Audience inter/active: Interactive media, narrative control and reconceiving audience history
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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which recent theorizations of interactivity work to reconceive the author-text-audience relationship. Suggesting that all media forms – historical and contemporary – can be reconceptualized in light of recent understandings of interactivity, it is argued that control over the text and its narrative as mythically ‘finished’ products is struggled over between an authorial desire for finality and an audience desire for control over the arrangement, (re)configuration and (re)distribution of the text. This struggle takes place across the sites of technological developments of textual control versus full interactivity, and in the realms of both media theory and media law.

Key words

audience • authorship • interactivity • media history
• multimedia • reality television

‘Interactivity’ as a buzz-word, a consumer sales motif, an intellectual concept and technologically-constituted feature of new media has for some time now been considered a cliché, an overkill term, a marketing concept misapplied to products or mediums which are not definitively interactive, in much the same way the term ‘digital’ has frequently been used to describe products, mediums and concepts which are not necessarily reliant on stored binary code for information processing. It is, nevertheless, an important concept which is implicated in the ways in which we can think about
authorship, audiences and texts, and allows some considerable re-interpretation of the role and function of audiences in previous, older media forms. The interactive and digital nature of computer-mediated communication results in several new tensions in the author-text-audience relationship, predominantly through blurring the line between author and audience, and eroding older technological, policy and conventional models for the ‘control’ of the text, its narrative sequencing and its distribution. Authors and media producers who continue to operate in the dominant paradigm of intellectual property can be said to be engaged in a struggle against this sort of interactive engagement through both legal and technology protections, while audiences continue to fight back with ever new technologies to challenge such attempts at control. In developing theories around interactive media, it is important to look not only at how this contestation is new, but how the development of interactive technologies can be seen as a new field of engagement in a much older struggle around the concepts of author, text and audience.

I am interested here in forms of interactivity in which the text or its content is affected, resequenced, altered, customized or re-narrated in the interactive process of audiencehood. This is the sort of interactivity in which content is affected not only at the ‘nodal point’ at which it becomes textual – a set of points which includes broadcast or release time or other forms of digital dissemination – but also and particularly the point at which a text leaves the hands or immediate, real-time control of an author or content creator and becomes available to alteration in some way by a reader or content-user. Such interactivity, I am arguing, has resulted in new tensions in the author-text-audience relationship, predominantly by blurring the distinction between author and audience. These tensions sometimes result in a struggle for control over the authorial ‘purity’ or ‘authenticity’ of the text through intellectual property management or digital programming protections or limited, channelled or ‘permitted’ forms of interactivity; they also result in attempts by audiences and users to ‘fight’ these new controls through the development of programming tools that unlock digital codes, attempts to re-sequence textual narratives, or other forms of customizing the text beyond authorial intent.

It is the contention of this article that a digital environment promoting interactivity has fostered a greater capacity and a greater interest by audiences to change, alter and manipulate a text or a textual narrative, to seek co-participation in authorship, and to thus redefine the traditional author-text-audience relationship. I argue here that in light of both new developments in interactivity as found in the increasing popularity of new media forms, such as electronic gaming, and the ‘backlash’ development of new technologies, softwares and legal methods that actively seek to prevent alteration and re-distribution of texts, the historical and contemporary
conception of the author-text-audience affinity can be characterized as a tactical war of contention for control over the text. I contend that this is a struggle set across a number of different contexts, media forms, sites and author/audience capacities. I will begin with a discussion on the ways in which current theorization of interactivity is often located in technologically-determinist paradigms before examining the ways in which interactivity upsets the author-text-audience relationship retrospectively in media history and concurrently in new developments around multimedia textuality.

THE NATURE OF INTERACTIVITY

Although interactivity has been difficult to define, and frequently is used so broadly it loses its signficatory value, the sort of interactivity that impacts most on the author-text-audience relationship and that allows us to expand our understanding of communication is that which cultivates some element of user control over narrative content in a media or new media text. In the context of emerging theories of interactivity, this is an admittedly broad conception, but it is one articulated not as determined by technology, programming, production, and authorial ‘permission’ to alter the text, but constituted within culture as a means or desire to co-participate in the textuality of the text, in its narrative, in the course or temporality of its flow or in its structuration. That is, some level of engagement with the text in the act of reading or usage that substantially and self-consciously shapes the text or the experience of its reception. The problem with theories of interactivity is the extent to which it can be located between seeing it as that which is technologically or authorially determined, and how much activity is required on the receiver’s part to shape reception. While interactivity often entails a built-in capacity to transform, shape or customize the text in accord with an author’s wishes, it spurs on and sometimes encourages a desire to transform the text in ways that are out of the hands of an author and in accord with the individual wishes of an audience member or user. What a digital media environment promotes are convenient and comfortable ways of altering a text: to co-participate, re-sequence or interactively transform a printed book would require literally cutting and pasting pages, whereas the opportunity to cut-and-paste in order to re-sequence or substantially transform a digital text has been not only easier, but has become a matter of contention. Spiro Kiousis argues that there should be no alarm expressed at the indefinability of interactivity: ‘as long as we all accept that the term implies some degree of receiver feedback and is usually linked to new technologies, why should there be a problem?’ (Kiousis, 2002: 357). In the broadest of definitions, receiver feedback might constitute the changing of television channels or the use of a pause.
button on a DVD player – the exercising of user choice is not, however, necessarily interactive.

Other writers have presented more narrow understandings of interactivity. Lelia Green, for example, suggests that interactivity implies the capacity of a communication medium to be altered by or have its products altered by the actions of a user or audience, as well as suggesting a technology which requires input from a user to work effectively (Green, 2002: xx). This definition would cover such products or texts as electronic games, but the extent to which this form of interactivity depends on the technology is unclear – a macromedia flash movie might utilize its digitality to build in a feature allowing user selection or re-ordering of scenes, but at the same time a user can interactively engage with a DVD disc to select a numerically non-sequential order of film chapters. While the latter is not often a built-in feature of a film, and while the technology does not specifically direct this sort of choice, it does involve receiver feedback and considerable engagement with a digitally-manipulable text.

Sally McMillan provides a more nuanced set of definitions of interactivity. Drawing on the work of Bordewijk and van Kaam (1986), she delineates the concept of interactivity into a typology of four intersecting levels or uses: (1) Allocution, in which interactive engagement is minimal, and is set within the context of a single, central broadcaster and multiple receivers on the periphery. This would ordinarily include most mass media forms such as television, as well as real-time events like a lecture or a play (McMillan, 2002: 273). (2) Consultation, which occurs in the use of a database, such as a CD-Rom or a world-wide-web site, where a user actively searches for pre-provided information (2002: 273). Feedback is clearly minimal in this case, and although some recording of access patterns might be a feature of the site or database, it does not necessarily alter the content, the narrative or individual sub-texts or sections of information requested. (3) Registration, which does record access patterns, and as with many forms of digital surveillance, accumulates information from the periphery for use in a central registry (2002: 273). Although McMillan’s example of registrational interactivity is the internet ‘cookie’, which tracks and customizes content of internet sites visited by the user, (4) Conversational interactivity, for McMillan, occurs when individuals interact directly with each other, mimicking face-to-face (F2F) contact through computer-mediated communications technologies (2002: 273), a form which locates the ‘text’, as it were, predominantly in real time rather than in a prior recorded format. Problematically, none of these definitions account for media forms such as the digital multimedia clip or the electronic game in which the user or player has considerable control over the text and its narrative. In such cases, the computer or computerized-device keeps constant track of inputs from the user and alters the narrative accordingly and over time. The narrative
flow of a video game will be dependent not only on authorial or programming structure, but on both user inputs and via a random number generator for diverse gameplay. Such an interactive text falls outside the definitions of interactivity given in McMillan’s account.

Both Green and McMillan’s definitions invoke the structure and arrangement of the technology or the medium as the central criteria of what it is that counts as interactivity. Although neither are technological determinists, the spectre of digital technology haunts these definitions, tending to locate interactivity too-securely within digital paradigms, recent media, and those texts which are self-consciously built around interactive engagement. However, it need not be the case that interactivity is linked with the structure or purpose of a technology or medium. As Rafaeli and Sudweeks put it:

interactivity is not a characteristic of the medium. It is a process-related construct about communication. It is the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages. (1997)

That is, there is no set of logical reasons to suggest that interactivity, even as it forms a central feature of recent computer-mediated communications, is a technologically-driven concept or determined wholly by technological development. Rather, what Rafaeli and Sudweeks do is shift the focus of interactivity from the technology to the form of communication and restore the figure of the audience member, user or receiver by acknowledging the relationality of communication processes. Likewise McQuail reinstates the question of the audience member, user or receiver as human subject in a communication process:

this would seem to run counter to the general trend of media history, restoring a human scale and individuality to mediated social communication, restoring the balance of power of the receiver at the periphery against the dominant centralized sender. But it also increases the individuation of use and fragmentation of the mass audience. It is also still unclear how far the audience wants to be interactive. (1997: 10)

Following the cultural materialist models of Raymond Williams, the concept of interactivity need not be understood as the ‘making available’ of a newly-invented technological tool, but the extension to media technologies of a culturally-constituted desire for communication that is located in the lived expressions of culture (Williams, 1981: 10, 1990). Counter to McQuail’s assertion that it is unclear how interactive audiences wish to be, it is becoming increasingly the case that the ‘up-take’ of interactive forms of media entertainment – particularly the electronic game, but also new forms of multimedia distributed through the internet – is not only significant, but
is driven by popular cultural demand. That is, the desire of users to participate in the textuality of the text, to engage in its narrative, to re-sequence texts on their own terms, and to find new and imaginative ways to do so even when the text does not specifically encourage choice, engagement or activity. Such a perspective on interactivity is to see the audience as active and aware participants in the media process, and not as the cultural dupes of marketing techniques or authorial intent.

I am characterizing this desire here as one which emerges and re-emerges in various periods, sites, alongside various new technologies, and which, since the advent of the concept of the ‘author’ has frequently been juxtaposed against questions of authorial control over the creation of both recorded and performed content. The aesthetics and architectures of ancient theatre, the rise of audience theories of interpretation and productive activation of meanings, the attempts to engage in re-distribution of media texts from the re-selling of books to the dubbing of audio tapes, are just a few among the many instances in which we see this desire emerge prior to the digital interactive technologies which facilitate it best. It is my argument, here, that the rise of interactivity as a form of audience participation is by no means the latest trend in media history, nor something that disrupts a prior synergy between author-text-audience, but a strongly-held and culturally-based desire to participate in the creation and transformation of the text that has effectively been denied by previous technologies of media production and distribution. I would suggest that it is no longer all that unclear how far the audience wants to be interactive depending on what it is we characterize as media texts, particularly if we take into account the popularity of multimedia and electronic gaming as media forms.

Mark Dery’s important work ‘Culture Jamming’ described the tactics of a new grassroots resistance to textual control, simplification and the power of an information industry that manufactures consent through the maintenance of control over textual interpretation. For Dery, this resistance took the form of media hacking, informational warfare, terror-art and the guerilla semiotics of work which sought to point out the signifcatory foundations of existing mass-media texts (Dery, 1993). This conception of an emerging, diametric war between media creators/industries and audience participation and interpretation is something I want to consider here in light of both the past history of the audience in its longue duree, and the ways in which emerging forms of interactivity that empower audiences over text and narrative – as found in both lip-service gestures to interactive television and new digital media formats such as the macromedia flash file – extend Dery’s forms of audience resistance by putting the author-text-audience relationship of textual control in question. This is not to equate audience interactive participation with audience resistance, nor to suggest that participation is a self-conscious form of resistance. Rather, the concept of interactivity allows
us to see a manner of cultural resistance against prevailing humanist notions of the author-text-audience relationship, and as resistances which have emerged historically rather than just technologically. Although I accept the mimicry of real-time F2F computer-mediated communication as one interactivity form (of many), I am only going to concern myself here with interactive forms and texts across a variety of mediums which allow control over the narrative – the electronic game being the most obvious example. The point here is that this form of digital interactivity is the culmination of a much older and ongoing contestation over control of a text as if a text were a finished, unified and coherent whole at the time at which it has been disseminated.

INTERACTIVITY AND THE AUTHOR-TEXT-AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP – SYNERGY AND STRUGGLE

In a recent televised advertisement for CNN.com, it was pointed out that ‘the average computer has 101 keys’. It goes on: ‘We say, you only need three – CNN’. Although making a particular play between the physical interface device for standard internet access and the brand name, it is considerably representative of the ways in which interactivity is both enabled and stemmed in popular discourses around new media, authorship, texts and audiences. The keyboard, the extension of the traditional typewriter with all the creative connotations that go with it, is the interface device of content-creation par excellence. The implication of CNN’s reduction to needing only three keys is that news and information creation is, and should be, in the hands of a media industry and its authors, journalists or content-creators. Mass news media, which on the one hand purport to represent ‘the people’ (as the mass, the reader, the audience) are, of course, not quite as independent from capital or state (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 311–12), and do indeed stand to lose the network power of ‘voice’ and the gatekeeping power of ‘making discourse (un)available’ the greater the interactivity over text that is granted to an audience. The struggle between author and audience, characterized as a struggle between corporate media industries and consumer-users, is well-illustrated in the juxtaposition of the undertone in CNN’s advertisement against independent internet media, such as indymedia.com, which in both structural terms and intent allows content-creation, right of reply and redefinition, debate and discussion to be held by the general user – indeed, its motto is ‘Everyone’s a journalist’.

The very idea of the author as the central authority of a work is, as Foucault pointed out, one which is regulated within culture, and the concept of which is available for critique (Foucault, 1977: 123). The operations of the name and role of the author as a rule for the quality and power of a work is an historical one, and one which continues both to change as well as be defended – questions over, for example, intellectual
property illustrate the two poles of authorship in which, on the one hand, a work can be disputed as having needed the protections that accord its ‘ownership’ to an author, and on the other as defending a set of rights asserted by an author not to have that work altered or distributed outside of his or her control (or, more properly, the rights of the industry owner to whom the author, as a semi-foundational law in this case, signs over his or her rights to that control). Foucault adeptly demonstrated the ways in which the author is not only historical, but the conception of it is one which is threatened at various times and in various forms:

The ‘author-function’ is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy. (Foucault, 1977: 130–1)

The argument here, then, would be that the rise of media technologies which not only avail themselves to certain forms of interactivity with the text, but also to the ways in which the pleasure of engagement with the text is sold under the signifier of interactivity is that which puts into question the functionality of authorship and opens the possibility for a variety of mediums no longer predicated on the name of the author: ‘We can easily imagine a culture where discourses would circulate without any need for an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity’ (Foucault, 1977: 138). The internet in general could be considered the site at which the author’s name disappears as a plethora of anonymous sites, commentaries, knowledges and textualities emerge amidst an environment predicated on its interactivity and exchangeability, although sometimes in the push towards a recorporatization of the internet as it functions as a public sphere, the role of the author and the emphasis on author verification are restored in the tide towards recentralization of the medium (Dahlberg, 2001; Ess, 1994; Papacharissi, 2002). The continuation of the mythos of the author into the digital age is one which is now to be located in what Manuel Castells refers to as a pluralization of sources of authority (Castells, 1997: 303) – which includes the audience exercising consumer choice in the weakest definition of interactive feedback, and in the strongest a full interactive engagement with the text beyond the requirements installed by an author or form-creator – but a system which witnesses a continuing backlash as other persons, sources, and institutions attempt to centralize the authorial voice as the only source of speaking-writing-saying power.
Textuality itself, then, becomes something that is put into question. Such a critique of the coherence of a text depends not on the question of audience interactivity over content, but on the concerns of cultural studies and critical theory which have argued for the incoherence of the text as that which is located in a network of inter-textuality (eg. Barthes, 1975, 1977) in which it is necessary to account for the form, the frame, the absent and the instability of context (Derrida, 1978, 1988). Nevertheless, the text persists as a unified, coherent and fixed whole – particularly as a recorded work – within the popular imaginary. As interactive engagement and participation re-emerge as features of audience desire and behaviour, that textual coherence is further interrogated, such that we witness questions over the textuality of, say, electronic games whereby there remains a pointed and fruitful indecidability between the game as text or play (Berger, 2002: 11–12; Pearce, 2002). I would argue that even as the text becomes more amorphous the ‘location’ of the text becomes increasingly difficult to place, particularly when it is digital and networked rather than carrying the ‘aura’ of the physical and the individual (Benjamin, 1992).

What occurs once interactivity is deemed to make available an aspect of participation within text-creation or the ability to alter, transform or re-distribute a text has been considered on the one hand the empowerment of audience (McMillan, 2002: 279, 285), and on the other the dissolution of the traditional concept of audiencehood (Brooker and Jermyn, 2003: 333; Webster, 1998: 190). Definitions of audience are of course diverse and contested, but by necessity have been subject to various forms of categorization, particularly where such categorizations occur in ways which give the audience the power to interpret, act, transform or redistribute different valencies. In her salient work Desperately Seeking the Audience (1991) Ien Ang, for example, categorises the audience across two paradigms – on the one hand a public and on the other, a market. Ang’s distinction is also of significance in demonstrating the gap between the audience desire for participation, and the authorial desire for textual control (Ang, 1991: 29). However, Ang’s dualist system is open to a reinterpretation in terms of the rise of interactive engagement: for Ang, the audience-as-public paradigm locates the audience in a transmission model of communication, viewing the audience as that which requests and, under paternalistic systems, requires information and meaning. This view of the audience is of a mass group of ‘receivers’ within a system of more-or-less ordered transference of meaning (Ang, 1991: 29). The desire for narrative interactivity under such a view would be seen to be a disruption of this order of transference, and would dissolve the centrist model on which transmissional systems are based. The audience-as-market notion, however, gives the question of transfers of meaning – or, indeed, material from which to make meaning in an ‘active audience’ conception – only a secondary level of importance, after the

[Cover: Interactive media, narrative control and reconceiving audience history]
primary business of providing goods and services to potential customers, aroused in order to maintain their interest (Ang, 1991: 29).

Certainly audience members and those who would ordinarily be defined by media industries as content-receivers or content-users are aware of the push-and-pull relationship between authorial/narrative control and audience interactivity. Edward Downes and Sally McMillan interviewed a number of users about the impact of computer-mediated interactive communication, finding responses categorizable across the three areas of the revolutionary potential of interactivity, the general consequences to media consumption, and uncertainty over the future of media use (Downes and McMillan, 2000). What is interesting about the interview extracts used by the authors is the location of questions of interactivity within the semantics of threat, empowerment, opposition to media industries and communications control. As one respondent put it, interactivity ‘threatens whole industries, threatens whole professions’ (Downes and McMillan, 2000: 164). Another found that the ability to access and utilize knowledge was in general empowering, and located this empowerment in controller/user and corporate/media citizen dyads: ‘Because I have a voice now. I think the threat is to existing institutions and the old ways of doing things’ (Downes and McMillan, 2000: 164). Although it appears their respondents valued the concept of a threat to authorship diversely, others seemed to speak more in terms of wresting control from the author (Downes and McMillan, 2000: 170), and creating a territory or space as a sense of ‘place’ within new computer-mediated environments (Downes and McMillan, 2000: 166).

**PUSH-AND-PULL: AUDIENCE INTERACTIVITY IN THE HISTORY OF THE MEDIUM**

Interactive engagement versus authorial control can be witnessed across a wide array of mediums, both ancient and contemporary. There is little scope in the present article to provide a thorough and well-nuanced discussion of a large number of mediums, but I do want to trace some of this push-and-pull juxtaposition across a longer period with a brief example: the evolution of media forms from theatre as a real-time event through recorded analogue media forms, such as cinema and television, towards the internet and electronic gaming as contemporary popular forms of interactive engagement with the text.

It would not be too great a risk to suggest that the contemporary, late-20th-century form of live, real-time theatre is one which in its dominant, middle-class mode returns to an even earlier form in the presentation of the sacred, in which any attempt to interfere or involve oneself from the audience is to cross a line, seats-to-stage, the penetration of the sacred space that, to use Julia Kristeva’s term, would be an act of abjection (Kristeva, 1982). To speak during a play is not merely to disrupt the audience and
actors, but to disrupt the theatrical work as a finished work, put it into
question, destabilize the finality and exact reproducibility of the play. Thus
where the very architectural aesthetics of the Greek amphitheatre in which
sponsors’ interactive engagement with the text/play is contrasted against the
Victorian stage is in the restriction of the audience members from exercising
an explicit ability to control or interrupt the unfolding, real-time text.
Under the Victorian model, cinema is thus viewed as the theatre
performance par excellence, because it is restricted by a screen operating as
an impenetrable seam and by the lapse in time that halts any possibility of
destabilization of the text as a finished text (although censorship
commissions, cinema management, equipment problems and other factors
might come to be seen to interfere with the finished, authored work, and
such disturbances are usually treated in contemporary culture with some
irritation for the very same reasons). For Williams, it is highly reductive to
treat the cinema as a non-interactive form of theatre, but it is a comparison
that is often made, and one which views the mechanical technologies of the
20th-century as impersonal compared with earlier forms of communication:

Where the theatre presented actors, the cinema presents the photographs of
actors. Where the meeting presented a man speaking, the wireless presents a
voice, or television a voice and a photograph. Points of this kind are relevant,
but need to be carefully made. It is not relevant to contrast an evening spent
watching television with an evening spent in conversation, although this is
often done. There is, I believe, no form of social activity which the use of
these techniques has replaced. (Williams, 1997: 21)

It is in the fact that forms of theatre as interactive have been replaced
neither by cinema nor by the sacred ‘textuality’ of the theatre which attests
to the push-and-pull struggle between an audience desire to participate and
an authorial desire to maintain a controlled textual coherence and
impenetrability. Space has always been made for the more interactive forms
of theatre, particularly in texts we would ordinarily call avant-garde, and
while they continue to be marginal, they are open to being viewed as small
niches of resistance to mass-media closure against interactive forms.

The basis on which we traditionally differentiate the theatre as a
communication text from the scripted or printed book, the cinema, the
television, the radio, and the html internet website is that for the greater
part the latter make available a text that is recorded as opposed to one
disseminated in ‘real time’ or, if it is to be in real time such as the television
‘live coverage’ news for example, it is distributed through a one-way non-
interactive system, and thereby not available for interruption, interference, or
transformation in any form. Even in the case of a live, real-time event, the
audience is disempowered from a creative and transformative role by the
simple fact of distance: broadcast mass media, as Meadows suggests,
effectively separates media program-makers and audiences (Meadows, 1994:
133). Various developments do, of course, allow greater user control, and we can figure the development and the utilization of these as a part of a struggle against authorial and industrial control over the text – the pull from the audience. In the case of television, the advent of the video recorder not only released the text from the broadcast imperatives of time (Cubitt, 1991: 42), but allowed a user to watch at various speeds, forward through segments of little interest, re-watch the entire text a second or third time and, for the more advanced, utilize two video recorders to reorder sequences or sections of the text (Jenkins, 1992: 212, 2003; Penley, 1997: 114), thereby allowing an early form of narrative interactivity which provided control over the text and the narrative.

There is nothing new in this point, other than to suggest that should we look for causal factors in the rise and popularity of interactive entertainment, it would always be wise to avoid a technological determinist approach and to view this emergence as one activated from within culture. As Raymond Williams attests, understanding media technologies depends on seeing them as located within culture and within an interpretation of their development that restores intention to the process of development:

The technology would be seen, that is to say, as being looked for and developed with certain purposes and practices already in mind. . . . [T]hese purposes and practices would be seen as direct: as known social needs, purposes and practices to which the technology is not marginal but central. (Williams, 1990: 13)

With this point in mind, it is suggested that one way in which we can view the historical development of various media technologies is from a perspective which understands their emergence as driven by a cultural – that is, popular – demand for the democratization of control over the text. This is a demand to take it out of the hands of authors, to allow not only the recording and re-recording of the text and some ability to distribute it independently, but to re-sequence the text, re-order it, change its quality, and so on, all in accord with the imaginative requirements and gratifications of the audience-user. It is, of course, digital technologies which are then to be understood as the culmination of this cultural desire in that they allow the greatest ease of textual manipulation, copying, and distribution across a network. What such technologies do is effectively restore to the audience their capacity to participate in the same ways in which a contemporary culture views ancient Greek theatre and communicative forms as being driven by active and creative participation over transmission.

**BIG BROTHER AND INTERACTIVE LIP-SERVICE GESTURES**

The reality TV phenomenon *Big Brother* makes use of various media networking and convergences in order to indicate the potential for
interactivity that skirts around the uni-directional mode of the standard television broadcast. With an entertainment phenomenon crossing television broadcast, internet updates and feedback forums, telephone and cellphone voting and most recently SMS text messaging (bi-directional), the interactive potential of a television show is provided through alternative means, rather than waiting until various forms of interactive television can be developed in a format decentralized enough to allow participatory engagement through the one medium (Kim and Sawhney, 2002). They explicitly market interactivity as both the promise and the premise of the reality TV experience, suggesting that ‘viewers/consumers will have a greater ability to participate in the production process’ (Andrejevich, 2002: 260).

If, as Michael Meadows puts it, Electronic mass media ‘effectively separate media program-makers and audiences with little chance for interaction’ (Meadows, 1994: 133), then it is important to see the ways in which various media industries are making use of this separation not merely to maintain authorial control, but to utilize forms of ‘lip service’ interactivity that encourage the pretence of interactive engagement with the text. Indeed, the capacity to provide an audience with the sense that collective voting has changed the composition of the household and thereby altered the composition of the narrative as it proceeds temporally, is a form of interactivity, and it is one which obscures the authorial control in the provision, selection and ordering of segments from the household footage as the major vector through which the narrative travels in combination with the ‘nodal’ commentary provided by the programme’s various host(s). A recent television programme broadcast on Australia’s Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) TwentyfourSeven asks viewers to vote for one of three potential story outcomes each week via SMS or on the show’s website. The narrative is set in the offices of a fictitious entertainment magazine, and it is this engagement with the plot that is the major and central factor in the experience for the audience (Nguyen, 2002). The interactive engagement with the plot is by no means a purely lip-service gesture – rather, it deals with considerable character development and provides a strong sense that the audience member has a level of interactive participation in the creation and future of the plot which, unlike the Reality TV programmes such as Big Brother with its emphasis on randomness, is presented as a programmatic plot.

Whether or not such a choice-based interactivity arrangement allows a genuine sense of creativity is a different matter. To put such an arrangement in terms of Umberto Eco’s open/closed texts categorizations, the open text which deliberately gives an audience more than one possible interpretation is, in fact, less open to creative interpretation than the closed text which, for Eco, is variably and diversely interpretable along individual and imaginative trajectories (Eco, 1979). An open text calls for the active cooperation of its
reader, ‘but also wants this reader to make a series of interpretive choices which even though not infinite are, however, more than one’ (Eco, 1979: 4). The closed text, on the other hand, which we might consider any televisual text deliberately and explicitly designed for transference through a uni-directional system, is actually open to a greater number of ‘aberrant’ decodings by non-average readers, since such texts have, as a minimum requirement, a sociologically ‘average’ reader in mind. This thinking would suggest that the open text, such as TwentyfourSeven, would in fact direct its readers to any of the three possible interactive plot-lines and thereby foreclose on thinking through the possibilities for co-creation that might occur along other lines, whereas the closed text, perhaps an episode of Neighbours, would be more likely open to a broader array of interpretations and co-creative possibilities – if only the interactive potential was put in place to allow such co-creative participation to its fullest extent. Nevertheless, the gesture towards interactivity here does indeed appear to be one made to the audience, but only as a tactical, if non-conscious, movement from the perspective of advantaging the media industry and its position of authorial control.

As Andrejevich argues, the promise of interactivity from a media industry’s perspective is one which is given within the realm of profit-rearing, and certainly in the case of Reality TV the added costs of providing an interactive component is off-set by effectively off-loading the dial-up, internet access and other component costs of interactive engagement to the consumers themselves (Andrejevich, 2002: 256; Mougayar, 1998: 170). Dallas Smythe points out the ways in which the labour of audiences is bought by advertisers, enforcing the work to ‘create the demand for advertised goods which is the purpose of monopoly-capitalist advertisers’ (Smythe, 1995: 222). The labour of the audience is their ‘attention’ or ‘potential attention’ sold on to the advertiser, and the act of labouring is the learning of ‘appropriate’ spending practices. Smythe believes audience members may resist this ‘work’ but that ‘the advertiser’s expectations are realized sufficiently that the results perpetuate the system of demand management’ (p. 222). What occurs in the gesture towards interactivity is that audiences experience a novel means by which audience maximization is intended (Ang, 1991: 27), although it should be pointed out that audience maximization is not always to be collapsed with a profit motive. It is the illusion of participation that is powerful and compelling to audiences in general (Schultz, 1994: 108–9), and as Australian media commentator Laurie Zion put it in reference to the compulsion towards DVD purchase: ‘The driving force behind this . . . is the consumer hunger for extra features’ (Zion, 2002).

Under this analysis it is suggested that an industry maintaining a certain form of authorial control over a cross-genre drama/gameshow media...
experience is presenting its own tactic by which to allow a gesture towards interactivity, without actually forfeiting ground in the challenge over narrative control. Of course, the extent to which audiences and individual audience members find such a form of interactivity compelling over a longer period remains to be seen, and it may indeed be the case that the reader of the ‘closed’ text will find compelling new ways in which to engage and participate interactively in reconfiguration, transformation and co-creation of the text.

MULTIMEDIA FLASHES: DIGITAL WARS, NARRATIVE TERRITORY

The push-and-pull relationship between content creators and interactive audiences is witnessed perhaps most strongly of all in new digital media, and in a range of products, programmes, sites and texts. Admittedly, there are many everyday, practical purposes for an author to maintain a certain form of control over the text produced. In my own teaching, for example, I tend to make available notes and summaries in an electronic capacity. In order to prevent students from cutting and pasting material back into their assessed work, and to avoid having notes altered – perhaps misrepresenting other authors – and redistributed, I would ordinarily dump that material into an acrobat.pdf document, under the view that fewer students would have access to a full-capacity Acrobat programme to unlock the text from the file. This is about control, and it is about the ways in which new digital forms of distribution have allowed the ease to alter and utilize a document, to interactively engage with the text, such that practical forms of control are occasionally warranted. The ethics of doing so are, nevertheless, quite complex, and I could not say that I am necessarily comfortable at all times with my own attempts to control not only the re-distribution but the content of a document. This does, however, illustrate the ways in which the push-and-pull of author versus (intended) audience control over the text is heightened dramatically in a digital environment.

An interesting example is seen in the recent shift of much internet content from hypertext mark-up language formats to the more professional production of .swf files through programmes like Macromedia Flash and Flash MX. Although this is part of an overall and continuing professionalization among the general user demographic who are fast picking up the creative tools used initially in digital industry environments, it has also been about shutting down the accessibility of content, preventing content alteration – including that of an end-user with only one of several hundred thousand digital copies on a home computer – and stopping individual parts of a textual product, such as photographs or sections of text, being copied, individualized, cut-and-pasted into other texts, or stored individually and independently of the rest of the content. In the completion...
of a Macromedia Flash text in its conversion from a .fla file to a .swf file, the possibilities for an audience-user or recipient to engage interactively in active reconfiguration, transformation and utilization of the text are shut down (Probets, n.d.). By locking down the code or preventing its copying or printing – an in-built feature of Macromedia Flash programme (Rey, 2002: 334) – the author-producer is able to maintain control over the text and its narrative, no matter how hypertextual that narrative might prove to be. Indeed, any interactivity built into the text will be choice-based and via the options presented by the author-producer, much as Eco’s ‘open’ text described above, and thereby relegating the extent of interactivity to the conditions set by the content creator. This is the push.

The pull from the audience in the continuing desire to have participation and interactivity – that is, the capacity to change, alter or utilize a document on one’s own terms – comes in the form of the development of what are sometimes collectively known as either swifty or swiffer programs (named after the flash extension .swf). One such swiffer program is defined as follows:

Swiffer is a surprisingly useful MS-DOS routine that easily creates an HTML file for any SWF document and automatically puts both it and the new HTML file in the Active Sync ‘My Documents’ folder. All you do is drop the SWF file on the desktop Swiffer icon, give the HTML a name when prompted, sync, then use Pocket File Explore to find the HTML file and then execute it. (http://members.cox.net/nnsydev/#FlashBrowser)

Other similar amateur programs are able to remove protection tags from a .swf file, unlock the code to be edited, reconfigured or utilized otherwise, and a Swiff Extractor program allows the extraction of JPEG files from the previously protected .swf format. The development of tools by which to regain a certain level of control over an authored, distributed text, to copy aspects and to re-arrange, are all part of the pull from the audience in the struggle for textual and narrative control.

Clearly the push-back response from the media and computing industries is the development of ever more complex forms of control, one recent example being the Microsoft plans for Windows.NET server technologies with incorporated Digital Rights Management (DRM) programming, giving media conglomerates complete control over the ways in which their content is viewed by consumers. As Nathan Cochrane put it, ‘Microsoft has unveiled its vision for the future digital media landscape and it’s a world where content creators are king’ (Cochrane, 2002). Part of the process of developing new DRM programming is to force the makers of media players to ensure their software isn’t used to view suspect media streams – a process not dissimilar from the DVD-Copy Control Association that is used by Hollywood for dealing with DVD makers. The addition here is to utilize
networking to request a licence key from a copyright clearing house, which
will be re-issued each time a player begins a particular track, file or
document. As Cochrane puts it:

It enables finely tuned licensing terms and conditions, such as limited 24-hour
play, a set number of plays over a given time, or an outright purchase licence
that lets the viewer watch the video or listen to music whenever they want. It
will also be used to bind content to a specific PC, so that it cannot be
redistributed around a house or played on a different device. . . . The idea is ‘to
keep honest users honest’, . . . by greatly restricting the ability of consumers to
dictate how the media they consume is used. (Cochrane, 2002)

The rhetoric here makes clear the ways in which a particular form of
struggle between author-audience or creator-consumer is ongoing in the
planning and development stages of new technological evolution and
growth. The critical response has been to articulate a fear over the abolition
of consumer rights to such forms as timeshifted video recording and ‘fair
use’ for the purposes of education and criticism.

What interactivity teaches us about the various cultural arrangements
between the audience-text-author is that distribution, narrative sequencing
and textual authenticity should not be seen as the natural consign of authors
who may ‘lose’ it in digital and interactive environments. Rather, the
‘control’ of these features is part of an ongoing struggle between producer/
consumer or author/audience, and one which may well be reaching a
culminative point in which the distinctions between these two collapse
usefully and productively. Invoking this point as a form of resistance is not,
however, to suggest a wholesale collapse of textual production, loss of
assignment of authorial name or voice, or controls over distribution should
be done away with altogether. Rather, what is needed is considerable
decision making at policy and regulation level which simultaneously permits
the continuation of various media industries while facilitating audience
empowerment over texts. Considered public debate on the question of this
push-and-pull between the author function and the audience desire for
creativity is yet to occur, although an interesting case in which a public
outcry at a form of interactivity that utilized networking and convergence
occurred recently in New Zealand. The New Zealand Symphony Orchestra
released in 2002 a promotional CD, sent out by physical mail to 8000
people as part of its marketing for its 2003 season. As a result of the
interactive potential of listeners to use a networked programme such as
MusicMatch Jukebox or RealOne Player to ‘name’ tracks on a CD that are
subsequently archived in a CD database – an option for a small gesture of
co-creative participation – other users found that the CD tracks had been
given the names of explicit sex acts. Rather than being treated as a mere prank or very minor misbehaviour, New Zealand police became involved in investigating how this occurred with a search for the source (*The Age*, 2002). The small public outcry in this case indicates, perhaps most strongly of all, the lack of preparedness for genuine user co-creative potential through digital mediums.

**References**


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