

Interactivity or Interpassivity: a Question of Agency in Digital Play

Laetitia Wilson

University of Western Australia
E-mail: noumena_lw@yahoo.com
(08) 9380 5072

ABSTRACT

The utopia of interactivity is waning and a question emerges; is what we so often refer to as interactivity in fact interpassivity? If so, how does this impact on the participant, the player in the digital field? This paper engages in a questioning of the dynamics of interpassivity through a call for closer attention to agency in the user-interface relation.□

KEYWORDS: Interactivity; Interpassivity; Agency; Digital Art

The ideal of agency is one of the last bastions of humanism, and has become the epitome of technological correctness. (David Rokeby, 1996)

Electronic technology terminates with the radically divided self: the self that is, which is at war with itself. Split consciousness for a culture that is split between digital and human flesh. (Arthur and Marilouis Kroker, 1996)

INTRODUCTION

A dark figure drops down in front of me, I see the glint of the gun as I take a tumble and duck behind a barrel, peeking out only to reveal the glint of my own gun as I fire into the direction of the threatening shape, my real hand trembles from the backfire...real hand? Yes, not the one holding the gun, but the one attached to my body, gripping the reactive game pad, the one whose fingers are jolting repetitively, pounding the rubber nodes as the figure – my stand-in - on the screen performs elastic survival manoeuvres. “The distinctiveness of computer games lies in interaction”[1] it is said. And indeed the catchphrase of digital technology is interactivity. But this catchphrase is losing its catch as the term ‘interactive’ becomes increasingly inadequate to describe our experience on the screen. The notion of interpassivity here emerges as a concept that demands attention for the reconsideration of interactivity and the negotiation of agency in digital play.

Digital play is best epitomised in both MUD/MOO scenarios - where the user creates/adopts a visible avatar to engage with the space and other avatars - and in Game scenarios where the avatar is also visible as one’s interface with the game world. The experiences of digital play

discussed here will be those involving third person perspective. The redundancy of the term ‘interactive’ to describe these spaces is noted by Espen Aarseth who proposes the notion of ‘ergodicity’ as a more constructive concept than interactivity. The term ‘ergodic’ is a combination of the Greek words for *work* and *path*. It communicates the idea that the user traverses a labyrinthine-like path through a given textual or virtual space, working through the elements encountered. Aarseth challenges the term interactive claiming that it is “a purely ideological term, projecting an unfocused fantasy rather than a concept of any analytical significance”[1](p.51). The ideological position implied by the term is that “humans and machines are equal partners in communication...”[1](p.48) involved in a reciprocal or mutual exchange. But to what extent is there mutual reciprocity when we follow a pre-programmed direction, when we ‘interact’ according to a predetermined set of codes? And what does this mean for agency; individual power, purposive action and the ability and scope to exercise choice and effect change?

The term ‘interactive’ is an over-simplification of the dynamics of the user-interface relation [5] that situates the user in a utopian discourse of active agency in dialogue with technology. In contrast, ergodicity situates agency as a process in which the user follows the prompts of the program and “the game plays the user just as the user plays the game”[1](p.162). The notion of interpassivity shifts the discourse in a similar vein and the following discussion will be an analysis of this concept, enabling a further unpacking of the highly marketable, packaged notion of interactivity.

FROM FACE-TO-FACE TO INTERFACE

Interpassivity can be defined as a mode of relating that involves the consensual transferral of activity or emotion onto another being or object - who consequently ‘acts’ in one’s place. It includes ergodic elements but diverges from this concept by its reliance on a mediating virtual or material object, rather than solely temporal progression through a text. The notion of interpassivity was first illustrated by Lacan - and termed by Žižek - through the example of the Chorus in Greek tragedy; “the chorus expressed the terror and compassion felt by the audience, who were apparently pleased to be relieved of such psychological stress.”[3](p.252) The affective response to the theatre is thereby performed by a ‘surrogate self’ - the chorus - as the ‘appropriate’ emotive response to the performance. Here, a surrogate self, in the form of a signifier, is substituted for the subject, “the emotional commentary is done for you”[3](p.252), demonstrating that even one’s “most intimate feelings can be radically externalised”[13](p.109) and projected into the symbolic realm.

Slavoj Žižek expands on the notion of interpassivity claiming that it is a central feature of human subjectivity.

Zizek's understanding of interpassivity is of primary relevance to the discussion of agency in digital play;

The ability of postmodern technologies to construct and mobilise a surrogate self for the subject which means that even though the subject is 'active' in ways previously unimaginable, its capacity to "passively enjoy" its widened field of experiences resides in this surrogate self, in the symbolic order. [13] (p.109)

An example of the decentring of the subject (or the modern day chorus) via technological means is the phenomenon of the canned laughter used in sit-coms. As an auditory strategy that promotes the ocularcentric regime of television, canned laughter laughs for the viewer. Agency is mediated through this auditory technology. Canned laughter is a signpost for humour. A flashing neon 'laugh now' that simultaneously prompts one to laugh while laughing in one's place and decentring the viewer into an interpassive subject.

The 'surrogate self' of interpassivity can be understood as an interpassive entity or device; an 'interpassive object'. The user engages with the digital space via this mediating virtual or material object. The avatar in cyberspace (or computer game persona) – as a virtual, surrogate self – can be understood as a 'stand-in' for our real-space selves; a "visual agent that represents the user"[4]. A feedback loop is created between user and avatar whereby part of one's self is extended or projected onto the screen, enacting a dynamic of agency by proxy. The cyberspace avatar, as the new 'interpassive object' thus functions as a locus for our extended agency; a locus that is multifarious and polymorphous, displaced from the facticity of our real-space selves. This reiterates the necessity to not only acknowledge the ability of postmodern technologies to 'construct and mobilise a surrogate self' but also the ability of postmodern technologies to construct a plurality of *shifting* selves.

As experiences of interpassivity, watching a sit-com and controlling an avatar are on opposite sides of the spectrum. In the examples of canned laughter and Greek tragedy, emotions are extrajected as 'appropriate' responses to a given scenario; a strategy of normative identification of emotion by proxy. The affective reactions of the interpassive object are here beyond our control. The example of the avatar as a surrogate self occupies a different zone. This entity of interposed digital make-up becomes the interpassive object in the form of an agent whose representation or speech/actions are malleable to a degree. Avatars in cyberspace (MUD's, MOO's), computer game personas, or certain mediating objects in 'interactive' art demonstrate this form. This results in agency that is 'externalised' and malleable to a degree; caught within a balancing act of integration and multiplication. □

The Split-Avatar-Self

If agency in virtual space is characterised by the recurring postmodern theme of plurality and malleability of the self, then it is also characterised by a sense of disembodiment; the 'body unit' is invisible in cyberspace. A visual identity is acquired in its place, an identity that may be built up on fantasy, unattainable ideals and the desire for the acquisition of lack;

What we lack, have lost, come to desire, and cannot attain through the actual is valorised and can be attained only through the commodified, fetishized virtual; just for this moment, and always at a cost. [4]□

What cost? Could not the possibility to explore a plurality of personalities allow for empowerment and self-realisation beyond the hegemony of 'real' life norms and habitual social conventions (expanded agency)? Or is this merely a symptom of digital utopianism when in actuality/virtuality 'real' life norms are translated into bits and bytes and habitual social conventions merely cycle through their programmatic repetitions at a remove from tangible encounters (limited agency)? Or rather does cyberspace call attention to the need for an alternative notion of agency? Whatever, according to Zizek there is a price to be paid:

...in cyberspace everything is possible, but for the price of assuming a fundamental impossibility: you cannot circumvent the mediation of the interface, its 'bypass', which separates you (as the subject of enunciation) forever from your symbolic stand-in. [15]□

The question then becomes, *how much* of a cost is this phenomenon of the avatar that can only ever be left behind as a temporary 'carrier' of agency in digital interpassive structures? This cost is relative to quantitative and qualitative factors of engagement; measurable in terms of the impact that it has on one's 'real' life, on a sense of agency heightened, weakened or merely different. The self-split - between the material body and the interpassive object, between the corporeal and the immanent – thus faces either a loss of agency through a lack of integration of the multiplicity of selves, an embellishment of agency through the integration of these selves and/or a re-definition of agency through alternative presence, perception and mobility.

AGENCY BY PROXY

Digital technologies have led to a proliferation of so-called interactive art. The democratic potentials of engagement with interactive art have been hailed; finally, an art form that involves the viewer as an active participant! This celebration beams in following the postmodern return of the reader/viewer. Yet the question still remains: how interactive are we in the (inter)face of the pre-programmed? There are some harsh views on this matter; □

No meaningful communication - in the sense of a true exchange of ideas, thoughts, opinions or discussion ... - can ever emerge from a programmed technology. What we get instead is a simple alteration, based on the rules set by the programmer...The user remains a 'user' who will not magically turn into a 'creator' (as we are constantly led to believe) but will continue to resemble a puppet responding to the artist's/technician's programmed vision"[10]p.13)

Here, almost the entirety of digital art is flippantly dismissed by Mona Sarkis in a privileging of the non-programmed and a denial of the potential for enriching experience via the interface. In this view we are not interactive at all, but merely a probed subject. If this situation is understood as not interactive but interpassive then interpassivity means subjection to the machine; with our agency severely compromised by the complete negation of the freedom to exercise choice in meaningful exchange. Sarkis expresses anxiety over the capacity of technology to consume us as we increasingly consume it; a technology that is then not only an *outward* extension of ourselves - in the McLuhanesque sense - but also *inward*, exercising control over our corporeal existence.

There is certainly a 'grey area'/overlapping between 'acting' and being 'acted upon' in interpassive structures. However, avatar spaces indisputably involve choice and communicative exchange in the creation and socialisation of one's av; an example is the *Palace* where one is involved in an interpassively mediated dialogue. Responding to the program is a central facet of video game spaces yet they are increasingly becoming less restrictive by providing the opportunity for creative scope (game-patches, character design) and intelligent decision-making (the *Sims*). What is apparent is that while it is undeniable that programmatic limits are a part of digital technology, there is nevertheless substantial scope in which to exercise choice and create meaning in interpassive structures. The user may not be a *creator* or *interactive* in the true sense of the words but is still able to exercise creative choice and engage in dialogue, albeit interpassively.

Programmatic GAME-OVER?

No. We can always press *Re-Play*. It may be the case that interactive art pieces are frequently not as exciting as computer games; not as informative as information touch

screens; and not as useful as automatic teller machines but this is *no* programmatic *game-over*. Programmed technologies have their limitations, but like all tools useability not only comes down to how they are *meant* to be used, but also how *you* use them. The multi-player 'head-game' *Proxy* (1998) by Robert Nideffer is an example of the complexity and scope applied by interactive artists and consequently, the scope available to the user. *Proxy* is engineered around a Multi-Agent Management system;

It's a game that's not always very fun, an artwork that would never be sold or even considered "art" by many people, and a software that's as intentionally dysfunctional as it is functional. [6]

Proxy is an art; software and game fusion that playfully stretches the parameters of each of these spheres while addressing notions of subjectivity, community and surveillance and juggling issues of agency and interpassivity. As a 'player' one can adopt an 'agent' or series of 'agents'. These agents function as avatars, as information watchdogs, seekers and battlers in a variety of information spaces (textual and graphical). A given agent is personalised with your chosen psychological profile and the aim is to maintain stability in your agent's psychological state. This interpassive object - as a mediator between oneself and the game-space - is thus a surrogate self that demands appropriate action or dialogue to avoid psychological problems; one's game score decreases when the program 'detects' feelings of anxiety or alienation in one's agent. Individual agency is extended into the game-space as one is required to act appropriately, according to the 'rules' of the 'game' and in response to dialogue with other agents (other players).

Proxy includes a role-playing section (a MUE/MOO-sphere) and an arcade-style battle-sphere. The role-play involves the endeavour of themed personae quests that range from curators to professors to students to hackers (a play on academia and the art world). As you take on a persona your psychological state - and consequently game score - fluctuates according to how well you communicate/role play with other agents in the space. If as a student you out-smart a professor then you do badly; normalisation gets rewarded. In the battle sphere information is ingested, exchanged and shot down by yourself or other agents. The familiar representational elements of battle by proxy are represented here with the added possibility of not only being able to shoot down information files in the form of geometric shapes - but also click on them to view their contents - ergodically orientating oneself in the space. As you browse the net your agent browses with you, ingesting context-relevant information of its own accord. Control over your symbolic stand-in is here denied; it acts autonomously, independent of your direct input. Your agency is no longer mediated through an interpassive object. As you sit back and watch,

the avatar as *surrogate* self becomes its *own* self – within the limits of the program - (based on your psychological profile). The habitual user/avatar relation is complicated, dismantled and re-defined as *Proxy* anarchically flip-flops between the interpassive and the ergodic. Its randomness challenges predetermined structures of interactivity and interpassivity, as your agent suddenly really *does* have a ‘life of its own’.[□]

So where does this leave the player? According to Nideffer “the Web’s function is shifting from being simply a graphical interface to variably encoded file structures to a mechanism for rendering agency by proxy.”^[6] Interpassivity emerges in a positive light if viewed not only as a means for emotion transferral/extension but also an opportunity for self-creation/editing/exploration by proxy (within the limits of one/many chosen programs). This reiterates Sherry Turkle’s vision of ‘a multiple but integrated identity’^[13], a vision that has here been reiterated through the filter of interpassivity. Interpassivity can be seen as the ground for a digital identity and agency, characterised by the ability to accommodate diversity. Agency is realised and strengthened by one becoming the author of one’s signifiers. To further evoke the concept of interpassivity I’d like to conclude with an image of a ‘cybernetic mirror stage’ of post-human development. Imagine, if you will, the screen in game and avatar scenarios as a mirror parallel to another mirror with oneself placed in the middle. An infinite number of *manipulable* selves in *masquerade* are displayed on either side through which the visual identification/realisation of a plurality of digital selves occurs... now you see one self, then you see another self, then you see another...

1. Aarseth, E.J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997.
2. Kroker, Arthur and Kroker Marilouise. Code Warriors: Bunkering in and Dumbing Down, in Bell, David, Kennedy, M. Barbara. *The Cybercultures Reader*. Routledge, London and New York, 2000, pp.96-103[□]
3. Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jaques Lacan Book vii: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1959-1960)*. Routledge, London, 1992
4. Little, Gregory. *A Manifesto for Avatars*. (1999) http://art.bgsu.edu/~glittle/ava_text_1.html Access: October 15 2002[□]
5. The experience of play sequences is broader than solely ‘interaction’ including the addition of “movie sequences, map screens, score or lap time feedback screens and son on” Newman, James. *The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame; Some Thoughts on Player-Character Relationships in Videogames*. <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/> Access: March 20 2003
6. Nideffer, Robert. “Manufacturing Agency: Relationally Structuring Community Information” in *AI and Society: The Journal of Human Centred and Machine Intelligence*. http://time.arts.ucla.edu/AI_Society/index.html Access: December 2002[□]
7. Rokeby, David. *Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media*. (July 1996) <http://www.interlog.com/~drokeby/mirrorsmirrors.html> Access; 29 March 2002[□]
8. Ross, Stuart. *UC Irvine Professor's Internet Art Included in Whitney Museum Biennial Exhibit*. <http://www.calit2.net/art/nideffer.html> Access: 20 May 2002[□]
10. Sarkis, Mona. Interactivity Means Interpassivity. in *Media Information Australia* (69, 1993) pp 13-14.[□]
11. Stallabrass, Julian. *Just Gaming*, (April 1993) <http://www.rochester.edu/College/FS/Publications/Stallabrass.html> Access: April 4 2002 [□]
12. Stone Rosanne Alluquere., Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary Stories About Virtual Cultures, in Bell, David, Kennedy, M. Barbara. *The Cybercultures Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, pp 504-528[□]
13. Turkle, Sherry. Who Am We? in Trend, David (ed). *Reading Digital Culture*. Blackwell, Massachusetts, 2001, 236-252
14. Zizek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. Verso, London, 1997, 105-115[□]
15. Zizek, Slavoj. *The Cyberspace Real: Between Perversion and Trauma*. <http://www.mii.kurume-u.ac.jp/~leuers/zizek-cyberspacereal.htm> Access: June 2 2001[□]