er...stolen

michael archer
It’s a simple computer game. There’s a fleet of gunships that you can use to fire at a target that is, virus-like, bleeding destructive depth charges down the screen. A quartet of protective blocks can be hidden behind until such time as they, too, are destroyed. The format is familiar from early video games such as ‘Space Invaders’, but with a twist: instead of firing at the usual assortment of military hardware the target at which you aim is a text. Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead’s *Triggerhappy* presents the player with a dilemma — whether to go for maximum obliteration or to pause in order to read the words before they dissolve. The text is a quotation from Michel Foucault’s essay, ‘What is an Author?’, which, together with Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’ remains a key exploration of the degree to which the coherent identity of the writer is an effect, rather than the origin, of a text. Foucault opens by observing two characteristics of writing: that it creates a space into which the (writing) subject constantly disappears, and that it is a way of warding off death. And he ends with a host of questions:

“What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject-functions?” And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: “What difference does it make who is speaking?”

What is to be done? Should one kill these words or read them? And is to make that choice tantamount to choosing between practice and theory, between doing something and thinking about what you’re doing? Thomson and Craighead’s work gives us the choice, and at the same time exposes that choice as less than straightforward: to choose either option is demonstrate a mode of existence; to use the text, to appropriate it for oneself, and to find a place for oneself as subject within it.

And within the ambiguities put into play by the work one can discern a further problem: what does it mean, in this context, in connection with this technology, to exhibit
the rapt attentiveness of the trigger-happy? Timothy Allen Jackson, in considering the nature of a ‘digital aesthetic’, turns to *picnolepsis* — Paul Virilio’s term for the frequent, often unremarked dissociation of the mind’s conscious thought processes from the body’s sensorimotor functioning — in his attempt to analyse what is going on in such cases. It is this kind of dissociation, he says, that we exhibit over sustained periods when we are absorbed in a computer game. But while this may suggest that we are not particularly aware of the physical state of our bodies during such times, we are ‘still actively constructing meaning’ in such circumstances\. The player of computer games, in other words, is finding rather than losing him- or herself. *Triggerhappy* presents us with the similar situation, but at one remove. Rather than a mere ‘finding’ or ‘losing’ of oneself, it interrogates in what such discovery or loss might consist. Who is found, and where?

‘Is anybody there?’ — a direct and straightforward question that, in some ways, has become the key enquiry following the appearance and development of internet technology. Under the guise of a polite request designed, perhaps, to initiate a dialogue, it presents all of our fears about dissolution of identity and loss of place, and leads our thoughts beyond that to the dread of non-being. It is a familiar question, too – the perennial precursor to countless ghost and horror stories – yet for all its clichéd obviousness it finds new purchase when used as the term for a Google search by Thomson and Craighead. The fact that the results of this search were printed on to Egyptian cotton tea towels and offered for sale through the artists’ online retail outlet, dot-store, only adds to the conflicting qualities of levity and profundity in the query. Is there any ‘body’ to be encountered anywhere within the vast hyperspatial domain of the web? And, if there is, from what possible ‘there’ could we understand any response to the query to have come?

Everyday conversation and media discussion on the topic of digital technology is subject to two recurrent themes — those of immersion and immateriality. The idea of immersion is a powerful one and is encountered frequently in writing on internet use. Instead of accessing the net in order to retrieve information, much as one might use a library to find a book, we are said to experience ourselves
as being immersed in it or to be caught within its structure. This experience is a spatial one, the bits of information and the various possible linkages between them that we encounter on our net-based adventures constituting a sort of electromagnetic architecture, a virtual environment that invites a qualitatively new kind of habitation. At the same time, arguments about, and analyses of digital technology seem to push us inexorably toward acceptance of the fact that the things of the world are becoming separated into their constituent parts. The material from which an object is made is detached from knowledge of the form that material takes, since form is, according to this view, information, and information can be represented digitally. A communication, no longer ink distributed in certain configurations across the surface of a piece of paper in the form of a letter, is really now only a package of information that can be sent from one computer terminal to another, or from a terminal to a fax machine, or to a printer, or to a mobile phone, or a palm pilot, or whatever. And that information can be displayed on a screen, or on some other piece of paper, or through speakers. This mutability and mobility gives rise to the mistaken notion that it makes sense to think in terms of a kind of disembodiment. William J. Mitchell, for example, talks of a process in which dematerialisation is followed by materialisation: ‘You separate an object’s form from its material, transmit the dematerialised form, and eventually re-embodi the form with new but indistinguishable material. You dematerialise, then re-materialise. You keep the bits constant, but substitute new atoms.’ But this, as Mitchell realises, is only the beginning. There need, in fact, be no original embodiment to act as model since the information file can be used to generate any number of instances in a wide variety of materials and a range of sizes.

One of the effects of viewing the digital file/material substrate relationship in this way is to reinforce the old form/content view of the work of art. And here dematerialisation comes together with the idea of immersion, because what gets immersed in netspace is a consciousness conceived as separable from the body within which it resides. In a simple, not to say fatuous comparison, the mind/body split is rendered equivalent to the form/content distinction. It is an
equivalence thrown into serious question, if not rendered irrelevant, by Alison Craighead’s conviction that what she and Jon Thomson are exploring through their practice is the idea of information as material. Far from thinking of the words, images and sounds encountered on a web surf as immaterial, phantasmatic effects of the system, they confront the fact not only that they are open to manipulation and organisation, but also that such engagement is rooted in and bears upon the physical and the real.

Their development of what they call ‘template cinema’ is a case in point. The first instance of this was the group of works called *Short Films About Flying*. Each film, anachronistically modelled on silent movies, is built from the same basic set of parts: a visual sequence punctuated by intertitles carrying a written narrative is augmented by a musical accompaniment. The online feed from a camera on the perimeter of Boston’s Logan Airport provides the visuals, a randomly selected music radio station gives us a soundtrack, and the story is generated from successive results of Google searches alternatively using the terms ‘He said’, and ‘She said’. These last elements are on the whole found in blogs, since, as Craighead observes, online diaries are packed with narratives that ‘lend themselves to being er...stolen’.

Naturally, the films can be downloaded and stored for offline viewing, but in the first instance they are sourced and generated online by means of Thomson and Craighead’s template programme. Acknowledging that there is a specific technological environment both within which they are realised, and through which they are made accessible, is a quality net-based art such as this shares with a number of precursors – for example, the photograms of Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, much work in sound, and even the telephone poetry of Bryon Gysin. The technology is not used merely as a device to record or represent a reality that exists elsewhere; it is, rather, embraced as an extension to, and qualifier of, one’s total spatial possibilities. It is only within this space that such material fragments can be handled and placed in relation to one another. Thomson describes the experience by likening the web to a piece of string in which he and Craighead are tying a number of knots. The centrally-placed viewer is then able to draw relationships between these otherwise unrelated nodes.
Thomson and Craighead’s interest in data as material, and the enquiry their work conducts into the modalities of that materiality, stands against the romantic, would-be revolutionary view of the internet that David Sanford Horner has referred to as cyber-idealism. Horner is sceptical of much of the emancipatory talk inspired by internet and virtual technologies. His doubt stems from the degree to which approbation of the freedoms to be discovered online – the freedom to associate, the freedom of/from identity, the freedom, ultimately, to escape the consequences of one’s actions – rests upon models of human interaction derived from science fiction and fantasy. Horner wants to draw a distinct line between fact and fiction, between the way things are and the way we might be tempted to imagine them becoming, somehow and at some unspecified future moment. The problem with such a view, as Thomson and Craighead reveal to us, is that this line between what is and what might be, is not always so easy to discern. You could hit a page recently, for example, and read this:

A videotape posted on an Islamist Web site apparently shows two men standing on a sidewalk — blindfolded, with their hands bound behind their backs — in front of a banner with the name ‘al Qaeda in Iraq’ in Arabic. Minutes later, the men were beheaded as punishment for delivering food to a U.S. military base.

If you had arrived at that page via a certain route, your reading of these words could have been done to a musical accompaniment. Dramatic, perhaps, in keeping with the impact of the story, or contemplative, as an inducement to consider the implications of the event, or melancholic, as an adjunct to a realisation of humankind’s unending inhumanity, or jubilant, in celebration of another blow against the tyranny of the oppressor, or …or… There is death, which is final and incontrovertible, and around this death is a penumbra of assumption and interpretation, of varying points of view and the judgements consequent upon their associated systems of values. The news story was published by CNN on their website, and the means to adding the musical accompaniment via a linked site constructed by Thomson and Craighead. CNN Interactive just got more interactive
offers the reader a varied menu of musical styles. Choosing from this provides a soundtrack of generic, manufactured music of the required sort to colour one’s reading of the news. Where does the analysis of the news end; how does the necessary and inescapable task of imposing a narrative on the world by excerpting events from the daily flow and framing them for easier assimilation mesh with the equally strong narrativising tendencies of the assimilators? How, in other words, can that line between fact and fiction be held when the fictionalising which is a part of our comprehension of the world guides and informs any and every practical decision that is subsequently taken? A more recent engagement with online news sites is Decorative Newsfeeds, in which stories from the BBC website are fed through a programme that turns them into swirling, looping strings of text. Projected onto both sides of a screen suspended in the middle of the room, these brief synopses of current events become active presences, knotting and unravelling as they slither around the space before one’s eyes.

In both its title and its form Decorative Newsfeeds recognises that to experience the net is to experience a flow of signals, impulses or information that, while being transient and fugitive is nonetheless in an important respect malleable. Far from being mere disembodied energy flow, the moving strings of words are engaged with by the viewer as part of the larger activity of becoming acquainted with, and moving around within the space of the gallery here and now. In her analysis of cyberspace as a realm into which the user can so very easily be seduced, N Katherine Hayles maintains the idea established in the fiction of William Gibson that what connects with a computer’s data banks is the ‘human sensorium’; which is to say that it is the brain and nervous system that becomes linked into the computer’s circuitry. The body, somehow, and however notionally, gets left behind. Michel Serres appears to reiterate this view in his questioning of what it means to think of a ‘here and now’ in relation to a flow:

Maintenant, now. What is the maintenant? The present participle of a verb like hold (tenir) in the hand (main), or to maintain. Maintenance. Now this solid object, the stature of a god, tablet or basin, I hold or have it in hand. I cannot
do this for a liquid, or fluid in general. Now time flows. I no more have time in hand than I can dam the water with my palm. Montaigne plunged his into the water: if he does not move it the current flows by running through his fingers and around his palm; if he withdraws it, he does not keep a drop. There is no main-tenant, no maintenance, quod erat demonstrandum.

But then we think of Goethe, who speaks in his poem *Lied und Gebilde*, of what exquisite pleasure it is to plunge our fingers into the Euphrates and to let them drift to and fro in the liquid element. ‘And when the poet’s pure hand scoops water,’ concludes Goethe, ‘the water will become form.’

More recently, of course, Robert Smithson addressed the complex of connections between language and material, between the mental and the physical, between time flow and spatial disposition, and between the specifics of geographical location and placement in the generic space of a gallery:

One’s mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallisations break apart into deposits of gritty reason. Vast moving faculties occur in this geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way. This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries. This slow flowage makes one conscious of the turbidity of thinking. Slump, debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain. The entire body is pulled into the cerebral sediment, where particles and fragments make themselves known as solid consciousness. A bleached and fractured world surrounds the artist. To organise this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an aesthetic process that has scarcely been touched.

Thomson and Craighead’s art touches this aesthetic process; they clearly see that the new technology with which they predominantly work, and whose specific attributes they analyse and exploit, is in many respects but an extension of the industrial legacy that preoccupied artists such
as Smithson. ‘Of course traditionally the railway, cars, and air-travel become very much about infrastructural growth,’ says Thomson, ‘and historically they are about colonisation – certainly with the railway. So we’ve found ourselves looking at these old networking technologies in this new networked world.’ And just as, too, Smithson placed the anonymous, general gallery space and the multifarious, inchoate world in relationship through his articulation of the site/non-site duality, Thomson and Craighead make it abundantly evident to us that the tension between the active and passive aspects of our involvement in their works, and the contrast between the physical dimensions of a room and the abstract expanses of cyberspace, are both specific and productive. They make a point, for example, of always citing the URL for any material they appropriate. This is an act of common courtesy, of course, but its significance lies more in the stress it places on the fact that the resource is unique, and that it is locatable. That we cannot immediately identify the particular server on which the file sits is immaterial; its locatability can be simply demonstrated by our typing an address and hitting return. In locating it we help to locate ourselves in our own, shared environment. We find this writ large in Weather Gauge. A wall of display screens gives information on time and temperature. The temperatures, given in both Fahrenheit and Celsius, differ from screen to screen, and the times do too, so we can infer that they relate either to different global locations at a single instant, or to a certain place at various times. Every few minutes the screens are wiped and get updated with new information, at which time we can see that each carries information from a different city around the world. The time is now, always now, and the information on the screens is telling us what the world is like, here and there, in this here and now.

3 See, for example, Peter Dallow, ‘The Space of Information: Digital Media as Simulation of the Analogical Mind’, in S. R. Munt (ed), Technospaces: Inside the New Media, Continuum, 2001, pp57-70
5 Alison Craighead in an interview with Charlotte L Frost, PUBLICATION?, June 2003
6 Jon Thomson in an interview with Kris Cohen, PUBLICATION?, January 2005
7 David Sanford Horner, ‘Cyborgs and Cyberspace: Personal Identity and Moral Agency’, in Munt, op cit, p83
9 Michel Serres, The Birth of Physics, Clinamen Press, Manchester, 2000, p152
12 Interview with Kris Cohen