

THE CONTEXT IS THE MESSAGE.

INTERACTIVE ART AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION

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Summary

A distinction between two kinds of communication: transmission and interaction, based on the concept of shared space (physical or virtual), leads to another distinction: face-to-face communication and mediated one. The latter can assume one of three possible variants: mediated transmission, quasi-direct mediated communication, or indirect mediated communication. The most of types of the interactive art are related to the last of those three models. The context of interaction - the product of the artist, which plays in the same time the role of partner of recipient's interaction - is the only message in the mediated indirect communication. The interaction creates an artwork - a result of creative behaviour of the recipient. A contact and the interaction have been separated. Between the recipient and the artifact/context occurs the intrapersonal communication. It can also appear in the space between the artist/sender and his/her product - artifact.

Key words: communication (direct, mediated, indirect, quasi-direct), connection, interaction, interactive art, mediation, transmission.

Interactive art – in general or at least its the most characteristic phenomena – can be recognised, in the framework of classic theories of communication with their three unit model (sender – message – receiver), as a medium which is unable to communicate. The more active an addressee becomes, the less possibility for communication an artist/sender can keep for himself/herself. On the other hand, however, numerous interactive works seem to be able to communicate. Many artists, critics and researchers consider the interactive art to be a medium providing a possibility of self-expression; works made by such artists become specific vehicles for messages. We have then to find out whether it can happen in spite of (or in opposition to) the medium’s interactivity, or whether the interactivity creates a new way (and a new model) of communication. That means we will have to examine the phenomenon of interactivity, and interactive art. We would have to consider once more what are the functions of all elements involved in the process of an artistic (and non-artistic) interactive communication. We should also examine classic theories of communication to make sure whether any of them can be used to describe the model of interactive art communication.

1

Interactivity, which in video appeared in a „rudimentary” form (or just as the announcement of the coming of actual interactivity) – only as a possibility of receptive behaviour motivated not by the structure of the work but by the needs of the viewer, could assume a fully-fledged form in computer art. In this case that means that interactivity has become the internal principle of the artistic

communication, and the viewer – if s/he wants to bring the artwork into being – has to start a game/communication strategy which will result in the shaping of the object of his/her perception.

In reflection on cyberculture and various phenomena which constitute it, such as first of all interactivity per se and the art of interactive media, one can notice the existence of two separate trends.

The first one tends to consider interactive art in reference to the basic categories building the modernistic aesthetic paradigm. The most important dogmas of this system include representation, self-expression, and the conviction about the supremacy of the artist/author's position in the process of artistic communication. S/he dominates both over the very artwork (art as anything presented as such by an artist) as well as over its meaning (content), which consequently also means his/her domination over the receiver and the perceptive-interpretative process. This view of interactive art says that interaction we embark on is not an interaction with any artificial creature or artificial intelligent system, but a mediated interpersonal interaction with the author of the artwork (or of the software).

The other trend presents interactive communication as free from the traditionally defined concepts of representation and expression, from the concept of meaning prior to communication, and the modernistically interpreted concepts of the author/sender and recipient. The structure of the artwork (result of a viewer's creative interaction with the artist's product, which I call here the artifact in opposition to the artwork) and the process of its emerging from hypertextual structure of the artifact become the subject of attention. The artist/author ceases to be the creator of the meaning of the artwork, which is created by the recipient in the process of interaction. The artist's only task consists in the construction of the

artifact – a context in which the recipient constructs the subject matter of his/her experience and its meaning. The recipient is thus no longer a mere interpreter of a ready-made sense waiting to be understood, or an agent perceiving a finite work. It is on the recipient's activity that the structure of his/her (aesthetic) experience depends. The process of communication in the interactive art assumes often a character of a game (although the rules and roles of the game do not have to be ultimately and explicitly defined). The cognitive function is supplemented by the autocognitive one, and agreement assumes the form of joint participation. Communication therefore becomes in a sense a process of creating meaning, which is essentially a creative activity.

It is a structure of hypertext, along with the material that fills it in: images, texts, sounds, that is an object of the artist's creative work. However, hypertext is not the object of the receiver's perception or his/her experience, but as I have said above, it is the context for that experience. The user of hypertext, faced with successive necessities for making choices and updating the elements thus selected, make use of only a small fraction of potential opportunities. The sum of all choices determines the work of art, the joint creation of the artist (who provides the material and the constructive rules – artifact) and the recipient (who chooses/select material and creates the structure of artwork).

One might be tempted to say that interaction with hypertext converts it into text. The final result of interaction is in all cases a closed finite structure - the result of choices that have been made. But such a statement would be erroneous. The recipient/hypertext user, who perceives the product of his/her interaction - the artwork, experiences both his/her own choices and their frameworks (software, hardware, spatial arrangement, etc.). When, at a certain moment, s/he concludes that his/her navigation is over and its result is the final work, s/he also experiences

(and may realise that) the incompleteness and indefiniteness which is inherent to interactive art.

The two ways of understanding interactive media which I have presented above should be taken only as theoretical models. In the space delimited by those two poles, one can find a great variety of concepts, theories, activities and works. We can encounter artists working in the domain of interactive arts and believing that it is their duty to express their own opinions and shape human minds. We can also come across critics and researchers who, in an analogous way, think that each artwork, including interactive ones, is purely (or primarily) an extension of the imagination, sensitivity, knowledge and desires of the artist. But there are also artists and theoreticians who think that interactivity means sharing responsibility with the receiver. And only their project seems to respect the internal logic of interactivity.

2

Generally speaking there are two models of communication. The first one we should actually name: transmission, or influential transmission, since this model sees communication as a one-way transmission, as a process in which the sender has an impact on the receiver. This concept and its theoretical foundations were created by Shannon and Weaver (1949). Since then it has been developed by many other researchers, like for example Miller (1951), Schramm (1954), Gerbner (1956), Berlo (1960), Smith, Bealer & Sim (1962), Cushman & Whiting (1972), but its basic characteristics stayed the same. According to Lasswell (1948), we can summarize this kind of communication in the series of questions: Who says? – What? – In which channel? – To whom? – With what effect? Communication understood as transmission has basically a monologue-like character. Nowadays, this kind of communication is perceived as typical for mass media: television, radio, cinema, as

well as characteristic for the artistic application of those media, that means art cinema, video art. Different approaches to mass media tending towards involving viewers or listeners into a reciprocal interaction with a moderator of a program (so called broadcast teleparticipatory media) are considered to be quasi-interactive (Cathart and Gumpert, 1986a), or a special, non-typical form of mass media communication (Avery and McCain).

The second model assumes that communication is an interaction. In this perspective communication is seen as a negotiation and an exchange of views and ideas, that leads to enable meaning to be produced or understanding to occur (see for example O'Sullivan et al., 1995). Communication understood as interaction has a dialogue-like structure and creates interconnections between individuals involved in it. This approach to the theory of communication has been developed by such writers, like Reiley & White Reiley (1965), Reimann (1968), Klaus (1969), Sereno & Mortensen (1970), Stemmler (1971). And if the first model – transmission – was dominant in the first decades of development of the communication theory, the latter one is typical for the present opinions. For contemporary researchers communication simply means social, interpersonal interaction (see for example Thompson, 1995).

There are a lot of differences between those two ways of understanding communication, between transmission and interaction. There are however some characteristics which they both have in common. Among them the most important one is that of interpersonal character of each communication. According to such a concept, this is an interrelation connecting two poles of the process – the sender and the addressee – to create the process of communication. The majority of researchers just assume that there is no communication when there is no real connection between participants involved. This attitude influences both, the old theory of transmission, and the modern understanding of communication as interaction. An

extreme stand concerning interactive communication expresses an opinion that the lack of real connection between individuals, in a real or virtual space, has its consequence in the impossibility of interaction. A very typical for this attitude opinion says that „interactivity means one individual talking to another (...) So called interactive television, CD-ROM's, video games, only allow interactivity with some pre-designed process, a series of predetermined givens and not with a real human being on the other end. This is a false interactivity and will only add to the frustration of a public looking for real exchange” (Foresta et al., 1995: 13). For the reasons I will be developing in the following part of this paper, I must disagree with such an opinion.

In view of the most of modern theories of communication, all kinds of communication are based on the concept of shared space (see for example Foresta et al., 1995; Johnson, 1995). This space can be physical – in this case we are involved in a direct, what means, face-to-face interpersonal communication – or can be virtual – thus communication becomes mediated. This differentiation, however, is not precise enough to distinguish between all sorts of non-direct communication. There is a great difference between a telephone-mediated communication and CD-ROM-mediated one. If we do not want to exclude CD-ROM and similar forms of mediation from the field of communication, we must find the proper place for them in the ensemble of communication strategies.

Underdevelopment of the mediated communication theory is probably caused by the fact that almost until now media have played a very small role in theoretical discourses on communication. Cathart and Gumpert (1986) wrote, for example, that in the end of the seventies they could not find any one theory, in which media would be considered to be an important factor of the interpersonal communication process. Only just in the nineties we face a significant development in this field of research.

To deal with this problem I propose to distinguish between a quasi-direct and an indirect communication as two forms of mediated communication. The first one is any kind of mediated communication in which we have to do with a real interaction between involved individuals. In a quasi-direct mediated communication the shared space has been expanded into dimensions which disable a direct, face-to-face contact, but still enable a real dialogue. As examples can stand letter writing, telephone conversation and so on. The latter one is a form of mediated communication where there is not either any direct contact, or an interpersonal interaction. A CD-ROM, an interactive installation, or a robot are examples of an indirect mediated communication.

One might ask how can we still talk about communication in reference to the situation where there is no real interpersonal contact between the sender and the addressee. The reason is however quite simple: I do not assume that each interactive communication must be based on a real interpersonal connection.

Even in traditional, classic theories of communication we can find such definitions or qualifications attributed to communication, which allow us to accept the idea of communication deprived of real contact. For example, Fearing (1956) describes situation which can be identified as interpersonal communication through reference to four characteristics:

- (1) In such a situation people enter into strategic relationship with each other, or with their surroundings;
- (2) Creating and using of signs and symbols is the fundamental attribute of such a situation;
- (3) Signs and symbols enable an exchange of knowledge, realising aims, and recognition of reality;

(4) Signs and symbols are recognised as such by participants of communication.

Even in spite of the lack of any references to media in the Fearing's definition, we can easily demonstrate that in the framework of this theory interpersonal communication does not necessary involve interpersonal connections. We must only assume that each product belongs to the surroundings of its producer. This means that a CD-ROM, an interactive installation, a robot, or simply any artistic artificial creature can belong to the artist's personal environment. Since each artwork originates a symbolic discourse, we must agree that all conditions proposed by Fearing have been fulfilled, and we face the real communication process.

3

To realise what kind of functions are involved in the process of mediated communication we can take into consideration another classic theory, this time that formulated by Jakobson. His concept concerns artistic communication and deals with the work of literature. Literature we must locate, however, in a different type of communication than those discussed above; it is an example of communication understood as mediated transmission. We can study this case to better understand differences between this type of communication and both, quasi-direct and indirect mediated communication.

Jakobson distinguished between six elements of a communication process: the sender, the addressee, the message/text, the code, the contact and the context. Each element plays its own function in a whole process. The structure and hierarchy of all of them forms different types of communication. There is no need to analyse meticulously this theory. It is however worthy noticing that the contact function can

be realised, according to Jakobson, even in literature: medium completely depriving a reader from a real connection with a writer.

Jakobson's approach was functional-structural; he fixed his interests on the artwork itself trying to find and analyse all elements and factors of communication as concentrated and objectified in poem or novel. This kind of approach is however inappropriate in the case of interactive art work, which should be rather considered to be a multi-layer, dynamic, processual and indefinite result of interaction. Also the notion of context, understood in Jakobson's theory as all sort of reference world, although inspiring, must be narrowed to become useful for an analyse of interactive art.

In the framework of the interactive art = the indirect mediated communication, I would like to propose to identify the context with the hypertextual structure being a base and a background for each individual experience of the work. In the first part of this study I have called it artifact, in opposition to artwork. The context is a product of the artist, who instead of providing with any traditional artwork - meaningful subject of hermeneutic interpretation and aesthetic experience, creates space for interaction. As I have written this is the interaction to bring into being a unique 'work of art' - theoretically different in each case product of individual, creative activity of an addressee/recipient. All that is the reason that we have to reverse the ontological order of elements of this model of communication; what is created first - by the artist - is the context, not the work of art in the traditional sense of the expression. Such a work of art is in fact created by the recipient in the context provided by the artist.

This approach to reconstruct the model of interactive, indirect mediated communication can also mean, that we will have to deconstruct the notion of the

context itself, and distinguish between its two aspects. The context described above is in fact the context of interaction, not of communication. In the framework of interactive art communication we actually deal with two different dimensions of the context: the first one creates the relationship between the recipient and the artifact - the product of the artist; the second activates the relationship between the artifact and any external world. These two aspects of the context, in mutual feedback-connection form the relationship between the artist and the recipient.

The context understood in such a way is the only message of the artist in the communication process characteristic for interactive art. This kind of message is just intelligible; it can be experienced only in theoretical, analytic approach, not in aesthetic one. And it should not be identified with artwork.

4

As a consequence of the distinction between the artifact – context, which is never perceived as a whole structure, but only imagined or predicted as such – an extension of a sensual experience, and the artwork – object of recipient’s experience, another very important characteristic of interactive media art communication must be brought into consideration. An identity of the addressee’s partner in the indirect mediated communication is different than the one of interaction. The first role is played by the artist/sender, the latter – by the artifact, which I have identified with the context, and which is a base for the hypertextual structure of perception and interactive strategies. That means that we have in a sense to separate the communication and the interaction from each other; they both occur in the interactive art, but not on the same level, or in the same moment of the whole process. As I have said, the interaction occurs between the recipient and the artifact; as the result of this activity the context of it can emerge, and when it happens the

communication between the artist and the recipient begins. This is a paradoxical and fundamental characteristic of interactive indirect communication, that the context, which is the only message in this kind of communication, is in the same time a subject of recipient creative behaviour. But this is what creates the specificity of interactive art communication.

Let us come back for a while to Jakobson's theory just to say, that all functions involved in his model play roles also in the mediated indirect communication process. The syndrome of all six elements of this model are subject and active factor of the message. The comparison between the model described above and that of Jakobson indicate also how far is from the classic genres of art = mediated transmission, to newly emerging art of interactive media = indirect mediated communication.

5

One can say that interaction is always a sort of communication and that we cannot separate them. We can try to cope with such an argument saying that there are in fact two kinds of communication involved in the interactive media art practice. The first one – the interpersonal mediated indirect communication between the artist and the recipient has been analysed above. The second one – the intrapersonal communication that accompanies the interaction will be the subject of this last part of this study.

Intrapersonal communication used to be defined as an internal dialogue between subjective I and objective Me, as a process of data transformation, enabling the individual to create his/her self-image (Mead, 1934). This kind of role taking activity seems to be an important factor of a process of creating the social Self (Duncan,

1962). Now interactive media bring with them the externalisation of this dialogue. Interacting with a computer program, CD-ROM or any artificial creature we act in a space which is in the same time private/intimate and public. Subjective I can be easily mirrored in objective Me, which in turn becoming the 'significant Other' provided by interactive artworks. We are facing now the ongoing process of fragmentarisation of the Self. The interactive intrapersonal communication is a part of this process. And together with the interpersonal, indirect communication they create the interactive art communication.

To summarise, a distinction between two kinds of communication: transmission and interaction, based on the concept of shared space (physical or virtual), led us to another distinction: face-to-face communication against mediated one. The latter one can appear in one of three possible variants: mediated transmission (e.g. literature, film), quasi-direct mediated communication (e.g. e-mail communication, interactive television), or indirect mediated communication (CD-ROM, interactive installation, robot, WWW, different artificial creatures, etc.). The context of interaction – the product of the artist's activity, which is in the same time the partner of recipient's interaction, is the only message in the mediated indirect communication. The interaction creates the artwork – the result of creative behaviour of the recipient in the context provided by the artist. Contact and interaction have been separated. The intrapersonal communication appears a typical relation between the recipient and the context/artifact. This kind of communication can also appear in the space between the artist/sender and his/her product.

I would like to end by emphasizing the fact this analyse of communication in the interactive world is nothing more than a handful of general hypotheses forming together an approach to understanding how development in interactive, multimedia technologies and their invasion into the realm of art change both patterns of

communication and a character of the artistic praxis. Numerous problems left to be analysed and many questions to be responded. This study can only play a role of an introduction to the subject.

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