

Text, Performance, Film, and Other Multimedia

Literary & Linguistic Computing continues to broaden its subject coverage with the publication in this issue of a selection of articles relating to the general theme of film and performance studies. The origin of what for some readers will be a rather eclectic mix lies in a one day conference organised by the CTI Centre for Textual Studies (Oxford University) in March 1997. Is it merely a connection of convenience that on the one hand a Centre with an explicit remit for text-based disciplines also supports computer-assisted film and performance studies, whilst on the other hand a journal of literary studies publishes the results?

The papers presented at the one-day Computer-Assisted Film and Drama Conference covered a diverse range of subject areas, presented by speakers bringing a range of perspectives to bear on the role of technology in their respective field of specialization. The new technologies have the potential to offer wider access to resources, increased interaction with different media, and preservation. It was interesting to note a pattern of overlapping themes which are emerging, reaching across the subject boundaries. In the digital world, certain issues are of common concern, regardless of subject area.

Overview

The new technologies have the potential to open up access to film, drama, and performance resources to a larger, more distributed audience. Audiences separated by geographic boundaries can all make use of the various types of resources, by drawing upon distribution technologies such as CD-ROM and the Internet. There are different means of accessing resources once they have been digitized. Text can be searched and effectively cut up and re-sorted; a film clip can be played in parallel to the film script and differences between the two immediately noted. Every film directed by a particular

person can be displayed together with secondary details, and links followed to other extensive resources updated only the previous day (rather than five years ago). All of this can be assembled together, allowing the author to describe interdisciplinary ties, and to encourage a user to follow them at will. The boundaries between the disciplines become even more blurred, individuals are encouraged to draw upon unconventional as well as conventional sources.

A major strength of digital technology is its ability to allow access to a fragile or protected artefact by a potentially infinite number of users. This is as true of this century's film stock as it is of the last millennium's manuscript libraries. Between the aim to digitize artefacts for access and the need to digitize for preservation can arise a certain tension. Long-term storage of any resource, whether it is a film clip, a facsimile of an artefact, or the digital version of a text, calls for careful storage considerations. For preservation purposes the digital resource requires an optimum of future-proofing which, as in the case of high resolution images or MPEG-2 encoding, is at variance with what can be easily delivered to the end-user in the present. On the other hand, the advantage of preserving the artefact at the best possible resolution with the greatest number of available colours or the highest frames per second is that computing technology makes it relatively easy to generate from this lower grade versions suitable for access purposes. This is often the means by which the tensions between the duty to archive and preserve for the future on the one hand, and the desire to make the holdings available to every computer-user on the other, can be reconciled for the purposes of appeasing the copyright holders (a position described by Richard Paterson with respect to the British Film Institute).

The Internet has opened up communication channels which allow for the global dissemination of digital resources and news of events. By breaking down traditional working methods, and creating new locations for resources to intersect, the use of the new media actually promote and encourage interdisciplinary working, allowing new and more

flexible interpretations. The Internet Movie Database (<http://uk.imdb.com/>) has users across the world, film students, film hobbyists, and those simply looking for a synopsis of the latest release. The database has many strengths but where it exceeds the offerings of its CD-ROM based equivalents (quite apart from the fact that its free) is exactly in its ability to offer comprehensive information on the latest films and also the extensive, searchable, links to a multitude of reviews submitted by its users, links to the movie company Web sites, and other film-related material. Finally, the Internet also offers the possibility of a medium by which events themselves might be disseminated. The World Wide Web in particular has become a stage on which the technologies of the virtual world enable performance events. These might be announced and 'staged' with the same deliberation and preparation devoted to performance in the so-called real world or they might be a little more hidden, a little more subtle, masked performances lurking in the forbidding world of the (primarily text-based) Multi-User Dimension (MUD) or a Usenet group where men and woman unknowing to each other create new genders, new personae for themselves. God forbid that they should ever meet without their digital masks.

The interpretation chain

The playwright creates a text to be performed. The performance is an interpretation of the text. The performance is greater than that which simply takes place within the performance space and contains more than that constructed by the players. Each performance of the same text will never be exactly the same as the one before or after it. The very presence of a different audience each time a performance takes place ensures this even if, as for example in particular works of Samuel Beckett, every care is taken to ensure that what happens in the performance area is the same each and every time the performance occurs. The film adaptation of the play text is quite a different matter and, as both Christie Carson and Lizbeth Goodman are at pains to point out, a film interpretation of Shakespeare and a performance of Shakespeare should never be confused nor one accepted as a substitute for the other. The film of the performance, however, also adds its

own additional layer of interpretation. The viewer of the film of the performance sees only what the camera saw which, in turn, is only what the director or editor of the film wished the camera to see. The viewer sits one place removed from the performance and at times might find herself staring at the audience of the performance through the interface of the camera. The viewer stands outside of the performance both in terms of time and geography. The viewer, assuming the film of the performance takes place on a small screen, is part of a chain of interpretation which eventually leads back to the performance (in the case of something like live art) or eventually back to the text.

The transferral or conversion of film and text to something digital has both a profound and a mundane effect on the media. If our hypothetical play is digitized and packaged as a CD-ROM for its further (enhanced) study then the chain of interpretation is at once continued and gathered together. The typical digital resource will be both multimedia (consisting of a mixture of text, video, audio, and still images) whilst also a single medium (simply digital). It is true that a video of the performance could contain the same mixture of media but a video is intended to be viewed as a linear resource and the addition of commentary and the such like would only serve to disintegrate the subject in question. CD-ROM offers the possibility of several linear narratives each of which can be played separately or hypertext bridges can exist between points in any of the narratives and from one medium to another. The choice to disintegrate and, to a certain extent, where to disintegrate is left to the user of the resource. A computer interface gives access to the text (or editions of the text), a film of the performance (or films), a film adaptation (or adaptations), and potentially unlimited secondary interpretation. How the material is selected, and especially the question of what links to what, and so gathering the chain into a single whole, is what defines the digital resource as a single medium in its own right but also, and more significantly, the digital resource itself becomes part of the history of interpretation of that performance text. Although digitization might preserve and give access to multi-interpretations of a single work, the presentation of these interpretations

usually within small windows on a small screen, for viewing by one user, places the digital resource at an even greater distance from the original experience.

The computer as stage

Many of the multimedia CD-ROMs which are currently available have been created with Macromedia Director. This authoring tool uses as a metaphor the production of a film with a cast list and score. The former contains details of every text, video, sound or animation object, whilst the latter synchronizes the movements of the various media objects. If the authoring tool puts the creator in the place of the director then the finished product is the film itself. It is, however, a metaphor which grants absolute control over the film to the director. The players in this case are objects which give little in the way of interpretation of a scene which is independent to that allotted by the Director. Even animated sequences are 'inanimate objects' in this regard.

Apart, however, from the creation of a multimedia resource being akin to the production of a film Brenda Laurel has observed that the use of such a resource, or any other software application, is a performance in its own right (Laurel 1992). The point is forcibly made that for the audience the stage is all there is (compare with What You See Is What You Get - WYSIWYG). Beyond the stage has no concern for the audience; the only reality is that which is before them in the performance space. It is a good performance that so absorbs the audience that they forget about the technical operations back stage. For the individual sitting before the computer the performance takes place upon the screen. It is a good performance or user-interface which conceals the inner workings of the operating system and software. One might make the more general point that each 'session' at the computer is a performance containing identifiable dramatic actions whether typing, pulling down menus, or interacting with a virtual reality through a computer-based game. For many, however, it a particular type of performance in which they are engaged, an event which occurs from the moment of booting up to the moment

of logging out. It is a ritual performance, a repetitive set of actions designed to effect what they symbolize, allowing for little in the way of improvisation. Reading email, for example, can involve precisely the same actions each time from switching on the machine to connecting to a central computer, logging in, and typing a simple command. Any deviation from the ritual, breaks the dialogue with the software and thus the ritual is invalidated. Familiar rituals offer, amongst other things, a comforting experience. In this context evidence of the discomfort arising from a lack of ritual is afforded from watching someone proficient at reading their email on their home computer attempting the same within an unfamiliar computing environment. Computers are notoriously bad at playing games of improvisation.

The link is the audience

Within the theory of the computer as the theatre and the software offering a performance space it is difficult to identify the audience. The individual is both audience and performer depending on what might be happening on the screen at any given moment. Curiously, it is the term 'audience' which links together the other media which we have mentioned: the printed book, the performance, and the film. Although the root of the word lies with the Latin present participle of *audire* (to hear), the book, the play, and the film are still spoken of having an audience. Properly speaking the book had its audience when it was read out aloud to one or more hearers. A search through the British National Corpus of Modern British English suggests that the idea of book and audience, rather than only book and reader, is still very much alive (at least within academic literature). It is the performance, however, with which the audience is most closely associated. The original implication of the word, of hearing rather than seeing has been somewhat submerged in the theatre or space where every seat is turned towards a stage heavy in lighting, scenery, and properties. The plays of Shakespeare, for example, with their paucity of stage directions and probable lack of props, were intensely verbal performances. The recent reconstruction of the Globe Theatre with its obscured views of the staging area serves

only to re-enforce this. The cinema retained the structure of the theatre with a stage on which the projection screen is mounted and even the occasional outburst of applause from the stalls as if the cinema audience have momentarily forgotten that their reaction will have no effect upon the projection. The cinema audience, and indeed the theatre audience, are a captive audience. The underlying connotations of the term now have more to do with an experience shared amongst many than with listening attentively. Intrinsic to the theatre and the cinema is the audience space. The television, however, does not assume an audience space (and rarely do we speak of the television room) and so the television has viewers, essentially a private rather than shared experience.

Computers, on the other hand, have neither audience nor viewers but rather users. Or rather, as we observed, computers have performers. The computer might be said to perform an action but really it is the user who performs the action by issuing a command, selecting a menu, moving the mouse or joystick, and so setting into motion a potential chain of events. On the other hand with regard to the multimedia CD-ROM we discussed above the user can also be in the place of the viewer, the reader, or the listener depending on which media object happens to be on the screen-stage at the time. Each one of these objects, as Mike Allen observes, demands a certain amount of attention from the user. A window of text, always difficult to read at length on the screen, might occupy five minutes of reading whereas the same text adapted for film and re-presented through Quicktime Video playback might occupy only one minute; comparable to the adaptation of a three volume Victorian novel to three hours or less of cinema time (Allen 1996). Three hours would be an exceedingly long time to be engaged with any single object on a computer screen. Engaging in a ritual performance with a computer is not to undertake something at a relaxed measured pace but rather to participate in the digital equivalent of the stereotypical Latin Mass conducted at break neck speed in order to bring about the effect in as little time as possible without omitting one word or action. The possible exception is the creation of a peice of text on the screen with frequent deletions and amendations; slowly but surely leading to an accomplished end. Computers were created

to crunch numbers; we surf and browse the Web; we speak of faster processor speeds, faster spinning disks, and we search the lot in seconds. The digital as a medium is not suited for long exposures and it is for this reason that projects such as the Shakespeare Multimedia Project offer neither the full text nor a full video of a performance.

Computers are better suited for demonstrating the process by which an object was created rather than the object itself. They are best suited for the searching and manipulation of data, a ritual which has its own symbols and language. Chadwyck-Healey make available vast amounts of digital textual sources (including English dramatic verse and prose).

Behind the scenes lies the complex encoding system of the Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML). The performer need not know much about this except that it enables the ritual of entering search terms into various database fields to generate slices of text. To read the full text one prints it out, attesting to the fact that the digital text whilst it remains digital, no matter how richly encoded, is a poor shadow of that which it attempts to represent.

Impressive and admirable as the new usability, sustainability, and flexibility of the digital resource might be, it is not the limit, or perhaps even the ideal, of the new human-computer interaction. The intersection where computer and user meet has the potential to create a new performance in itself, and it is perhaps to here that we should direct our gaze with greatest interest, and expectation, in the future.

References

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