
Un autre coup de des
Multimedia and the game paradigm

By Darren Tofts

A century ago the great French symboliste Stephane Mallarme published his remarkable concrete poem Un Coup de Des (“A throw of the dice”). Mallarme’s poem was a dramatic experiment, an attempt to materialize his interests in chance and indeterminacy in the physical, typographical layout of the printed page. He succeeded, and Un Coup de Des has retained its edge in the face of impressive longevity, holding its own against the deconstructionist typography of graphic designers such as David Carson. Un Coup de Des was in part a response to changing ideas about poetry and poetics, particularly in relation to the technology of the printed page. The [age, as a representational field, was forced to yield new expressive possibilities under the strain of Mallarme’s inventive interpretation of the relationship between words, space and time. In his preface to the original Cosmopolis edition, Mallarme reflected on the way in which his technique dispersed, rather than transgressed, established ways of operation. Dispersal has become a focal theme in discussion of contemporary poetics, especially in relation to new media arts. Mallarme’s interest in the game of hasard, or throwing dice, as a way forward for poetics, finds uncanny relevance in our own fin de siecle, a period in which an emergent art form, multi-media, is also defining itself in relation to traditional art within multi-media art, too, many of the traditional forms of representation are being dispersed, rather than broken or superseded, opened up to the extended potential of virtual, networked space. Un Coup de Des caused quite a sensation when it was published in 1897. I’d like to think that multi-media art has the capacity to inspire in its users the same degree of excitement as that felt by Mallarme’s disciple, the poet Paul Valery, when he first saw the poem: It seemed to me that I was looking at the form and pattern of a thought, placed for the first time in finite space. Here space itself truly spoke, dreamed, and gave birth to temporal forms. Expectancy, doubt, consternation, all were visible things.... There amid murmurs, insinuations, visual thunder, a whole spiritual tempest carried page by page to the extremes of thought, to a point of ineffable rupture – there the marvel took place, there on the very paper some indescribable scintillation of final stars trembled infinitely pure in an inter-conscious void... I was struck dumb by this unprecedented arrangement. (1)

Multi-media criticism has yet to reach such sublime heights, but it’s very early days yet. However the idea of chance and indeterminacy as an underlining poetic for multi-media art is attractive and appropriate. The semiotic principle of multi-media, connectionist programming, allows for, and indeed maximises those elements of surprise and unpredictability that so impressed Verley. But unpredictability, as part of the creative process as well as the aesthetic experience, is nothing new to the arts. The kind of logic that has come to be associated with digital media is something with which we are already very unfamiliar, especially within the avant-garde arts. (2)

Our engagement with interactives is driven by the cybernetic principle of feedback, the ability of the program to respond to external input, assess those interactions, and precipitate further action on the basis of this information. Feedback, generally, assumes memory of expected outcomes within certain situations. But it also takes into account conditions of unpredictability, the assumption that information received in unexpected or new situations will yield an actual performance based entirely on that information. This behavioural contract between the responsive ecology of the computer and the agency of the user recapitulates something else with which we are familiar, the structures of games and game play; that is, two participants competing with each other strategically within a framework of contingencies. Games are dialectical in that roles are determined around the competitive dynamic of crating/overcoming obstacles that precede the achievement of a goal or outcome. They are effectively a battle for control of the flow of information, or misinformation, as the case may be. The strategies deployed within a game playing environment involve process of adjustment and readjustment, strategic responses to the actions of an opponent. Taken together, these features of control and feedback indicate that games also fit under the general rubric of cybernetics, the science of control and communication within organic and inorganic systems. The first theorist of game theory, as it applies to the activities of “computing machines”, was Norbert Wiener. Cybernetics, as Wiener developed the idea in the 1940s, was a hybrid discipline, drawing

only in part on differential switching and the theory of messages. More conspicuously, Wiener's work took great inspiration from the linguistics of Roman Jakobson and the game theory of John von Neumann. Von Neumann's Theory of Games was an influential text for Wiener, and can be read as the principle intertext of his *Cybernetics: Or control and Communication in the animal and the machine* (1948). Von Neumann's game theory helped Wiener crystallize his central notion of entropy, and the battle to control its increase within natural systems and constructed environments. The second law of thermodynamics dictates that entropy, within any closed system, such as the universe or the human body, is always on the increase (closed systems lose energy and wind down without external input). Wiener made the radical assumption that most human activity was, in one way or another, an attempt to minimise the forces of entropy. Game theory provided him with the metaphor to figure all human activity as a type of contest, an attempt to overcome resistance or keep adversarial forces at bay through the use of strategy. From a cybernetic point of view, human life was a game played against a fierce competitor, and an activity such as eating breakfast was the opening gambit in our quotidian struggle with entropy. Wiener learned from Von Neumann that game theory was a structuralist discipline and could be applied to all social and cultural phenomena. Its principle tenet involved the notion of players, or arrangements of players, who develop a strategic approach to achieving certain ends, against specific forces or odds pitted against them. In applying cybernetics to linguistics, for example, Wiener saw that this isometric process of pressure and resistance could be used to account for the way that language works. Speech was essentially a cybernetic event, a struggle for control within communication between talkers and listeners, both battling the force of confusion and misunderstanding. Understanding, the accurate communication of a meaning between players, was for Wiener not a qualitative achievement in itself, but a curtailing of entropy, a measurement of the degree to which misunderstanding has not prevailed. To complicate matters further, players within language games could consciously jam communications, thereby adding the dimension of strategy to the dramatic contest to control the flow of meaning. Mallarmé's dice-throwing is once again instructive in this context. The complete title of the poem, *Un Coup de Des Jamais N'abolira Le Hasard* ("A throw of the dice will never abolish chance") suggests the futility of attempting to control contingency, to overcome chance. Words scatter and bounce hither and thither across the page, resisting hierarchy and syntactical protocols. In this way the poem is a powerful enactment of the lay of meaning as something fugitive, dispersed. Reading Mallarmé is a game, a contest to wrest meaning from meaninglessness; a game that many Post Modern readers still fail to win. Reading has always been a game played in the name of closure, a contest to locate meaning against the forces of entropy (meaninglessness) or superfluity (excess). A text like *Un Coup de Des* is an important frame of reference within a discussion of new media arts because it exemplifies the ways in which so-called linear media (books) have struggled to extend beyond the confines of their apparatus. Janet Murray, in her *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), describes the ways in which certain experimental narratives broke loose of their boundaries, "like a two-dimensional picture trying to burst out of its frame"(3). Murray demonstrates how the multiform literary texts of writers such as Borges and Calvino stretched the limits of the technology of the book, and precipitated the need for a technology like the computer to capture "cascading permutations" of story-line (4). Murray offers a convincing argument for the continued need to think of interactives as narrative situations, story spaces shaped by narrative structure, and made intelligible by the exercise of assumptions concerning narrative. In other words, narrative is very much one of the rules of the game in multi-media indeed, narrative is structured like a game, with rules that are known, in advance, by artist and audience alike). The way in which users of interactives seek to overcome obstacles, solve puzzles and succeed in quests, is evidence of the continued drive of the will to narrative within the new representational spaces made available by digital media. The pursuit of narrative is, more often than not, the *Aradne's* thread that enables us to successfully navigate a world such as *Myst*. Or, from a cybernetic point of view, narrative is the means by which a player controls the increase in entropy, the forces of confusion which frustrate us at every failed attempt to make something happen in that static world. *Myst* is, in fact, a wonderful example of a closed system, a world in which nothing happens without external input. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck* Murray has assembled a Propp-like inventory of fundamental game structures, all of which revolve around the theme of the agon, or contest between opponents (the same economy as identified by Wiener in relation to cybernetics). This pattern of struggle and reconciliation, derived from the classical archetype of Daedalus and the Minotaur, finds expression in a range of scenarios such as the quest (*King's Quest*), the puzzle (*The seventh Guest*), the maze (*Zork*), combat (*Doom*), and the exploration of an unfamiliar world (*Myst*). Murray is one of the first critics to offer such a structuralist

critique of the array of available interactives. As with literary works, she finds that there is also considerable overlap, and any single work may contain several or all of these scenarios. It is through this interweaving of different story types that multi-media offers the potential to reconcile the tired, default opposition between the exploratory and reflective experience of literature and the adrenaline charged impact of video-arcade-style digital media. Murray refers to these experiments in a new medium as electronic juvenilia, the digital equivalent of the first books, or incunabula' that is, works of a technology in its infancy, in this case the "narrative computer" (5)

They are historically important in that they combine and synthesize the contemplative, temporal aspect of narrative and the intense, sustained presence of electronic games. A bit like reading *Un Coup de Des*, really. A good, illustrative example of this type of work (though one not discussed by Murray) is the Residents' *Bad Day on the Midway* (Inscape, 1995). Described by the Residents as an "anti-game", involving an anti-hero, *Bad Day on the Midway* is a highly self-conscious exploration of the game as agon, as strife-ridden interaction between malevolent adversary and good-natured opponent. Like a novel, the world of the *Midway* is directed by characters and their stories. It is decidedly more in the manner of the later Henry James, William Faulkner and James Joyce, than George Eliot or Jane Austen. There is no over-arching narrative point of view, but rather a promiscuous, peripatetic series of centres of consciousness, through which the player can vicariously move from one to the other, building up a collagic, polyphonic view of an entire world of motivation and subterfuge. The integrity of the world of the *midway* and our sensation within it as an apparent reality, or time-space continuum, is heightened by the principle of feedback. Choices made by the player have an actual bearing on the unfolding of events, unlike the hokey, pseudo-choices of games such as *s Quantum Gate*, which simply activate a pre-programmed algorithm. Rather than producing expected outcomes, game play yields actual outcomes that develop out of the idiosyncratic decision-making of any given player. This inbuilt randomness of the game play is a unique and powerful enhancement, sustaining the feel of a cosmos in which action precipitates causes and effects that are unique and not repeatable. The prevailing atmosphere of *Bad Day on the Midway* is a kind of insidious miasma, an overwhelming sensation of creeping corruption and imminent danger, despite the spectacular, carnivalesque side shows, which come alive in Jim Ludtke's inspired rendering. All the characters one encounters have their own dark agendas, and the drama of interaction involves a kind of forensic piecing together of their motivations and potential actions.

This cautious, detective investigation into the psychological make-up of the characters and their respective hearts of darkness, requires considered monitoring of all the thoughts going through their minds, which are displayed, à la Mallarmé, sporadically across the screen as you see the world from their point of view. To keep track of their thoughts, over time requires an active, diligent memory, attentive to the possible cross-overs and parallels with the thoughts of other characters as well. Without an omniscient narrator to organise such information for us, we are really faced with a considerable task of collation and assimilation of information, which may lead to the prevention of a murder (possibly yours) or the closing down of the *Midway* itself. This reflective activity is offset by the distracting curiosity of exploration, which is fascinating in its own right, and the dedicated game play of the fantastic side show attractions of the *Midway* itself, such as *Kill a Commie Shooting Gallery*, *Dagmar the Dog Woman*, and *Torture Top Ten*. *Bad Day on the Midway* is an excellent example of the interface between literary theories of narrative, cybernetic articulations of game theory, and multi-media environments. It is suggestive of the way in which new media art is defining itself as an apparatus through the inventive grafting of elements from a range of traditional art forms on to the innovative potential of the computer. *Bad Day on the Midway* cleverly exploits the tension within game play between captivation and strategic reflection, engagement with the immediate task at hand, and the need to keep anticipating future moves and actions. The temptation to forget about plots and stratagems is considerable, as the side shows are themselves strategically placed decoys of divertissement, perfidiously designed to distract the player from the pitfalls that lurk around every attraction and concession stand. This aesthetic of delay, which is fundamental to all narrative art forms, is an important rule of the game, since it disperses the idea of closure through the duration of unpredictable actions and outcomes, based entirely on the choices the player makes. It reinforces the idea of the story world as an entropic space, constantly winding down toward closure, requiring persistent suspension of the ending. Here is Norbert Wiener's contingent universe, world in which God most certainly plays dice.

References

1. Paul Valery, quoted in Stephanie Mallarme, *Collected Poems*, Trans. Weinfield, H., Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, p. 265.
2. See Tofts, D, "Hyperlogic, The Avant-Garde, and Other Intransitive Acts", *UTS Review*, 2, 2, 1996.
3. Murray, J, *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, New York, Free Press, 1997, p. 28.
4. Murray, *Ibid.*, p.38
5. *Ibid.*, 28-29