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HCI Cannot Be Used To Evaluate Art

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Art provides exact information of how to rearrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own expanded facilities. The artist shows us how to "ride with the punch", rather than "taking it on the chin".

– Marshal McLuhan

INTRODUCTION

While my interests are genuine and resonate strongly with the theme of this workshop, I will take an adversarial approach to the evaluation of art. I do this not to simply be oppositional but to promote the direct discussion of art and debate the appropriateness of its evaluation by computer scientists, designers, and the like.

Critiquing Art

I agree with the workshop organizers that it is not constructive to evaluate interactive artwork under the same guidelines as traditional HCI work. There are often extremely divergent goals associated with artists and HCI researchers. Yes, there may be obvious parallels such as an artist that wants to insure that their work is correctly interpreted. However, art critique \neq interactive art evaluation. Artists are not simply entertainers that must make working systems for users to easily interact with. Artists are creating systems, tools, artifacts, conceptual pieces, and the like based on their personal inner reflections, social observations, and other sources. They need to make works that fail in every way imaginable – intentionally. They need to design works that are obvious as well as vague. The work they create is almost always considered complete as declared by the artist and not up for re-design and modification at the whims of gallery users. If we demanded user evaluations of artworks, many conceptual works and numerous revolutionary art pieces such as *The Fountain* (Duchamp 1917) would almost certainly not be part of our art history. Or more recently, why would Chris Burden be permitted to create a work that intentionally destroyed a museum (*Goliath*)?

Is Easy to Interact Art Better Art?

If interactive pieces are difficult to use or interpret it may be a result of poor UI design by the artists. But the artist may not care. Duchamp does not care if you know or even believe the existence of an object in *With Hidden Noise* (Duchamp 1916). User studies of these works would almost certainly lead to some redesign so that such pieces

could be more easily understood. This is contradictory to the very essence of art as a practice. The element of such difficult interaction with the piece is likely part of the artistic message. Artists are not typically operating in a constrained design space that undergoes some sort of necessary user study and evaluation and then re-design. There may, of course, be cases where an artist indeed wants their piece to be more precisely used and interpreted. In those cases they may employ some form of design evaluation with users. But this study in itself is part of the art piece. It is likely a commentary on how scientific studies and ethnographic observations, while beneficial to many designs, are also creating new socially designed objects that place humans in the design loop, namely to mimic the design loop of research. There is a fundamental question here. Is there a need for user studies and evaluation for interactive new media art? I believed that this important question has not been adequately debated within the HCI community.

EVAL-U-ATE ME

Propones will tell you that such interactive new media art needs to be evaluated and optimized to improve user experience and understanding. They argue for a new set of evaluation techniques for interactive art based on the claim that such interactive pieces are encountered in “new” contexts where existing HCI techniques cannot be applied.

But the usual proposed list of “new” evaluation techniques for interactive art are not new at all but familiar to even traditional HCI researches. For example, they claim that existing HCI techniques for interactive art do not apply because interactive art is often *encountered in groups*, that the rich *background of the user* is a factor, that *narrative and metaphor* play dominant roles, and that the setting is in a museum or gallery rather than a *laboratory context*. However, (*subjects in groups*) HCI researchers do in fact perform user studies in groups. In fact groups are often preferred because of known and well understood group dynamics. (*User backgrounds*) HCI researches are indeed passionately interested in and strongly consider subjects' individual interpretations, understandings, attitudes, personality, culture, and expectations of technology during user studies. They often ask such questions explicitly during user evaluations and are not simply interested in age, gender, and education. (*Narrative and metaphors*) Much of HCI is centered around metaphors (*i.e.* the desktop

metaphor) and HCI researchers are very aware of studying the results of their attempted metaphors. Did users understand the metaphor as intended or was it too vague or lacking of a clear mapping to a real life representation? These are questions that HCI researchers do indeed ask. (*Setting in the laboratory*) This is really about context and one can observe first hand the effect that a change in setting can have on an evaluation. In fact one can easily canonize an object as art to people simply by placing it within a gallery setting even when it is not designed as an art piece.

You Can't Evaluate What You Can't Evaluate

There is a major fundamental question that has yet to be addressed by the HCI community – why should there be user studies and evaluation techniques at all for interactive art? I believe there may be convincing arguments for this in some cases but it is certainly not a settled debate. Primarily, as stated before, art in its fine art practice is not

subject to user studies. Art practice and HCI research are entirely different types of objects and cannot be compared in the typical manner in which the HCI community of researchers practice. This is not to say there are indeed parallels and similarities to draw between them. It is indeed a debate I look forward to.

CONCLUSION

Despite my initial oppositional stand, I passionately encourage this debate and the resulting dialogue between the arts and sciences. In fact it is often artists that inspire us with wildly brainstormed concepts that are often scorned as having no real practical application. Instead it is often these art lead concepts that inspire greater ideas from others – advancing the whole research community. For that we, perhaps especially HCI researchers, owe a debt of gratitude to the art community and the interventionist actions from artists.