From Maulbertsch to MMORPGs.
On Digital Cross-Media Entertainment

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Of Sky Patrons and Sky Patrols

A person familiar with the Star Wars trilogy and currently hooked to the remake of „Battleship Galactica" may feel curiously attracted and at the same time puzzled when entering one of the grandiose baroque interiors, many of which can be found in Bavaria, Austria and Hungary, whose ceilings are decorated with elaborate celestial landscapes. The sheer exuberance of the visual display of imaginary cosmic interaction has no match in contemporary architecture, but it may well be regarded as akin to recent science fiction scenarios, not to mention the facts of real life digital warfare. As far as iconographic conventions are concerned, Jupiter and Superman are reasonably close relatives. Yet, on the other hand, centuries divide those exquisite showcases of church and nobility from pop culture.

It takes an effort at de-familiarization to realize the joyfull ontological promiscuity in evidence in baroque frescoes. Consider Franz Maulbertsch's magnificent design for the Károly Esterházy College's chapel in Eger. At first it might strike you as a phantasmagoria of light, color and clouds, amply populated by airborne entities of mythological origin. But this is just part of the picture. Closer inspection reveals an intriguing interdependence of make-belief and realism.

The Hungarian coat of arms is prominent, as well as a host of liturgical paraphrenalia and ceremonial equipment. A council meeting is in session, contemporary scientific instruments are on display. This „Welttheater" includes religion, history, politics and even science to achive a spectacular artistic synthesis in an exalted public space. Soon afterwards conditions changed. The French revolution triggered the fall of the aristocracy, whereas industrial technology provided the means for humans to actually fly, turning the baroque visions into a disempowered elite's nostalgia. Yet, this is only half the story.

Cinema has taken the place of manufactured dreams and – more recently – digital cameras have put the power of audio-visual showmanship into the hands of ordinary users. Science fiction movies, Batman, Supergirls and Spiderman show celestial spaces populated with heroes, villains and any kind of sophisticated, multipurpose wizardry. Pop culture seems to be heavily affected by pre-modern iconography. Consumer electronics allows people to capture and modify the visual surface of master exhibits of our „cultural heritage“. Experimental video art often uses the same equipment to explore the conventions of image-production in modern media society. A case in point is Thomas Binder's „TAUII“, a video based on the fresco adorning the Eger chapel. It is impressive because of its startling approach towards the paintings appearance. Thomas Binder's video shatters cinematic conventions. It's components are cut-outs from the painting, performing a wild dance in a dynamic animated space as they bump into each other, dissolve and re-emerge to the accompaniment of a throbbing rhythm. Baroque complacency is exchanged for techno-dynamics. The artist offers a contemporary response to the challenge of the European architectural tradition.

And yet, in a way Thomas Binder's achievement is thoroughly tradtional and does not address the most provocative developments in the realm of virtual expolarions of space. The point is simple. All the dancing daemons displayed before our eyes are put into their orbit once and forever in a cinematic display. There is no way for a viewer to influence the developing spectacle; this much is unchanged from the 17th century. Digital entertainment, however, offers a new option. Imagine that you could control the king and his entourage as they inhabit the representational space. This is precisely what networked games on the internet allow you to do. And some of them are precisely power demonstrations in the sky. „City of Heroes“ is a socalled „massive multiuser online roleplaying game“ based on the scenario of a virtual township endangered by all kinds of evil creatures and to be rescued by avatars operated by participants on the net. A comic book and films serve to introduce the setting, linking back to more familiar modes of representation. A rainbow, in fact, serves more or less the same purpose in Bavaria's Wies Kirche and the City of Heroes brochure.

But this continuity is broken the moment a prospective user is invited to pick her „character",
including its outfit, capacities and operative functions.

At this moment one enters into a world of technologically mediated, playful, social collaboration. The
representational medium is turned into a stage for avatars of real life persons to act out a drama of
their own choosing. Instead of being *impressed* by a showpiece they are *immersed* into an environment
that demands constant attention as it essentially consists of inputs from the governing program plus
challenges from fellow participants sharing the game environment. There is no novelty *per se*,
everything has to be put in context to be at all comprehensible. One might think of a TV show that
hinges on phone-in from the audience. A closer inspection of the underlying logic of interactive digital
coordination is in order.

The Architecture of Immersion

Interactivity has been a feature of artistic production since antiquity. Live performances are easily
open to audience response but a related motive can also be observed in texts which address their
readers or in pictures which take the habits of the beholder into account. Baroque designs are, in fact,
well known for their attemptsto draw the spectator into the depicted universe. It is against this
background that the novelty of online gaming has to be assessed. Let us start with an example of well-
established audience-participtation, namely the European song contest on TV. This is an entertainment
program which turns on the suspense of who is going to win a competition. This much is similar to
movie narratives or to the reporting of sport events. The difference, of couse, is the particular decision-
making arrangement: those very viewers who tune in to see the show are invited to determine its
outcome. It's not just that the line between the modrators in the studio and the viewers is crossed as it
regularly happens in live reporting. The crucial feature is the representational closure of the format.
Hurricanes or bomb alerts can pop up anytime – the European sond contest is carefully staged as a
ritual culminating in a final resolution which, as it were, is in the hands of those who watch for the
pleasure (and pain) of learning the outcome.

One might regard this show as a very primitive role playing game with national audiences taking the
part of fans for their respective representatives and deciding their fate by simple telephone messages.
„City of Heroes", by contrast, is certainly much more sophisticated. Instead of the broadcast studio
environment it offers a computer generated virtual world for all its participants. It is populated by
avatars of every single player and it consists in arbitrarily many scenarios representing city life and
strife. Given these details there is, in fact, no point in all the participants adhering to a single narrative.
There is a wide variety of options availsable for exploring the genral framework defined by the game
engine. These refinements might be regarded as quantitative differences, still comprehensible within
the paradigm of a real life agent occasionally crossing over into an artificial world. And entering „City
of Heroes" as a beginner actually feels like attempting one's first steps on an unfamiliar stage. But this
account is missing a crucial feature.

Viewers can affect the course of events of a TV show, they cannot change the immmediate sensual
appearance of the production. They lack physical control of their delegates. Networked computer
games allow their players to bodily determine the behavior of their avatars in a realm of shared
representation. (It's really just an extension of what everyone is doing when using a „mouse".) In
addition to an observer's phantasies, intentions and judgements impinging on the representation of a
world, her primary neurological reflexes can be tapped into in order to shape an artificial environment.
Here is a sketch of the feedback loop:
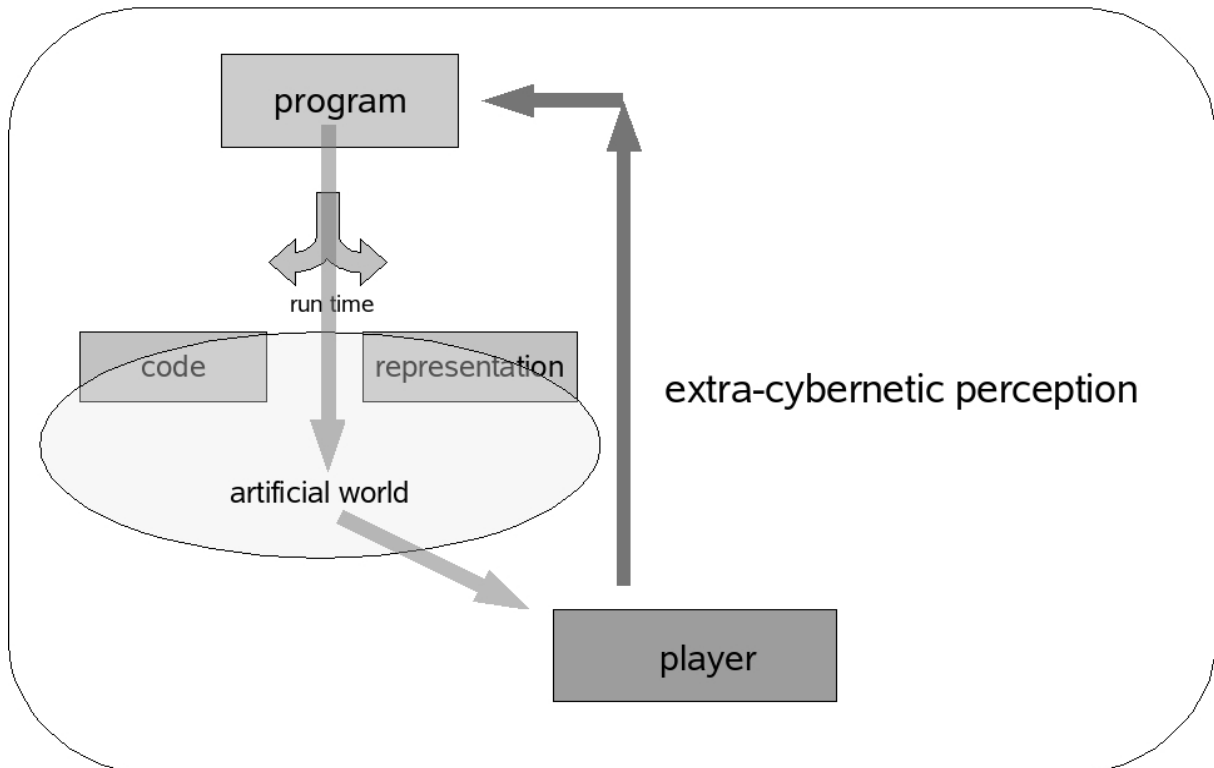
The general representational structure shown here is quite familiar. We are not talking about avantgarde experiments. Yet, there is a crucial arrangement distinguishing online games from their predecessors. Cinema is built on moving pictures, i.e. machines which operate in real time. Computer generated environments are implemented at „run time" which can be synchronized with ordinary human behavior. The bodily movement of a game's participants can, in particular, be regarded as inputs to be directly fed into the very world those participants perceive and act upon.

Success at soccer depends on a player's ability to anticipate and to preempt his opponents movements. A game of poker demands similar guess-work as to one's partner's intentions. The distinguishing mark of the particular feedback we are considering is that „run time", in this case, does not mean a real life temporal sequence, but rather refers to the electronic cycles an computer runs through and which *may* – by additional provisions – be synchronized with an agent's biorythm. A medical device can detect a failure of the cardiac system and automatically intervene. Or, as is the case in representational contexts, the rules governing the construction of a symbolic universe may include algorithms that can be triggered by sentient observers of the artificial world. The novelty of this cybernetic loop can be caught in the following anomaly: observation is directly transformed to actions changing the observational setting. It is if snipping your finger turns a table into a fridge. To put it differently: electronic circuits give rise to games that offer the opportunity to hook into the system of ordinary sense perception and explore – as well as exploit – its functions.

In one way this seems like a decisive triumph of tele-communications. A signal transmitted has been turned into an operative force, shaping the environment *emitting* signals. Thomas Binder's video seems a decorative nicety compared to the prospect of triggering change in cyberspace by involving oneself in sophisticated, audio-visual renderings of celestial narratives. There is, however, a serious drawback. The cybernetic feedback we have been exploring is inherently autistic. There is a price to be paid for linking the qualities of objects perceived to the whim of perception: such qualities are usually thought to be accessible to – and underwritten by – shared practices of a group of agents. Arbitrarily changing sense impressions are often taken as illusions. Entrapped in a clever mirrot setup a person lacks corrective outside information and can be short-circuited into a deceptive double bind. This objection

provokes an obvious reply. „Massivly multi-player" games are obviously designed to arbitrate between all those bio-bubbles cruising e.g. the city locations. Such globally distributed social phantasies are a characteristic synthesis of an apparatus of individual control and the control of individuals by further individuals and ultimately by the masters of the artificial world. This does not stop the argument, though, because the question now becomes: What kind of information exchange takes place between monadic entities enmeshed in a universe which is ultimately governed by an equilibrium calculus more or less cleverly set up to manage the enorrmous amount of data fed into the system. One may conjecture that there is no Leibnizian optimization procedure available.

Feedback Politics

I have been presenting a rather linear development starting from bygone splendor, touching upon media technologies of the previous century and ending up with the most recent, ultrafast and widely distributed implementation of imaginative, social aeronautical mobility. Something has been lacking in this account: the point of the exercise is not to move ones fingers in sync with some data source. The sequence of shapes on the monitor has to be embedded in meaning, for otherwise it will be just random flickers, incomprehensible to the individual and even stranger to a group of players. Now, at this juncture of my report, the suggestion of progress is eclipsed by a more somber prospect. It has to be admitted that the „City of Heroes" is basically a place of infantile posturing and shootouts. Mutants, daemons and villains are constantly threatening the inhabitants which derive their pleasure by exploring dangerous neighborhooda heavily armed and ready for a kill. I do not mean to be condescending or enter into a critique of this genre of entertainment, but one thing seems clear: the type of game we are considering combines some very advanced technology with a most atavistic set of mind. There is no civil progress on the part of the players. And, to make things worse, a main reason for the open-ended slaughter on display is closely linked to the very achievements praised before.

The question is: What kind of community will arise if you build virtual encounters on audio-visual imputs triggering response loops determined by instinct? Language as a means of expression and as a mediating inter-cultural force does only play a marginal role in this kind of battlefield. If people are deprived of a vocabulary to express their attitudes and restricted to their most basic bodily gestures chances are that they will resort to sex and violence. A globalized game engine exploiting immediate cros—networ interventions controlled by manipulating a joystick will most likely be used to support a dramatic saga of destruction, death and survival, all of them depending on the skills of an adolescent rapid reaction expert. Given the short circuit between individual bodily movement and the social aggregation of stimulus-response patterns on a global scale, the idea to juxtapose Maulbertsch and MMORPGs seems ludicrous. Pervasive Surveillance of citizens by government agencies is a fact. Secret service agencies are known to employ all the ressources of the network. Regarded in this light „City of Heroes" might well appear as a case of the Stockholm syndrome. Having been taken hostage we now dutifully adapt our spare time to celebrate the violence we are subjected to.

The dilemma I have developed, pitting old-time artistic and contemporary martial renderings of celestical power against each other is in fact a more genral one. Theoretical discouse on telecommunication technologies takes place in beautiful buildings, some of them decorated with exquisite paintings, and it purports to come to terms with an entirely different universe, consisting if selfregulating, consumer-induced data-flows. Academic work on internet society sometimes reminds me of the decorative ceiling of libraries, compared to massive multi-villain exploits, not to mention the bottomless depth of trivialities and vanities we have newly gained access to an the net. Making sense of the present state of telecommunications is, after all, an enterprise not entirely different from bridging the divide between the reign of Helios and the City of Heroes. I close with an observation concerning the baroque heritage and a thought about current politics.

A tacit premise has been underlying my line of argument. It might be called the tourism presumption. Only if one assumes modern, post-bourgois society and informal access to the locations of erstwhile exclusion those „works of art" can appear as magnificent showpieces quasi exempted from their social

setting. Taking into account their context of origin, one quickly realizes that they depend upon and give expression to a highly prominent power structure, including an absolute monarchy, its feudal underpinnings and the concomitant complicity of the church. Many complaints against the decay of civilization are therefore missguided. I hesitate the thesis that one of the principal aims of baroque frescoes was to impress their viewers immediately, no questions asked, by sheer visual splendor. The most advances machinery to evoke awe and delight was used for this purpose. Present day secularized air traffic, metaphorical and literal, certainly lacks style, but one should think twice before turning this into an argument in favor of aristocracy. For theoretical discourse, which usually sides with its sponsors, to belittle the enjoyment of the masses seems itself to be a case of bad taste to me.

Where does that leave us? The crucial change we have been examining is the introduction of networked social feedback mechanisms into the domain of representational transactions. Games are a suitable starting point, but the implications are obviously far reaching. Our political system is built upon electing representatives and accountability towards their electoral base is a permanent matter of concern. The term „feedback" is commonly used in a cybernetic or a more conversational sense and I regard it as an aim of philosophical investigations to clarify both the affinities and discrepancies between those uses. Let me briefly explain by showong two pictures.

The imagery of these examples comes from the Middle Ages, but both are in actual use. Exhibit 1 is taken from „City of Heroes", it might be your avatar. The second man in knightly armor comes from a more traditional context. A 19th century statue of a watchman adorns the top of Vienna's city hall. The guardian has obviously been redesigned according to the needs of audience-response strategies. He is no longer the self-contained keeper of peace but a symbolic invitation to enter into the orbit of the communities life and services. The city council is actively eliciting the passer-by's feedback.

The smiling, thumbs-up, knight is a vivid reminder of the precarious nature of contermporary politics. Democracy is built upon bidirectional information lflows within a representational system. For a major city this amounts to a complicated arrangement of interests and agents, mixed up in numerous smaller groups. It is most often impossible to reduce this complexity to the logistics of warfare and rapid data-transfer – yet we are being sold on decision-making a la City of Heroes. Air control is a prominent case, think of New York 2001 and New Orleans 2005. It takes some knowledge of history, a sense of art and an analysis of network interactivity to confront the next epiphany.