The Present Tense

by Sara Roberts

Essay for Catalogue for 'Programmed Presences'
Filmhouse, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1997

The Present Tense

I'd like to recommend a quick look at the present, which has been much ignored lately in favor of the future. The shortage of the present is particularly acute in computer culture where it seems everything will happen when the next model of the new system has an upgrade with better compression and faster throughput. Gertrude Stein said about her home town that there was no there, there. She would certainly observe, were she alive today and attending ComputerTradeshowX that there is no now, now. This lack of now in the computer world is ironic because whereas photography and film technology are, most literally, devices for re-presenting past moments, computers are important as engines which can make things happen in the present. It is this peculiar ability that I wish to call attention to in the current feverish search for non-linear, interactive narrative.

Interpassivity

Let's think a moment about the differences in how one experiences narrative in film and in interactive situations.

First, in film: you enter a theatre, sit down in a comfortable seat, the lights grow dim and for a long, wonderful interval you do not notice yourself at all, you are captivated in the time on the screen. Your body is parked in the seat, a conduit for laughter and tears but for the most part ignored, until the credits roll, the lights come up, you rejoin your physical self and walk out searching for your car keys ...

Now, in the case of an interactive gallery piece, you must walk around it, search for the stimulus which will activate it, wave your arms, make noise, look for pressure pads on the floor. Have you influenced it? Did you do the right thing? Did *it* do the right thing? Could it be that the piece is not functioning properly today? Are you getting it? It seems unlikely that a narrative can survive such anxiety.

As for desktop multimedia, it allows you the simplicity of sitting and watching a screen, and while you may briefly be allowed to lapse into the bliss of following a story, momentarily you will arrive at a juncture which requires your active attention. Just as you are becoming absorbed the ball is suddenly in your court and it is up to you ... to point and click, to search for the cleverly hidden exit from the present screen, to enter some morsel of text soon to turn up, turned around. In short you must keep your visceral wits about you.

Faced with the duties of interactive narrative one longs at times for interpassivity. The constant activity of interactivity is not conducive to a satisfying experience of narrative. Interactive narrative, for all its touted user

inclusion, is now predominantly modeled as perpetual narrative interruptus, the snatching away of the dream for the paltry pleasure of counterfeit control. There is in these attempts an implicit assumption that choice is the alluring factor in interactivity. Choice is what good consumers crave.

Presence

In the earlier part of this century it was a rare treat to see light play on the screen with dazzling verisimilitude to life, a luxurious experience in a movie palace amongst a myriad other thrilled audience members. But in the information age the silver screen has given way to the CRT ... we stare at a computer all day at work, go home and watch the tube, go to a cineplex and see a movie on a screen the size of a picture window. Screens are as common as pavement, the rarity is actual presence - personal appearance.

Let me come back round to the present, that particularly powerful moment for our animal selves. There is a charge, presence, that we attribute to those who share our time frame. We have a fundamental, probably primordial interest in detecting presence, in ascertaining the actuality or enjoying the illusion of a thing existing and acting in the present with us. Possibly the attraction to the situations and programs we call interactive is not for the choices they offer, but for the same reason that eighteenth century Europeans flocked to see automatons drawing pictures and playing instruments - for their uncanny sense of ambiguous presence.

The computer, in being an engine for making things happen in the present, lends itself well to forms of abbreviated presence such as chat rooms and CUSeeMe. It is less recognized as a tool for the representation of things that are presence-like: behavior, character, relationship... dynamics that exist, shifting and changing, in the present. It is in keeping track of these shifts and changes that the notion of narrative arises.

Early Programming

> "The opinions which we hold of each other, our relationships with friends and family, are in no sense permanent save in appearance, but are as eternally fluid as the sea itself."
>
> -Marcel Proust

For some time my work has been concerned with the characteristic back and forth of relationships: Proust's eternal fluidity. My earliest attempt at portraying a relationship was *Early Programming* (1988). This domestic tableau thrusts the visitor into the role of a child to whom a computer-generated mother speaks of typically motherly things. There is no attempt to disguise or soften the strangeness of having these very familiar and human

exchanges with a machine. On the contrary the machineness of the maternal protagonist is exaggerated, keeping the emotional button-pressing in these conversations at a slight remove. And still the situation highlights our tremendous capacity for animating the inanimate.

The visitor may choose from a menu of replies ranging from well-behaved to extremely insolent. The emotional tone of exchanges with this computer mother (MARGO) are affected, somewhat unpredictably, by MARGO's underlying mood cycle. Her "emotional engine", an algorithmic representation of some of my own childhood experience, determines what she says and her tone of voice, and is affected directly and cumulatively by the replies of the visitor/child. As a surrogate for facial expression there is an onscreen indicator that gets smaller and darker as her mood worsens, lighter and larger as she becomes more affectionate. There are various topics of discussion: finishing dinner, cleaning your room, practicing the piano, etc. that are introduced with short video clips at the computer's discretion.

When I ask people about their experience with the piece I typically hear a blow by blow account of how they've infuriated or delighted MARGO, how, over the course of the conversation she or they triumphed in some domestic struggle of the will. Funny and sad little narratives.

Elective Affinities

After that I wanted to portray a marriage. Fortunately, I was not married at the beginning of the project and was forced to seek material from extra-personal sources. In the early eighties I worked on the staff at Zoetrope Studios. There were persistent rumors of a film Francis Coppola wanted to make, adapted from some obscure novel. It had a strange title: 'Elective Affinities' ('Die Wahlverwandtschaften'). I found the book, a novella by none other than Johann Wolfgang Goethe.

Fascinated by chemistry, Goethe found a certain metaphorical resonance in the phenomenon of elective affinity - a chemical process in which two bonded elements can be torn apart by the appearance of a third element holding a greater chemical attraction for one of them. At the time he wrote the novella he was in his fifties, and had recently married the woman with whom he'd lived for fifteen years and had five children. Declaring himself, finally, a devoted convert to matrimony he wrote of the deplorable moral climate that tolerated such laxity as he had practiced. He then fell in love with the eighteen year old daughter of his publisher. The book, published in 1809, is a thorough, explicit, almost clinical analysis of a marriage entangled by outside interests - perfect material for my purposes.

The problem with 'Elective Affinities' was that it had a plot. The mother and child exchanges in 'Early Programming' had the advantage of being completely in the present tense. A plot complicated matters with a time-line. After fooling around with various elaborate scenarios I finally put the four characters in a car together - an effective limbo situation, nearly stopping time altogether. Then, by giving them a constant internal monologue, the visitor could have the ability to overhear their thoughts, memories and fantasies, which in combination contain the gist of the plot.

The central relationship of the book is between a married couple, Edward and Charlotte, who, in this contemporary adaptation, are an affluent couple building a country house. They have just been out to the property with their landscape contractor, Otto, a longtime friend of Edward's, and Ottilie, who assists Charlotte with her catering business. Now, on the way home, they have all fallen silent. They are thinking about the conversation and sexual innuendo that went on that afternoon.

As they think, each of them experiences shifts of confidence and mood which greatly affect how they interpret the afternoon's events. Furthermore, while riding in the car they exchange glances with each other, which can cause confidence to rise and fall, moods to grow dark or ebullient. By standing back and watching them the visitor can see the dynamic between them changing. By coming close to one of them you can hear the character think to him or herself about what's going on. There is a strong, almost embarrassing intimacy to overhearing their thoughts. Being thoughts, they are often things that one would never say out loud.

All this is generated by four networked computers, digital descendants of the eighteenth century automatons. Rather than being driven by clockwork the tenor of their thoughts is controlled by a program, an emotional engine. The program cycles from mood to mood, calling up appropriate thoughts and facial expressions, occasionally sending or receiving a glance which is communicated to the others by means of a local network. When one character glances at another a message is sent to the receiver of the glance with information about who glanced at them and the current mood of that character. The mood of the character receiving the glance is adjusted accordingly.

The characters interact only with each other, the visitor does not affect them in any way except that standing close to a character will make the character speak more loudly... so *Elective Affinities* is perhaps best described as auto-interactive (no pun intended). The visitor is a fly on the wall, or the windshield, in this case. Only by being completely inconsequential can we be privy to the thoughts of these characters. If we could affect them it would be quite another relationship.

The thoughts that these characters speak as well as their videotaped expressions, staring out the car windows, were recorded, each actor separately, throughout the Fall of '94 in various studios in the San Francisco Bay Area. But the activity taking place in the car, the glancing back and forth, the moods, the changing relationship between them, is a shape shifting, a story being generated as you read these words.

Sara Roberts (1955), Artist, interactive sculpture and installations; Director, Integrated Media Program, California Institute of the Arts, Los Angeles.