

Editorial:

On the Essential Nature of Conciseness

Patrick Lichty

In my experience as an artist, writer, and curator of technological art, one of the largest challenges that faces the genre of new media is for it (i.e. new media art) and its practitioners to communicate to an audience in a clear and concise fashion. Let's be honest; the field of art is a cultural niche that is frequently misunderstood by society as a weekend hobby or singularly self-involved enterprise, and new media is a subset of that already small world. Given that technologically-based art is slowly entering the mainstream, it is still by no means fully integrated into the larger art world at this point. New media art is not widely understood within its own environments of the museum and gallery, and casual onlookers have often commented that they did not understand many pieces due to the fact that they were not overly familiar with computer technology. Furthermore, a review of an exhibition of digital art contained the advice that the patrons should avoid the artists at all costs, as not only do they practice art speak, they are also computer geeks, and thus completely incomprehensible.

Perhaps this point is overstated, but the issue here is that, if the genre of new media and technological arts in general is to flourish, clear communication skills are essential to convey the ideas we want to offer to our audience. This may seem like a very basic idea, but I'm still amazed at the number of occasions, including my own presentations, where any possible connection with the audience has been obscured by the use of imprecise communications or reliance on overly technical terms.

This is not a call for a common American 'dumbing-down' of the ideas that are being conveyed. I believe that one of the great scientific practitioners (either Penrose or Feynman) once wrote that the gist of any concept should be able to be related clearly to a freshman undergraduate student. In fact, one of the greatest scholars I have ever known had the uncanny knack of being able to illustrate the most complex trains of thought with amazingly straightforward language. This is not to say that this must be done in all forums at all times. More technically oriented language is entirely suitable in forums like SIGGRAPH or ISEA, where

the demographics allow for it, and in many circumstances, practitioners may need to create specific vocabularies to express nascent and developing concepts specific to a given time, place and context. These instances are outside the scope of this discussion; the point under scrutiny is communication with larger audiences.

A number of well-known new media artists have given brilliant presentations only to learn that through the use of unfamiliar terminology, the audience was all but alienated. Again, to use such language in front of audiences not intimately acquainted with the subject is at most requiring them to perform an undue amount of back research, and on the part of the new media practitioner is a failure to address an audience. The ability to do this is a fundamental skill taught in any freshman university public speaking course.

If new media is going to be understood by a wider audience, bridges have to be built between 'our world' and the public in order to create greater interest and acceptance. The burden of this public advocacy of new media through clarity and access falls upon its best known practitioners (the Kacs, Ascotts, Hershmanns, Stelarcs et al.), as they are the most visible proponents of the genre. It's regrettable that in many cases, mid-level 'stars' of new media have not progressed to a point where these communications hurdles have been overcome.

Don't get me wrong, I believe it is essential to explore new vocabularies to describe the ways in which new media artists express themselves. For these new vocabularies -- and even localized ones -- meaning might be constrained to a very specific time, place, and context. However, if new media is to gain wider acceptance in the general public, the new media (research) community and the audience as a whole have to be further connected. It is almost solely through bridges of communication created by works and texts, that the ideas intrinsic to new media will be disseminated to the greater public. To neglect the importance of this communication aspect causes a great disservice to colleagues and the larger (art) community as a whole.