What / When / How is Participation in Digital Arts and Media?

Panel Discussion

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INTRODUCTION

"Participation" is the central organizing principle and goal of participatory design. However, as the variety of artworks selected for the *ParticipArt* program of PDC '06 clearly demonstrate, there are nearly as many ideas about participation – what it is, who does it, where and how it happens – as there are artists, designers, and participants.

Broadly speaking, participatory design in the context of digital arts and media ranges along a spectrum of forms and approaches. Some designers create conceptual frameworks or digital environments and then invite others to contribute or act within them. Others organize environments or events that are subsequently created and extended by the joint action of participants and designers. Some of these environments exist completely in the virtual world while others represent augmentation of natural settings and public spaces.

The definition of participation in the context of systems and media design is a moving target. Therefore, the aim of this round table discussion is to question and examine the nature, significance, and necessity of participation in today's diverse, pervasively-mediated cultures. We will discuss how such participation is proposed and played out in genres as disparate as artworks, games and consumer product design, and think about the future of designing for participation.

TOPICS

Key issues that the round table will consider are:

The nature of participation in new and digital media

- What new resources for participation do new media and digital technologies offer that more traditional media such as painting, theatre, or film might not?

- Many artists working in new media make a distinction between software design and media arts design. What do we mean by design? What is common, and where do the paths diverge?

- Are there significant distinctions to be made between visual / aural / haptic or other forms of participation? If there is a limiting factor, is the limit in the technological platform or human capacity?

- Is there a difference between participation in an art project by individuals (or individuals acting sequentially) and participation by groups acting together? Are there limiting factors to simultaneity?

- What is the place of playfulness, humor or irony in new participatory artworks?

How is participation in art projects developed?

- Who proposes participation in an art project?

- How are participants invited to become engaged in an art project? Are there particular forms of invitation that create problems or misunderstandings?

Participation in creating the work

- If "non-artists" participate in creating a work, does that challenge the idea of "creative authorship?" What is the role of the "artist"? Can any participatory art work be "owned?"

- Is there a difference between collaboration and participation? Or are they just points across a spectrum?

- Participation in the consumption/reception of the work

- What differences are there between interaction and participation? How might we define them?

- How do we guide participants through the process of participation in an art work? What are the elements of navigation and how can we convey the logic of interaction? Can guidance or instruction be seen as separate from the project itself or does it have to be "built into" the design of the artwork?

- What is the difference between a project where participation has a rules-based style (such as a game) and one that is more open-ended (such as environments) and where the rules, if any, are not transparent?

- How can we convey feedback to participants?

- What differences are there between what people see/hear/understand of the work as participants and the overview that creators see/hear/understand?

The significance of participation
- Does art work change because "non-artists" or participants formerly unknown to the initiating artist engage in it?

- Does the participatory process change the work over time? If so, how does it change?

Supporting participation
- What are the cultural concerns – such as nationality, gender, education, technical access etc. -- that should be addressed to support effective or pleasurable participation in an artwork?

CONCLUSION

This round-table session will bring together artists who are exhibiting at PDC 2006, those who have participated in planning the art track, and the wider conference community. We hope to engage in a stimulating exploration of the nature of participation in digital arts and media.