

shortattentionspan



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Interactive Art Methodology

(an excerpt from our final documentation)

Can a new methodology be developed to create complex, playful content for multimedia installations whose interactivity depends solely on physical body movements?

To our research question, the answer is yes. From our work on Luminance, we have developed a set of guidelines that can provide any creator with a process designed to expand the effectiveness of his/her interactive art. This is the recommended methodology for an effective interactive multimedia art installation, no matter its technology, degree/type of interactivity or subject matter:

1.) Brainstorm widely.

Whatever your original idea might be, spend time imagining the wildest and most interesting possibilities of other concepts and variations. No suggestion is too strange or ambitious. Now is the time to explore a full range of “what if.” Keep note of these ramblings, as some of them may aid your installation as it develops.

2.) Thoroughly check out recent creations.

The research should venture far in the field to not only make sure that someone hasn't already done your project, but to locate the support, antecedents and free aid that is now available in many areas. You are not alone. Multimedia art is a mature enough arena to provide supportive communities with free code, references, and valuable advice.

3.) Stay loose, meander, explore.

Human nature craves stability and certainty, even in the midst of some daring creative effort. This is especially true for media, which is predominantly geared toward a stated – often commercial – result. Exactly where a production is headed is a fixed point in the future. Success is measured by how well that declared goal is achieved.

The opposite principle must prevail for innovative art. Producing art is messy, often instinctual, and may remain largely unclear until near the end of production. A freeform pattern is more difficult in a technological zone, but Flash designer/developer Brendan Dawes' term "sketching with code" conveys the attitude and practice where random musings can be pursued in programming as well as in personal journals.

Here is where the developed body of code and other installations' details can serve as a grounding to keep your options open and allow exploration within reasonable time frames for human endeavor. Every wheel need not be re-invented, enabling you to try out, cherrypick, and/or discard several avenues of creation. Or, these meanderings may solidify the notion that you're in very new territory.

However, this means that more of the production process will remain volatile longer than is found in traditional commercial efforts. And you won't know exactly where you'll end up. This will keep many project aspects unfinalized and major alterations may be necessary late in the process. So all project personnel must be prepared for this and willing to pace their energies to accommodate 11th hour marathons if there is a deadline involved.

4.) Discover your main premise and use it as your guide point.

This keystone of good storytelling is a must in order to keep the project on track while exploring the creation of the work freely. The project's premise lies at the overarching level of your intention: your installation is a mysterious evocation of childhood nightmares, or a startling revelation at the juncture of human discomfort and sensual pleasure, or a soothing escape to a fantasy universe.

The premise is your anchor in the heavy seas of exploration. As all the snafus, dead ends, and new avenues pop up during production, whatever decisions to be made are based on the premise. Does this enhance my main point? Is this a detour? Is this so powerful a technique that it'll overshadow my premise? Is it worth it?

5.) Use One Stop Tracking.

Effective scheduling, clear task assignments and a good visceral sense of where the project is progressing can be best achieved by using one production tracking document. This document should include images of the visuals (storyboard panels) as well as the user actions, and creator/team tasks in priority order. By consolidating all these production elements, everyone can track progress, see logjams, and be clear about what needs to be done. This also reinforces a sense of the flow of what users will experience.

If a deadline is involved – “the installation must appear at the Memorial Day BBQ” – then a calendar can be linked to the main document. Games productions have found this integrated configuration useful for planning long range and short time priorities, especially those concerned with interdependent assignments.

6.) Don't live in your head or in your code.

As soon as possible, create the very roughest prototype of your entire project – visuals and sounds if that's it – to establish another level of inspiration and clarity. Get the installation out of your head and into reality, even if it's only virtual. Seeing and/or hearing the work-in-progress early on can be a good source of happy accidents, wherein even mistakes can be found to be valuable assets. The volume of placeholders doesn't matter.

There are always aspects of a project that are more interesting and pleasurable to work on. A prototype illuminates the relative rhythm in the overall skeleton of your work, pointing up the truly important aspects to be addressed.

7.) Test the real world variables.

Even if your plan is to express your own apocalyptic vision of string theory, “interactive” designates the user's actions as important. You should have uninformed users play with your creation early in the process (see# 6) and a few times thereafter. Record them in order to combat your unavoidable personal bias.

This is not merely an exercise to evaluate comprehension and layout. This is an opportunity to explore the physical variables of your installation. Its scale, the positioning of physical elements, ambient light, sound system volume and placement, can all reinforce or scuttle your project. Each session should be an adjustment of the overall effect. Would your installation be best experienced in a neon bar, a museum, or a highway underpass?

The most valuable contribution of user testing is to perceive what the users bring to the experience. What stories are they telling themselves about what's happening as they interact? What do they feel is going on? It can be that their interpretation of the installation is more compelling than what you intend. If that's so, what changes can you make to reinforce that new slant while staying true to your premise?

8.) Trust your stream of consciousness and the users' imagination.

It's very easy to fall into a production mode of thinking, no matter the background of a multimedia artist. The spaces between artistic self-expression and user-centered design are a slippery slope. By staying open and receptive to the creation process while observing the "content" generated by the testing user, your art installations can be truly complex and evocative.