

Interactive media has synthesized the traditional art forms of writing, music, painting, sculpture and the moving image. CD-ROM technology and the Web can incorporate 2D and 3D graphics, movies, animations, text and sound. An added tool to this mix has redefined the notion of artistic experience--user interaction, the user's power of choice to co-create a digital artwork within artist-defined parameters.

User interaction includes clicking, dragging and dropping and roll-overs to modify on-screen elements. Physically interacting with on-screen-elements is an empowering act, because the user becomes cause in the scenario. In a digital interactive artwork, the user engages in an artistic feedback loop to transform artistic elements and relationships-- changes in color, shape, texture, text, iconic and textual menus, animation, music, sound, voice and screen transitions. The user makes choices about these over time, creating ever new and updated information configurations and perceptions. The user builds an iterative cycle of aesthetic relationships, and through this cycle of perception and co-creation, fulfills the meaning of the work.

The power of choice in an interactive artwork is like a brush to a painter, chisel to a sculptor, pen to a writer or piano for a composer. The act of choosing allows for co-creation with the artist. I am not referring to video games or financial software, which are essentially about winning and entering/tracking of data. Interactive digital art differs from these in that it requires a series of transformations relying on the physical, contemplative and perceptual powers of the individual to unfold an aesthetic code in time and space through choice. If the artist creates a code or syntax (a group of navigational and interaction "rules") by which the user relates aesthetic entities (shape, color, sound, text) through choice, the experience can be a healing journey because the user is accepting responsibility for co-creating unity through cause and effect.

Note I say unity. A Dada-like approach to interactive art, where the user is free to click on pretty much anything and link to pretty much anywhere within the work, lacks a holistic creative vision and forces a kind of chaos on the user. The artist's role is the same as it ever was--to create clear boundaries (the aesthetic idea) realized through form and content where one finds a greater freedom and wholeness by interacting with an artistic vision, or metaphorical "play."

Someone who has knowledge of religious or spiritual mysteries is sometimes called a hierophant. This person has an ability to perceive the workings of inner forces behind physical realities. An artist-created code used to create an interactive digital artwork is like a hierophant. The hierophant can be an image, sound or text and remains in a frozen state until activated and initiated by the user. Once initiated (into the aesthetic mystery) by the user, the code moves invisible forces and qualities to modify physical onscreen elements. Each object, word or sound is in a sense sacred and can be used as a starting point for revelation of an aesthetic whole. In a digital interactive artwork the user co-creates the artwork, augmenting his or her perceptions along the way in an evolution of metaphor through the unfolding of harmonic relationships, toward unity.

An example of a hierophant could be the image of a wave crashing onto shore. Within this image are sets of forces and qualities that can modify other elements on the screen--an image of a chair

and bird. If the user clicks on the crashing wave, this action modifies the chair by morphing its shape into a curved wooden bench accompanied by the sound of water. The action can also modify the bird who utters the words: "Sailors found me all wet by the ocean." User perception relates these as harmonic qualities, because each modification has "borrowed" qualities from the last cause and effect, creating a unity greater than the sum of their parts. This series of cause and effect relationships engages the user in harmonic aesthetic relationships, or a cybernetic system of metaphor. Because the harmonic relationships between objects and qualities is caused and perceived by the user, he or she experiences a healing or unifying effect through their relationship.

In a cybernetic system of metaphor (a series of aesthetic feedback loops) the user perceives unity in related sounds, text and images. The artists' perception and rules for creating the artwork, which used to be a passive or subconscious presence in traditional art forms, now becomes a conscious tool for the user to co-create. The work becomes the fulfillment of a code. This once-invisible artist's code has become a conscious syntax for co-creation, consisting of artistic elements, navigational rules and systems of interaction, Users physically unfold the art syntax and create unity in the work.

Healing is possible with an aesthetic multimedia interaction where the artist has embodied an artistic unity in the code/syntax and the user is empowered to move beyond duality (stress) to find unity among dissimilar elements. The artist's code becomes a hierophant to help an individual discover and perceive the mystery and hidden unity of the work resulting in a harmonic convergence between the user and the work.

The healing temples of the Greeks and Egyptians used color and sound harmonics to heal body, mind and emotions. Could digital art interactions using color, moving images, graphics, text and sound be designed as a twenty-first century equivalent? The personal computer station and multi-user kiosk are potential healing places. The software could even measure the reduction of stress by users to validate these programs as "healing technologies." Artists can assist others to a place of greater well-being through interactive design. An electronic syntax of light and sound elements, with user interactions guided by an artist-created code, can empower the individual via choice to create a healing cybernetic journey of aesthetic perception.

BARBARA BUCKNER is a Producer and Project Manager for Fortune 1000 corporate communications, specializing in video and interactive media projects including CD-ROM, Web and kiosk development. For many years, she was an independent video artist and exhibited work internationally, some of which is housed in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She has also taught fine art video production at the School of Visual Arts, the Art Institute of the Chicago, Binghamton University, SUNY Buffalo and New York University. She can be contacted at [twelveagles@earthlink.net](mailto:twelveagles@earthlink.net).