

# Virtual Q&A

*Jun-Ann Lam asks  
'Virtualities' curator*

*Peter Morse and  
gallery visitors  
some questions  
on the meaning of  
and reception for  
interactive art.*

**Rhys Mackney; 12-year-old male:**

It's interesting [*Cutometer* by Martine Corompt]. It's a bit weird because why would you make the head so big. You'd have to be a five-year-old to like it...big head, big eyes...can't really understand it...can't really find the point of it...what's that thing in the corner?

**Rhys Mackney's mother, indefinitely aged female:**

I never play. I've never played. It's more for my son.

## THE INTERVIEWS

**Jim; father of two girls and two boys:**

It takes a bit of time to absorb, especially with kids. The exhibit [*The Mutant Genome Project* by Patricia Piccinini] makes a very good point about whether or not genetic engineering is a good thing.

**Kristian Carroll; 21-year-old male:**

Confusing ... I don't know what's going on; I haven't had much to do with computers. I guess I didn't look at it in [*Cutometer* by Martine Corompt] in very much depth.

**Peter Morse; exhibition curator; 31-year-old male:**

*Virtualities* is an exhibition of recent Australian experimental computer and video art. It took about three months to get together after I got the job curating with MIMA. (It had previously been arranged with Scienceworks.) I came up with the idea of *Virtualities* because there is a lot of talk about virtual spaces, times, geometries, narratives, and so forth, in relation to contemporary computer practice. I was interested in the notion of the virtual as a metaphor and the array of different things to which the term "virtual" has been applied. This exhibition ranges from virtual architectures, such as in Peter Hennessy's *M-path* and John Colette's *30*

## THE INTERACTIVE

**Q:** Consider the skin of video arcades: the space, the atmosphere, the 3-D construction that houses the games. They actually induce a game-playing euphoria and atmosphere with machines screeching, loud cracks that go off when you achieve a certain score, people looking over your shoulder when you play, the sense of awe when someone really "hot" scores big and plays well, the sense of ego when you are playing well.

Consider a cinema: it has a perfect skin for film watching which is why people go to films – to take in the scale, the darkness, the surround sound, the chip eating and package crunching irritants.

Do you think artists and curators spend enough time considering the "skin", space and comfort of the user experience?

**Q:** If a user is perplexed and troubled by the interface of an interactive, is she/he able to derive meaning from the resolution of the problem of unfamiliarity, independent of the novelty of "playing" with something new and unfamiliar?

**Q:** If the user is a child, how should the above affect the long-term strategies of the design of user interfaces and interactivity?

**Q:** Is this process of familiarising oneself with the unfamiliar an unconscious learning?

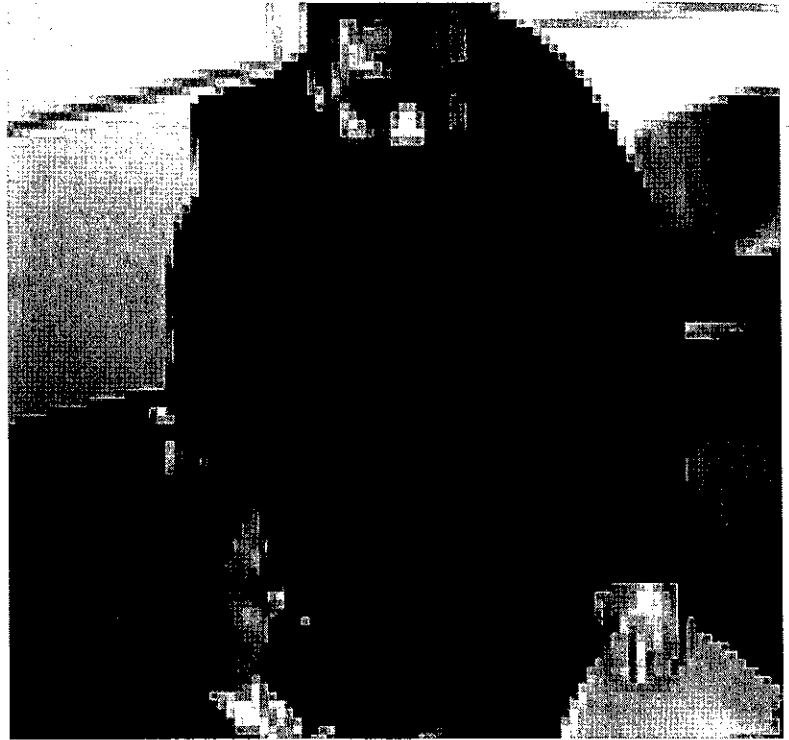
**Q:** Is the artist responsible for conveying the meaning of her/his content effectively and its effect on the audience, or

*Words for the City*, to game-like interfaces in the work of Patricia Piccinini and Felix Hude. The way in which contemporary works draw upon images of popular culture, such as *Don't Shoot the Messenger's* techno-animations, Martine Corompt's *Cutometer* and Ian Haig's work, are also addressed.

Likewise, there are virtual histories explored by Irene Proebsting and Barry Brown in *Industrial Vesper #11* and Moira Corby's *My Memory Your Past*.

This indicates to me that the term "virtual" is a highly versatile one; it not only applies to the array of internally constructed computer spaces but also to a confluence of discourses at the nexus of praxiological engagement between the operator and machine. By this I mean not only something sounding extremely abstruse and incomprehensible but the way in which we think about our relationship to and experience of computers, which needs to be examined in terms of a set of meaningful relationships that encompass both a variety of political and ideological positions.

This is evidenced by the simplest and most confused remarks that many people have made



about the exhibition, such as: "I don't understand this"; "I don't know what it's about"; "what's this work for", etc. This indicates to me that people are already in a problematic relationship with

# I HOPE THE PEOPLE CAME TO SEE IT

is this the problematic nature of new technology - that it is new and unfamiliar and, therefore, always a challenge to the user and sometimes impossible for the user to decode the usability, navigation and structure of an interactive?

**Q:** Where does this leave the postmodern view on meaning?

**Q:** Is there enough time to learn at a public access venue/exhibition, to derive meaning from the content once the user has come to grips with the surface interactivity?

**Q:** Is there a problematic disparity between the intention of the artist and the expectations of the user? Do they communicate at all?

**Q:** Will the user always be at the mercy of the artist/computer companies because she/he is always one step behind decoding instead of creating the technology at hand?

**Q:** Does this create a problem of elitism?

**Q:** Should there be concern about who owns technology, who makes technology, who defines the direction technology takes? Is the artist any more in control?

**Q:** Are interfaces as well designed as one would expect any "good" painting to be?

**Q:** What are the criteria for determining good interactives from bad interactives?

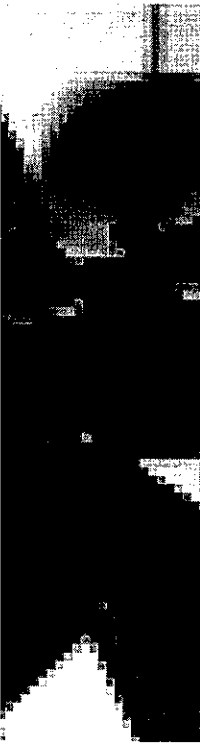
**Q:** Are artists subversive enough? What part do they really play in technology?

Print your answers on a clean piece of paper, clearly print name and return address, supply a self-addressed envelope and send to:

PO BOX 666, Devil's County

OR e.mail to:

devil's advocate@agitate.communicate.australia



technology and that they have certain highly codified expectations about how to interact with given interfaces. For example, to expect *The Mutant Genome Project* to behave like a game because it “looks” like a game is to be totally confounded. In this sense a number of the works are quite subversive of normal expectations. However, rather than this being alienating to operators, the exhibition itself is interesting and engaging enough in the way it looks and behaves for them to come back and spend a number of hours playing with them.

I guess the other thing I should point out is how mythical the notion of interactivity is, especially in relation to computers. Anyone worth their salt knows full well that they are extremely irritating and frustrating machines. The most fluent example of an interactive technology is probably something like a book. It doesn't need to be plugged in,

it's portable, engineered to use your imagination and intelligence. You can scroll through it extremely rapidly. When computers are like this,

# PEOPLE WHO HAD FUN

terms like “virtuality” will not really have a currency because it will be an inherent part of the technology and the discursive spaces that are constructed within and without it. Virtualities is a much groovier name than “Strategies of Reading”.

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**Footnote: This article is available in unedited, undesignated format on the Internet. Log on to the Cyberfringe: <http://www.vicnet.net.au/fringe/> available virtually anytime.**

# THE EXHIBITION

The interactives and videos played in two circular, very small chambers; the first chamber had all the artists' interactives, the other had videos and the interactive of artists made by the curator which contained interviews with the artists and their explanations of their work. Both chambers were dark, all cladding and materials were black, and space was scarce.

The curator had designed and constructed hexagonal viewing boxes with transparent perspex screens to house the hard drives and VCRs. All computer screens were at the eye-level of a 10-year-old child.

There was no user access to the keyboards or mouses. Access was via touch-pads (like the touch-sensitive pads on a Macintosh powerbook) external to the boxes.

Two speakers were located in front/above/aside of each screen/interactive, directed down towards the user. It was crowded and cramped, people were noisy, the interactives were noisy (that is, a cacophonous experience).

Younger people, older people, infants, chip and sauce breath, sweat, body odour, body heat and machine heat, radiation and the perpetual whirr of hard drives contributed to a wholly

new experience in interactivity and computer chip art and technology. As much as the surrounding activities were distracting and altogether unlike a conventional gallery space, the experience was by no means unpleasant. It was in fact a very enjoyable experience and I would even go so far as to say that the atmosphere gave new perspective on interactive experience. The collection of interactives, each in relation to the other, gave relevance to each work (what does this say about the individual works when they stand alone?) and highlighted the diversity, creativity, meaning and pertinence of computer-generated artwork.

# PETER MORSE HOPES PEOPLE HAD FUN. I CERTAINLY DID