ORACLE

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Abstract

Oracle is an interactive installation, created in the framework of the eMobiLArt Project, which uses tracking systems, generative algorithms, sound and video, forming a dynamic environment. Through the change between an audiovisual display, and the sudden stillness of an image, while one stays still for a longer time, Oracle reveals its answer to the viewers. Witnessing the emergence of original semantics through our daily relationship with images and vast visual information, Oracle stands as a sudden metaphor of our collective unconscious.

Oracles

Meeting at the first e-MobiLArt Lab for interactive media artists in Athens, June 2008, Julia Carboneras Girgas, Etienne de France, Maria Lalou, Evi Malisianou and Fernando Velázquez, formed 'theggroup'. After our second meeting, we initiated the composition of our project within the e-MobiLArt collaborative process; a contemporary Oracle.

   Different meanings of an oracle are found in many ancient cultures such as I Ching, Kabbalah, Delphic Oracle, Akashwani, among other similar manifestations across Africa, Asia, Europe, Oceania and the Americas. We understand 'the Oracle' as an allegorical process through which different perspectives for known situations and conditions can be revealed in a poetic and aesthetic way.

   Humanity has always created immaterial dimensions to give meanings and keys in order to understand the world, like myths and religions; all considered real, but immaterial in their essence [1]. In contemporary society, pervasive and ubiquitous computing redefine time and space, often supplanting an experience with invisible "Data". "Data" has become our prosthesis [2]. Can "Data" be considered as a contemporary collective unconscious?

Creating an Oracle

We first decided the elements that could compose the source of the Oracle's answer – a contemporary Oracle adapted to today's context: we formed the *Oracle*'s content through a composition of images selected from filtered public online-databases (Flickr and various blogs). These were images that were tagged under listed keywords such as "memory, secret, pervasive, virtual, territory, allegory, expectation, wealth or fantasy". The result was a large image bank from which a created algorithm collects and implements the sequence of the displayed images for the frontal projection of *Oracle's* installation. These images, full of personal memories, become the link between the abstraction of digital data and the 'flesh-and-blood' individual needs and interests, thinking of the invisible backbone of database and navigation through information as the driving aesthetic of the project [3]. *Oracle* is a multimedia installation that takes place in a dark room, where a soundscape dialogs with two projections [4], one in front of the visitors (wall projection) and one below them (floor projection). The front projection shows a pulsing sequence of images, while the one on the floor projects a graphical interface that intrigues and engages the viewer in participatory interaction. The sound is edited in real time by an algorithm forming the *Oracle*'s answering process, which is translating the movement of people in space into digital data. A wide-lens camera placed on the ceiling, tracks the motion of people in the room. Their movement, rotation and speed produce the necessary feedback to trigger composition changes in both projections but also in the soundscape: the number of spectators, their position and the distance between them affect the environment, creating a responsive display of video projections and sounds. The combination of this feedback modifies the order of the images, the frame rate of their sequences, and their contrast and brightness, composing at the same time a soundscape, by altering parameters in a customized synthesizer. When a person decides to stand still, the projection freezes into a single picture and stays frozen until someone moves again. That is the oracle's answer. Altering the traditional condition (where for example in the case of the Delphic oracle an answer is given by Pythia to a single requester, as a private ritual), the answer is not exclusively directed to the person who decides to stand still at that specific moment but rather to anyone in contact with the *Oracle*. Hence, we would prefer to refer to the viewers as participants, the ones questioning and unconsciously making choices through their embodied minds.

Fig. 1. Video still, from the documentation of Oracle, in the first e-MobiLArt exhibition at the State Museum of Contemporary Art Greece, during the 2nd Biennale of Thessaloniki, 5/2009. (© theggroup)

Digital Oracle

For Manovich [5] the database as a cultural form represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order the list in contrast with narrative forms. The database structures and the algorithms that articulate them are equally important. An oracle only gives an allegorical context to interact with; the same "answer" has different meanings depending on the intentions and needs of the consulter. We aim go create 'an Oracle' that could link human and machinical [6] behaviors

in a playful ambience to interact collectively articulating a list of items. The *Oracle* database (the content that makes the oracle possible) is constituted by human memories and the answers are the result of a dialectic process between an algorithm and the feedback produced by the visitors.

Oracle is a mirror that makes our digital collective unconscious visible, giving back to us the capability of finding the answers in a human layer. In this mirror of collective human memory, the participant is offered a poetic moment, where he can experience a critical and individual approach of an aesthetic experience.

References and Notes

1. P.Demo, *Introdução à sociologia. Complexidade, Interdisciplinariedade e Desigualdade Social*. Editora Atlas: São Paulo, 2002. p 15.

2. We should refer here to Marshall McLuhan's idea of prosthesis mentioned in Understanding Media. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.*; 1st Ed. McGraw Hill, NY, 1964, reissued by Gingko Press, 2003.

3. V. Vesna. *Database Aesthetics. Art in the age of information overflow*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007. p. 9

4. The set-up of oracle included: one core duo PC computer, a wide lens infrared wirefire camera, two projectors and two speakers, all commanded by a MAX patch in a 4 x 4 meter dark room.

5. L. Manovich. *Database as symbolic form*. In *Database Aesthetics*. V, Vesna (editor) *Art in the age of information overflow*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007. p 44.

6. "machinical" is a linguistic term deriving from the adjective machine and the suffix –al, which has the meaning 'pertaining to'.

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