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onscreen - media art

Gaming: everybody's doing it

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There are times, I suspect, when we've all felt a serendipitous synchronicity, when everything we encounter seems somehow oddly connected in ways we'd never anticipate. My participation in this year's Digital Arts and Culture (DAC) conference was one such moment. And the point of coalescence, surprisingly, centred on 'the game.' Everywhere I look at the moment people are making or playing or talking about gaming.

I say 'surprisingly' because gaming has registered only a minor blip on my cultural radar. Aside from a spell of pub time-wasting playing Galaga and Space Invaders in the 80s, a minor obsession with Super Nintendo platform games like Donkey Kong and Super Mario Bros and the occasional family game of Scrabble or Monopoly, the obsession with games has passed me by.

Computer games are, of course, a multi-billion dollar business. According to the Financial Review (May 20, 2003) sales of games hardware and software in Australia leapt by 31% last year to \$825 million. This report predicts that online gaming will grow nearly 50% each year for the next few years, with US revenue climbing to \$US 1.8 billion in 2005 from \$US 210 million last year and UK research firm, In-Stat/MDR believes the market will be worth \$US 2.8 billion worldwide by 2006. There is no question that the gaming industry is having an impact on the financial sector. The impact on academics and cultural critics appears somewhat more muted.

Many presenters at Melbourne DAC, however, were very interested in the effect that gaming is having on digital arts and culture. The conference theme, "Streaming Worlds", was intended to attract participation from a broadly cultural palette, yet more than half the papers reflected in some way on games and gaming.

In particular, the Scandinavian conference delegates seem to spend an inordinate amount of time immersed in the world of Everquest, a game that allows for the simultaneous participation of 500,000 players. Their interest in gaming is not surprising given that Scandinavian, Espen Aarseth, the keynote speaker at this year's event, was the first chair of the Digital Arts and Culture conference series. Aarseth also runs the recently established Center for Computer Games Research at the IT University in Copenhagen.

In his keynote address, "Playing Research: Methodological approaches to game analysis", Aarseth was quick to indicate that computer games research, as a nascent field of inquiry, is somewhat underdeveloped and under-theorised. This was evident from many papers presented on the topic, which bordered on description rather than

analysis. It was often difficult to see how research into computer games was substantially different from well established sociological and psychological approaches to gaming of all kinds, not just those on computers.

The conference format contributed to the paucity of detailed analysis. All papers were made available to conference participants (and are still available at <http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/> - no longer online) to be read before attending the sessions. Presenters were then only allowed 15 minutes to talk to their papers. Both audience and speakers struggled with these constraints. Conferences, however, are far more important for allowing people to socialise and this was the real strength of DAC which provided plenty of opportunities for delegates to network.

There's also a tradition within DAC of bringing together artists and theorists to encourage and support the development and discussion of creative digital art. +playengines+, held at Experimedia in the State Library of Victoria and supported by the Digital Arts and Culture conference, was curated by Antoanetta Ivanova of Novamedia Arts. The exhibition featured 24 Australian and international works, opening in tandem with DAC.

This was the first exhibition of its kind in the new Experimedia Project space, an extraordinary area fashioned from the former exterior of the old Museum of Victoria. The original bluestone of the old museum forms one feature wall and the space is dominated by a large wall-mounted plasma screen and a specially commissioned sculpture by local media artists Martine Corompt and Ian Haig.

Most works featured in the exhibition have already exhibited elsewhere: notably Troy Innocent's Semimorph, the Lycette Bros' Not my Type IV, Mark Amerika's Filmtex, Kate Richards and Ross Gibson's Life After Wartime, Stuart Moulthrop's Pax, Mez Breeze's [ad]dressed in a skin code_, and Michelle Glaser, Andrew Hutchinson and Marie-Louise Xavier's Juvenate. However, the proximity of the exhibition to the public spaces of the library meant many audience members were exposed to this kind of work for the first time.

Here lies the greatest strength of the exhibition and, more generally, Experimedia. Rather than attempting to attract a sometimes bemused public to a gallery to view new media art, Experimedia and +playengines+ placed the works in the path of a public who may not ordinarily visit other gallery spaces, therefore attracting a new audience. Elderly people wandered over, taking a break from their genealogical research; students tired of studying; families passing through and itinerant readers and writers of all varieties mixed with conference delegates and artists. This gave the exhibition and the space a real sense of vibrancy, adding to an already successful conference.

Melbourne DAC, 5th International Digital Arts and Culture Conference, RMIT, Melbourne, May 19-23; +playengines+, Experimedia, curator Antoanetta Ivanova, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, May 19-June 23

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