Manovich [9] writes, representative media (film, theatre, literature) merges with telecommunications media (telex, telephone), giving rise to what we call new media, for which a sufficient understanding is yet to be built.

Discussions about specifically the interactive properties of new media tend to get stuck in a good/bad interactivity argument, a clear example being the issue of usability within the field of cognitive HCI (Human-Computer Interaction) studies. This is but one example of a discussion that is contributing to the establishment of a dichotomy of the user as being either active or passive. The base for this argument seems to be a common agreement that technological interactivity through new media can have an empowering effect that takes place through a liberation of the subject – the once passive couch potato, becoming active, 'clicking-away' media composer. Parameters for judging states of activity and passivity do not seem to enter into consideration. In the words of Michelle Kendricks, considering theories of hypertext, this kind of omission fails "...to escape familiar notions of a liberal humanist subject that is ontologically prior to its social articulations, and they must retreat to a default consumerist model". [9 .p.232]

The criteria for interaction, including commercial interests, social contexts and power structures are seldom mapped out and neither are the ties that these structures have to individual works and their strategies for interaction. To begin to discern such complex relations, we need a field of study and a method. An excellent reevaluation of the libertarian ideology connected to computer technologies is carried out by Aarseth [1]. He rejects the notion that for example Internet Culture by default should be democratic. Instead he suggests that the ideological base of computer technologies are highly context sensitive, claiming that "Those who control a medium technically and economically are always in a position superior to those who do not." [1, p. 167] Aarseth then explains that "control" is not the same as "active use", and it is exactly this latter space for interaction - the reading of digital media if you like – that is the object of interest here. If the interactive film genre can be agreed on as the field or 'medium' of this study (hold together by the collective consumer and corporate desire for it), the method should incorporate a way of measuring the practice of interaction with works of this genre. As an attempt to do this I will apply an analysis of the relationship between filmic conventions of narration and interaction design, as explained below.

In the study of film, certain technical conventions have to be known by the scholar in order to produce a full analysis of the filmic narration. A key example of this is David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* [2] where an understanding of stylistic devices like P.O.V. (Point-of-view) shots and voiceover are central to the concept of a genre like the detective film. The recognition of stylistic devices combined with an understanding of dramaturgical structures contribute to the understanding of a narrative whole, indicating the cultural position of a work. But digital technologies add a whole new dimension of technical devices, namely those giving individual access to and allow use of a work. While the broad concept of interactivity might not be reduced to purely a question of interface, we cannot ignore the importance of interaction design as it enters into dialogue with narrative structures. Just as stylistic conventions regulate narrative understanding, interaction design regulates possible actions. Interactive film then, calls for an evaluation of the merger between the practice of narrative perception and computer-mediated interaction. How is this space of practice defined, what are its possibilities and limitations?

BACKGROUND: FUTURE CINEMA OF THE PAST...

If we look at earlier scholars of new media, we find that in 1970 Gene Youngblood, taking up the cue from Marshall McLuhan, writes in a prophetic way about the future of cinema and its fusion with new technologies in his *Expanded Cinema*:

For thousands of young persons around the world today, the cinema is a way of living. As we find ourselves faced with increasing leisure time, the camera will become more important as an instrument of creative living as opposed to its present role as conditioner of the dronelike existence we now lead. I mean to suggest that the camera – either cinema, or video, or both – as an extension of our nervous system, functions as a superego that allows us to observe and modify our behavior by observing our "software" image just as world man modifies his behavior by observing his collective superego as manifested in the global videosphere. By creating new realities in video/cinema we create new realities in our lives. [14, p. 132]

The use of cinema, video and camera should here be understood according to the title of Youngblood's book: as expanded media forms, encompassing future interactive versions of audiovisual media. Not only does Youngblood suggest that future forms of media will act as empowering agency in everyday life on a global scale, he also presents us with the view of media as 'extensions of man' in a 'technobiological' sense – human becoming software and technology entering the realm of the organic. Has Youngblood's promise for a change in the nature of the camera from a "conditioner of the dronelike existence" of mankind to an 'instrument of creative living' been fulfilled in the digital age? And what does this say about society's desires and hopes for mediation and technological interaction?

At the time of their writing, Youngblood's arguments, much like McLuhan's, might have seemed as technocratic and utopian hyperbole and we may think so even today, simply because the vision of the totally

immersive technological future didn't seem to come true in that way. However, it is my argument that media technology and theory actually went much *further*. This going ahead did not happen in the modernistic sense of progress; a model of thinking that was perhaps mistakenly applied in that moment of technological and cultural shift in which Youngblood's and others thought articulated itself. The media forms that Youngblood contested, such as "the cinema of structure" did maybe indeed contain the seeds of a "digital aesthetics" embracing concepts such as interactivity, but their revolutionary artistic ambitions doesn't seem to have formed leading imperatives in the progression of information technologies. For a moment art and technology seemed to happen, but did it last?

The speed at which computer technologies developed was governed by principles that may actually have prevented these utopian fusions of art and technology from embedding themselves successfully in culture. The mid-nineties however, with the impact of consumer based computer technology and net culture, marked the definite return of this utopian desire for technology. A return with significant changes, because the economic base as well as the cultural base for digital technologies were fundamentally changed: global economics operating through integrated electronic networks and cultural forms since long transformed and under transformation by the impact of the "information age". In the light of this, the promise of liberation through digital technology simply cannot be mistaken for the same promise twenty or even thirty years earlier – the criteria for being the *interactor and the interacted*, to use Manuel Castells phrasing [3], are not, or cannot be the same.

Now 'our software image' as Youngblood so fittingly put it, can indeed be endlessly observed and modified – the question is by *whom*? If the software image exists, for example as it does on the MSN - Microsoft Network then we should maybe instead say that this image is under endless "surveillance and control". It might still be "me" who is clicking the mouse, but the technological interaction has been so completely standardised and commodified that the process of interaction seems to happen almost automatically and at the same time, paradoxically (for the subject) by complete chance. For the individual, electronic networks does seem to "rhizomatically" couple together any point whatsoever to any other point whatsoever, but the logics behind this linking, or rather its *ideologies*, remain beyond the users reach who are caught up in the totalising flatness of the web. (Slavoj Zizek meets Manuel Castells: "Welcome to the desert of the real *virtuality*") This is evident for example in the way that Internet search engines arranges separate pieces of information into seamless wholes. Of course, there is still sequentiality and separation through pages and clicks but there is also screen-based media's strongly unifying elements such as interface design conventions and standardisation of media-access through software like Quicktime Player or Microsoft Explorer.

In advocating "transparency" and "ease-of-use", the media-industry and its software developers are also playing an ideological game. While an interface design convention like a left-hand and frame-based HTML navigation system, in itself does not express any clear political line, it is, much like the "shot-reverse-shot" of

the classical Hollywood cinema, a stylistic convention with a function that is coupled to a specific industrial context. In the light of the complex web of global commercial and political interests that technological interactivity is caught up in, it should be clear that whenever we talk about the liberating function of new media there is a need for caution and sensitivity to the singular context.

In the following, I will try to pay such sensitivity to the singular, concerning the transformation by interactivity of filmic modes of expressions. I will then conclude on how this relates to the outlined topics of control and freedom in spectatorship, subjectivity and consumption of interactive film.

CASE I : ADVENTURE GAMES – INTERFACE TRANSPARENCY AND HOLLYWOOD STORYTELLING

In the computer-game version of *Blade Runner* (Westwood, 1998) we are faced with a replication of the famous opening-shot of Ridley Scott's movie – the future vision of LA recreated in 3d graphics. From here the game 'cuts' to a story that runs parallel to that of the well-known movie, the player taking the role of a Blade Runner inhabiting the same fictional space as Harrison Ford's original character. The nature of the story has also changed, not so much an open-ended and existential film-noir as was the case especially in the film's "director's cut" version, but now a more straightforward detective story. Most games that belong to the adventure genre follow this mystery type of plot where the player assumes the role of an investigating voyeur/detective. This is a convenient formula that allows an assured degree of gameplay while still keeping the action strictly story-based.

It has been argued elsewhere that the point of games is gaming, not storytelling and that we should not be afraid to study gaming for gaming's own sake. [8] This point has brought a more balanced view to computer games studies, which through writers like Janet H. Murray and others came to be preoccupied with interactive fiction. Instead of dismissing this approach, I believe that we can fairly say that there are computer games where narrative has a foregrounded, *explicit* role (adventure games) as well as there are many games where narrative could be described as being *implicit* in the game structure (strategy games). If the explicit role is somehow contradictory to the nature of gaming, I leave others to decide, opting instead to focus on narrative simply because it is integral to the idea of an interactive film.

My first case of interactive film concerns this type of game where narrative is explicit: adventure games, which, as adventure game designers themselves typically claim "...are built on stories, and you must approach the game design from that angle, as if you are writing a script or a book" [13,p56]. Adventure games, are not seldom marketed as actual "interactive movies", and in my view holds a position as the *mainstream* of interactive cinema. Story structure is almost exclusively built on classical dramaturgical models and while non-linearity may exist between elements, as in the process of navigation, there is in the end always a respect for the causal movement from A to B.

If we examine the interaction design in this type of game we will find that the interfaces usually reinforce the

classical storytelling structure. Spectator identification is built up through a strong narrative in the illusionist Hollywood style, coupled with an interface that operates as a simulated, clearly functional toolbox. The keyword in the interaction design applied is *transparency* where interactivity is made out of presupposed 'natural' metaphors of usability. This means that interaction will take place through the use of buttons, icons and menus that are often imitating processes of interaction that we know from before, especially from elements outside computer culture. This approach owes much to the field of HCI research [12].

One striking example of this functionalistic interactivity combined with a traditional film narration can be found in the computer game *Gabriel Knight 3* (1999). The game developers have here constructed a highly cinematic 3d engine which enables the player to freely choose his or her angle independently from the position of the actual player character in the game. This reinforces an alienation from the main protagonist that is also present in classical Hollywood cinema, offering an objectively voyeuristic and fetishist identification. If the player feels lost by the freedom offered, there is also an interesting function that allows one to choose between a few pre-programmed angles in each setting. These are valuable tools also for finding important points of interest in the story-world. If one wants to have more freedom of movement there is the possibility of switching a "cinematics" function on or off. In the 'off' mode no 'pre-edited' camera angles or sequences can occur, the player being free to move about at her own will – but this introduces the risk of the player missing out on important story information.

Whenever a crucial event in the story takes place in adventure games, it is common that the story-engine takes control and presents the viewer/player with a pre-edited filmic sequence. The cinematics *off* mode in *GK3* though, allows the player to take control of the camera also in the 'story sequences' – a disconcerting experience since the narrative is guided by Hollywood style storytelling, of which we expect a certain controlled visual narration. Nevertheless this makes for an interesting subversion of this form of interactive film. One which betrays the fact that there is a clear reason why these games usually offer the player a quite low level of control, concealed under an interface that tries to uphold an aura of freedom. This is not too say that adventure games are failures, their value certainly lies beyond the direct interactivity, in the filmic storytelling which as David Bordwell would have it "...cues the spectator to execute a definable variety of *operations*". [2,p.31] These are operations of "narrative comprehension" that exist independently of on-screen interaction, meaning that as a conclusion, interactivity in these type of works seem to primarily remain in the truly 'imaginary'.

CASE II: ART CD-ROM/DVD CINEMA – CRITICALLY CONSTRUCTIVE CONTROL

In the loosely defined field of 'digital art' we can find many examples of artistic approaches to interactive filmmaking that could be described as 'critically constructive'. Computer game designers often follow the HCI approach of applying cognitive psychology when it comes to determine the design of interactivity. The result is the ideal of transparency and functionalism as seen

above. Artists working with visual media are ready to follow other paths. As artist Jim Campbell argues in his article "Delusions of Dialogue: Control and Choice in Interactive Art":

The difference between an interactive game and an interactive work of art is not just in the subject matter. It's also in the program and interface, which are an important part of the expression of a work. Artists working in this field will continue to be at odds with the models and directions of the multimedia industry.[3]

These are often works where the user does not follow a path that is predetermined by classical dramaturgical structures but which contain open-ended narrative threads that are explored through an associative interaction and an interplay between different degrees of control. Here the role of 'active spectatorship' does not mean completely controlling a character in an immersive 3d environment but something that is closer to Youngblood's vision, interactivity meaning a participation in the creation of cinematic concepts.

One example of this alternative approach to fiction and interaction can be found in the works of the Finnish self-proclaimed "queen of multimedia" Marita Liulia. Her *S.O.B. – Son of a Bitch* (1999) CD-Rom is a kind of feministic docu-soap where you are allowed to explore the apartment of the mysteriously vanished professor Jack L. Froid. We are told that the professor is a once famous psychoanalyst who for some time held the same prestigious chair as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Through the exploration of the apartment, the user gradually discovers the life and ideas of Froid in a manner that is reminiscent of the detective type game. However suspension is not directed towards the solving of a specific goal, the real exploration being that of the image of man in western society and thinking. The interaction is built upon the navigation of photographic panoramas, built using the technique of QuickTime VR. This assures an aesthetic grounded in cinema, as each room presents the user with a set of predefined camera angles. Through hyperlinked objects, such as the paintings on Froid's walls there is access to several interactive sequences, often taking the form of ironic mini-games. *S.O.B.* is particularly interesting in the way that it subverts the language of computer games and edutainment, in order to explore the construction of maleness.

Another type of artistic CD-Rom film is much further removed from the gaming aspect. A kind of mini-genre is already made up of "database narratives" which utilizes associative interaction with audio and video sequences – often collected from linear films. The user deconstructs, and constructs his/her own version from a given set of materials that is called upon through experimental interfaces sometimes combined with elements of randomisation. Examples are the Director/Macromedia CD-Roms *The Good Cook* by Michael Buckley, *Speed* (2000) by Thore Sonesson and Per Linde, experimental filmmaker Chris Marker's *Immunity* (1997) and the three-screen DVD installation *The Decay of Fiction: Encounters with a Film* by Pat O'Neill (2002) by the The Labyrinth Project.

Even if this artistic work follows a different aesthetic

of interactivity and storytelling than that of computer games, there are instances when also these works enter into the active/passive dichotomy and its consumer contexts. Both adventure games and experimental interactive films still belong to clearly defined fields – namely the entertainment industry and art world respectively. Within these fields there are defined places for production and conventions for reception. It is not so surprising then, that artists should advocate alternative approaches to interactivity, other than those found in industrial contexts.

This is how the art world can claim its space. If we compare the branding of computer games to artist productions, we will often find a reversal of strategies, but this only betrays that they are two sides of the same coin. Where the computer game industry is largely built around well known developing houses like Eidos, Ubi Soft and Sierra, the art products are most likely identified by the artist's name, like for example in *Chris Marker's Immemory*.

Even though the art space is also highly commodified, the above examples seem to have more explicit room for experiments and critical practices, than that found in computer games. However, it should be questioned if this experimentation is able to establish a fruitful dialogue with a user situated outside the art context. This leads on to my last case, being interactive cinema on the web, where we find new, immediately less context specific, possibilities for the kind of subversions like in Liulia's work.

CASE III : NET CINEMA – COMMUNICATION AND ACTS OF RESISTANCE

The case of net-based cinema offers up new fields of discussion, where the openness to subversion seems larger and less regulated by cultural and social norms. The least established category in my imaginary genre so far, this new ground both deepens the context of consumption in interactivity as well as opening up dynamic possibilities. Concepts such as remediation and transcoding are intensively present on the Internet, its conceptual structure mimicking the idea of the computer as simulator of other media. I will now consider films made specifically for the Internet as a medium, works that seem to have adapted itself to its hypermediated reality. This excludes the most common form of films on the net, as it is mainly being used as an easy and cheap way to distribute traditional short movies and streaming TV. One such well-known outlet is AtomFilms (www.atomfilms.com), which does, however, contain a few exceptions, showcasing the so called “immersive cinema” technique. The first, and so far probably the best, *The New Arrival* (2001) by Amy Talkington was produced as a showcase for a kind of development of the panoramic navigation we know from QuickTimeVR, the technique used in my previous example of Liulia's *S.O.B.*

With “immersive cinema” it is possible to direct the view of a static camera through a 360-degree flow of *continuously* moving images. In *The New Arrival*, this rather sensational technology is cleverly used as a motif in the narrative perspective. All characters speak directly towards the point of the camera, meaning that you are not only the cameraman, but similar to computer games you also play the role of the protagonist. You cannot

move about freely in this world, as the narrative and the fixity of the camera position control the flow of action. Instead you choose your point of interest in the filmic event that happens around you. The twist in *The New Arrival* is that your character is revealed to be on his way to a retirement home – where you end up being pushed around in a wheelchair! This typical short-film twist, has a double point since it not only concludes the narrative structure, it also incorporates the design of the interaction directly in the plot. The story cleverly uses the initial promise of freedom of interactivity in order to also show the restrictedness of this very interactivity, which in a very neat way also reveals the sometimes-claustrophobic traits of interactive cinema.

As a second example I've chosen the work of “net bureau” HiRes who have specialized in making net specific trailers for American “independent” feature films. Their trailers for *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) and *Donnie Darko* (2001) are stunning examples of translation of film narration into web narration. Instead of a page with credits and a downloadable theatrical trailer for the film, HiRes creates spatial audiovisual and interactive interpretations of the films' temporal structures and main themes.

The interactive trailer for Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*, partly created using the Flash software, progresses according to the titles of the film's seasonal time structure, from summer to winter, but in between these the film is hardly recognisable. Characters, lines and pieces of music return from the film in a collage structure that builds up its own version of the movie's haunting and ultimately menacing atmosphere. Most cleverly, some parts of the movie are completely transformed into Internet specific forms. The case here in the plot is of an elderly woman who is a TV-addict desperately trying to loose weight, in order to appear on her favourite quiz show. This part is never represented in the HiRes trailer with images of a TV or the actual character but instead we navigate through ads for diet pills and warnings of “computer compulsion” habits on pages that continually crash and break down. In the same way the user is encouraged to play a useless One-Eyed Jacks machine, which recalls the youths in the movie who are desperately trying to win money in order to buy drugs.

At the same time as the HiRes interactive trailers are exciting expansions of cinema into new media, they are also extremely deceptive in their commercial content. Truly they are selling a product through the users immersive experience. This also seems to be typical of a consumer net culture, where branding becomes more important than clearly announcing what the product is. Giving the user a worthwhile experience is today more about creating net-specific content that can be chosen for its recognisable style, rather than as previously, offering a database of credits, images and film trailers. A style that, if the branding is successful, will eventually be tied up to its product – the feature film. Or even the reverse scenario could be true; the *film* will be connected to its innovative trailer.

This is a significant fusion in net culture, of narration and consumption. From this follows a type of interactivity that while opening up for narrative experiments in mainstream cultural fields is also

controlled by commercial interests that form hidden criteria for the interaction. In this media culture it is no longer hardware but software, which dictate the production – Microsoft Explorer seemingly being our new TV. Of course this TV may present itself as something completely different: a vast information processing and empowering, *interactive* tool. But does it liberate us from the “dronelike existence” that Youngblood spoke of? The often-heard argument concerning new media abridging the gap between users and producers seems to become ironically true: the producers are becoming more *like* the users, their creation tightly governed by a centralized, global business. This leads me on to the conclusion of this paper, which is an elaboration of the connection between the consumer society and the role of the spectator as consumer of interactive film.

DIGITISATION, CONSUMER SPACE AND INTERACTIVE FILM

The assumption that “information wants to be free” is instantly recognisable as a founding slogan for activist- and hacker -movements. Ironically this seemingly anti-establishment statement could as easily be adopted to describe the functioning of neo-liberal info-economics. With its fast exchange of information, communication and ease of use (for both producer and user), Internet communication already corresponds to a shift in corporate culture towards global, informational economics. The structure of the net seems to have been perfectly adapted to the idea of informational economics from the start – as companies more easily administrate their flow of information, they will also be able to offer cheaper products. The profit is instead generated through a great quantity of information flow, meaning that you simply buy more. In the light of this, the significance of the change from free Internet services to paying services often seem banal, such as when the once free net art community and newsgroup Rhizome, early in 2003 started to charge its users a \$5 subscription fee.

As soon as we start paying online with our credit cards, the vision of the freedom enjoyed by the “pure” surfer seems to become replaced with that of the passive, oppressed consumer. At least this was clearly the case in the discussion within the digital art community as www.rhizome.org “went commercial”. Why was this change in the service so clearly perceived by its users as a reduction of their status, from free surfers to restricted customers? It seems that in our western societies, which are the very strongholds of global consumer culture, the Internet has a status as the last stand for an alternative anti-commercial culture. This desire for purity on the net seems blind to the fact that just *using* the net implies specific economical infrastructures. The Internet of course started as a non-commercial service, but its vast mass-appeal has, in spite of dot-com crashes, expanded along with its business. The way most people use the Internet is already part of a highly commercialised software industry, and the same could to some extent be said to apply for hardware.

Indeed, following Manovich’s concept of ‘modularity’ as a guiding principle of new media, the on-going digitisation of all media objects could be seen as a making available of every instance of communication as binary units ready for commodification. To further use the terminology of this influential theorist of new media;

maybe we could define the most totalising aspect of media convergence, as being *the complete transcoding of consumer-space*.

The statement “information wants to be free”, as a slogan for hacker cultures, then seems to “backfire”, returning to an idea of “freedom” that is again something that is taken for granted, and never questioned in terms of what kind of freedom is wanted or needed and on what grounds? Maybe we need to leave the idea that the trivial online payment automatically puts the digital subject into the control of a totalitarian capitalist power. In defining the concept of control I would rather like to call upon Deleuze’s essay “Having an Idea in Cinema”:

A control is not a discipline. In making highways, for example, you don’t enclose people but instead multiply the means of control. I am not saying that this is the highway’s exclusive purpose, but that people can drive infinitely and “freely” without being at all confined yet while still being perfectly controlled. This is our future. [5, p.62]

Recalling Youngblood’s idea of the mediated creative future, Deleuze paints a quite different picture, more in line with the argument that, as I previously suggested, technological changes went much further and with completely different cultural consequences. It is clear that Deleuze wants us to rethink the conditions of freedom, instead of constantly craving for it as an everlasting and static object. In his essay, Deleuze, more radically characterises “communication” and “information” as already being instances of control, as technologies that form and control subjects. Curiously, he then goes on to define art, as an *act of resistance* that has absolutely *nothing* to do with communication, except as an act of *anti-communication*. We should bear in mind here that Deleuze works with less technologically minded concepts of communication and information. However, I believe that it is possible to borrow his idea of the act of resistance for the argumentation here. Earlier, I gave some examples of how interactive cinema does indeed contain a critical and sometimes subversive approach to digital media and interactivity, but we also saw the limitations of the computer game industry and of the art world respectively, as production fields for containing these works.

Going beyond the idea of artistic subversions, the imaginary genre of interactive film can serve as a context for situating the myriad of possibilities for action that arise *within* structures of control in digital consumer spaces. In all the cases that I described previously, the subject approaches the work with some knowledge or memory of cinema, but at the same time something else is present, such as a gaming element, or an immersive and navigable environment. The subject goes through different altering states, at an *intermediary* of being a player, viewer, user and consumer. Each of these roles is conditioned by different criteria: the player and viewer operates primarily in a space of interaction and narration while the user and consumer in a fluctuation of utilisation and selection.

These different states seem to be constantly intermingling in new media, as shown by the HiRes trailers, which are immersive sites of interactivity, narration and publicity. The states that the ‘viewer’

goes through there should not be regarded as passive – instead we can look at them as cultural places each with their specific conditions for actions and for “acts of resistance”. From this viewpoint, anti-communication and “acts of resistance” can be situated in the every practice of interaction. By resistance and anti-communication in this context I mean actions that already constitute *something else*, and not the strictly Hegelian counterparts that move towards a kind of paradigmatic synthesis.

The subject of new media, as player, user or viewer does not need to be limited by the context of consumption to mindlessly follow pre-programmed paths, even though the process of interaction can be conditioned by such a context. Resistance in the practice of interaction can be described as akin to what Michel De Certeau had in mind in *The Practice of Everyday Life* [6] where he sought out to map out the largely invisible operations of consumers caught up in society’s control structures. He then posed the important question of what do people *do* with all the daily media input? And how do these “ways of making do” feed back into cultural processes?

One of De Certeau’s striking examples was that of putting on a wig, as a metaphor for the activity of the worker who uses his skills and tools at work to carry out ‘secret’ work, for himself or as a favour to a friend. If we extend this kind of analysis to new media, we might find countless examples of “rulebreaking”. The way people interact in chat-rooms, MUD’s and virtually any context of online communication, where countless chances for bypassing, subverting and counteracting the communication system open themselves. This goes for identity games between humans in chat-rooms, but also for human to computer interaction as in hacking practices. Web sites themselves can also carry the wig, as with the example of projects connected to art/activists [®]mark (www.rtmk.com), with their mock versions of existing websites of organisations such as the WTO. Even though Microsoft resolved most people’s desire for driving off the road in car-games with their *Midtown Madness* series (taking up the cue from Deleuze...?), the possibilities for putting a digital system to an unintended use do not seem to stop there – new permutations will constantly emerge, not only from obvious misuse but from the sheer amount of the interaction of consuming subjects.

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