

NARRATIVE AND ART-MAKING THROUGH DIGITAL INTERFACES | BERRETH

Project #1 – Recombinant Play (a two-part exercise - approximately two - three weeks total)

A key element of the design process, for designers building novel and effective digital systems, is the concept of *affordances*, and a basic understanding of the potential functions, abilities, uses of the collection of technologies at play in the digital assembly. This is the case whether you are designing a digital artifact for narrative or art-making purposes, or engaging in game design, digital tool-building, web or application development, toy design, interactive museum installation development, or any of the other potential inventions that you may be conceiving.

First you need to be able to identify an affordance in a digital system that you come across, and be able to analyze how that system *signifies* the affordance's presence, and the range of interactions/uses available to the *interactant*, through cues or conventions which help the user form a *conceptual model* of the system's operation.

When conceiving a new digital artifact, a designer often *recombinantly* assembles several known affordances from previous projects he/she has developed or other people's work, to create new permutations or hybridizations which solve a new design problem, or potentially suggest unexplored territory or new potential (sometimes crazy or wildly inventive).

To be recombinant, or to engage in recombination, is the process, used like in DNA, of recombining building blocks into new forms, some of which have never existed. Sometimes this process is *generative*, and breaks us out of certain *deterministic* ruts we get in as designers.

This is a two-part project.

Part One

Use the digital artifact that you brought as an example to the last class session, that inspired you in some way. You can select another artifact, if it doesn't work for this project.

- 1) First, in text form, describe three or four affordances of your digital artifact. For each of these affordances, in two or three sentences explain how the affordance is signified. How do you know how to interact with it (it could explicitly tell you in some form or other, or perhaps it relies on interaction conventions, or previous user knowledge)?

For example: In the SoundSense interactive museum exhibit I've shown you several times... Some potential affordances of this particular system might be

- i. body movement is tracked by cameras
- ii. social behavior is controlled through game-base interaction
- iii. exploration is rewarded by surprise sounds
- iv. interaction with the system is stored in memory
- v. body movement is mapped/drawn to a projected visualization

These affordances are just a few of many within the digital artifact, each of them could be categorized as one or a combination of the four affordances that Janet Murray identifies.

Regarding how an affordance is signified...

- i. There is a computer monitor in the room, which shows the stitched video image of all the cameras looking down on the floor (nine total). This monitor is part of the curatorial display, and it informs the interactant of how the system works, and that they are being surveilled. Body tracking is also signified as the visitor explores the room, and discovers that the projected visualization, and sound design, reacts to their movements.

The affordances you identify can be input, output, procedural and processing, storing/archiving, communicating/networking, are any of the other types of affordances we've discussed in class, or you've been introduced to in the readings, or perhaps relate to storytelling/thematic elements of the artifact.

They can be even be as wild as – “simulates the love life of humans and pigeons”.

- 2) Now pick a minimum of three other digital artifacts and do the same exercise (for the other projects, you don't have to be as thorough about identifying the signifiers). These could be from the collection submitted by your peers, or other projects that you are familiar with, either through class or in your own practice. The only criteria are that the projects represent a diverse collection of types of digital artifacts (computer games, digital gadgets, mobile apps, interactive installations, tools, visualization technologies, websites, etc. etc.) and aren't just from any one single type (perhaps the more diverse, the better for this exercise).
- 3) Finally, mix and match 2-4 affordances from several different digital artifacts. This could be an entirely random process (roll a die!), or it could be determined by opportunities which spring to your mind as you glance over the lists. Now try and create a design fiction scenario of a hypothetical digital system, piece of software or technology device, ie a computer game, digital toy, gadget, tool, application or installation. This can be as crazy or speculative as you want, your imagination is the limit, only make it as cool, crazy or compelling as possible. The point is to free your mind to recombinant possibility, and spur free association and mental assembly. Create three scenarios which are totally different from each other, and describe them each in a paragraph of text.

For example, if I were to combine selected affordances from a 3d printer, a mobile robot, and a game involving humans and pigeons, what kind of crazy, disturbing, sublime, inventive, digital artifacts could I come up with?

- 4) Turn in a typed two page document, with the analysis of step one (listing three to four affordances of your digital artifact, explaining for each how each affordance is signified in two to three sentences), and then the results from your work for step three, a paragraph each, describing the three digital artifacts / scenarios you imagined via the recombination exercise (three total paragraphs). Due Monday, September 9th.

Part Two

Select your favorite digital/artifact scenario from the three that you created for part one.

- 1) Create a five to eight panel narrative storyboard describing a key interactive moment / affordance of your digital artifact. If you have a particularly complex system, select the most illustrative capability/experience of your artifact, which would highlight the unique appeal of your idea.

Use the techniques described in the Greenberg “Narrative Storyboard...” article, utilizing filmic techniques such as establishing shots, over the shoulder shots, closeups, etc., overlaid annotations often used in film storyboards, and narrative conventions such as introduction of character, description of a conflict/problem, rising action to climax, and resolution of conflict via your digital artifact. One of the points of your storyboard is persuasion, and the communication of what’s special about your idea.

Where does the interaction takes place?

What is the problem? Or what is the unique opportunity (play or otherwise) your system is pursuing?

What is the task/activities that people are trying to do?

Which people are present and what are their actions?

What kind of objects or digital devices do they use?

What is the possible input and output for each digital system?

How do the actions of people and/or devices solve the problem, or what new types of experiences are created?

- 2) A rough sketch draft of your narrative storyboard should be ready for desk crits on Wednesday, September 18th. You can use either a drawn or photo illustrated storyboard, per the two types described in the reading. Don’t forget to reference the examples I posted on the class website, to provide inspiration.

Besides individual desk crits, you will share your storyboard with two of your peers in class, to demonstrate your ideas to others, and get feedback on effectiveness of your representation. This should help you iterate and further develop your storyboard.

- 3) **Turn in a final version of your storyboard. This should be submitted to the Moodle site and is due Monday, September 23rd. Please also bring a copy to class. This version should be well crafted, ie cleanly inked with black ink (possibly colored also, but not required) if you are drawing your storyboard, or illustrated via Adobe Illustrator/Photoshop, if you feel more comfortable with those tools. Again, look to the example storyboards for the types of presentations we are looking for.**