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This paper will attempt to give some verbal description and insight to the interfaces that comprise my thesis body of work. The work itself focuses on the absurdity of the current political and social scene as exemplified by the decisions of the current administration and reality television. These ideas are explored through the use of interactive web based art works. The paper shall be presented in 3 parts. Part one will establish my general out look on the world and begin to study how this perspective has established itself in my work. Part two will attempt to give historical and contemporary context to the work, and part three will give descriptive information about the work.

ABSURDLY ALLOWABLE

By

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ABSURDLY ALLOWABLE

“Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. Yes, yes, it’s the most comical thing in the world.” – Samuel Beckett

As an MFA student over the past two years my work has undergone numerous changes before arriving at its current state. This paper will attempt to give some verbal description and insight to the work and shall be presented in 3 parts. Part one will establish my general outlook on the world and begin to study how this perspective has established itself in my work. Part two will attempt to give historical and contemporary context to the work, and part three will give descriptive information about the work.

The world is absurd, this is the only truth that I prescribe upon reality, and it is from this point that my work begins. There are a great number of events that occur that I will never understand, that I don’t think I’m meant to understand. They range from large-scale tragedies to reality television, and often the former make more sense than the latter. Currently examples of this absurdity can be seen in the war in Iraq and corporate control of mass media. Very often lives are dictated by absurd events because of simple acceptance. The general public yields to the idea that this is just how it is and therefore how it should be.

This is the approach I took with most of life prior to becoming a member of the Idiot Box, which is an improvisational comedy club in downtown Greensboro. This

served as a gateway into a personal study of comedy. It is through this study that I realized that one of the major assets of comedy as an art form was that it seemed to take power away from these unexplainably absurd and awful events. Breaking it down further I began to think about how exactly comedy was able to achieve this, and I found that it was largely by taking into question the idea of how things “should be.”

My early video attempts therefore focused on trying to show an alternative to the way history had played out. I attempted to pull from my improvisational comedy background and asked my friends for suggestions of tragic or violent events and also things that they found amusing. It was my attempt to juxtapose famous imagery of these events with the amusing actions such as monkeys and booty dancing. I was strongly influenced by Gabriele Matteos series of paintings depicting famous events if all participants had been nude. However, opposed to Matteo's work the inconsistency of the approach in my videos lead to only vague surface connects that didn't evolve beyond the original image from which I was working. The moments that were most successful in the work occurred when I departed more from the original image, and also when more interactivity was offered to the viewer. This shift offered a different approach from which to view events and therefore more greatly highlighted the idea of opportunity for change.

In the current interactive pieces I am still exploring the idea of selected tragedies and my perception of their absurdity. Rather than attempting to set up alternatives however I aim to point out the ridiculousness of these selected events. It is much like the famous playwright Ionesco stated, "you can only predict things after they have

happened". Also I believe that awareness begets power. My own idea of power is closely associated with my concept of control or at least the illusion of control. For this reason it seemed important to make all the works have some interactive element. Desire for interactivity lead directly to the use of games such as hang man. By not over complicating the interactivity I feel the absurdity is more highlighted since one can see the oddities easily in simple game or games they are relatively familiar with.

Also it became important to me to begin to use my own scanned drawings for these pieces. This allows me to communicate on my own terms rather than relying largely on the language of someone else as I was doing. I became forced to consider the formal issues of incorporating multiple drawings together to form a single images that were capable of functioning as cohesive games but without removing the individual character of the drawings. In addition, by using drawings rather than photographs everything was brought to an equal level of importance, as well as provided some opportunity for caricature and animation. Giving the works some elements of animation provided me with opportunity to explore how things interrelate. I believe that this cause and effect relationship is key to understanding how the absurdity of our world develops and therefore the animation plays a key role in the finished pieces.

As I explored the concept of game play it also raised questions for me about the issues of presentation. Since the pieces are dependent upon interaction the idea of a unique art object seemed rather stifling. Due to limitations of the museum setting it becomes difficult for multiple people to interact with the work and therefore most visitors revert back to the standard viewer relationship with the piece. This is because most of

the time they can only watch someone else interact with the work. For this reason I began to think of the work as web based pieces which can be viewed and interacted with by a great number more individuals. Even in the museum setting I hope to highlight that these are web based works by providing a small amount of contextual environment in the form of an office desk and chair.

In addition to Gabrielle Matteo my art has been influenced by a number of contemporary artist such as Hoogerbrugge. Both are web based artist who make use of flash and actionscripting in their works and also contain elements of humor in their work. Hoogerbrugge's series Neurotica, which comprises of many short animations, highlighted for me an idea of repetition. In his work the repetitive actions of the character push the idea of neurosis that is so prevalent in our society. For me this encouraged the idea of simple games that involve the same basic set of choices repeated rather than a progression and change in the obstacles one might face as they play the game.

Historically speaking my art owes thanks to the influence of other artist focusing on political issues such as Otto Dix and George Grosz. Both artists used their medium to make art that questioned the society in which they existed. Grosz considered himself a propagandist of the social revolution. Even while exploring the hardships of the world these artists managed to infuse a sense of humor in their art and used caricature to further showcase absurdity.

Visual artist are not the only makers that have been instrumental to my work. Coming from a theatrical background a number of playwrights have also had a great influence on my philosophy and working practice as well. Primary among these are

practitioners who are most commonly associated with the theatre of the Absurd such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. Although I do not adopt all ideas developed by this group my practice has become reliant on the idea of attempting to convey a sense of bewilderment, anxiety, and wonder in the face of an inexplicable universe.

Hangman is the interface that first began this series of works. The interface is a standard hangman guessing game that asks the viewer to help President Bush guess the correct word in order to win a free ring tone. At the beginning each round a random audio file is played of one of Bush's misspoken words or statements. The word to be guessed always has a direct relation to this audio statement. As the viewer chooses incorrect letters the hangman body is completed with a struggling Saddam in place of the standard stick figure. If the viewer is able to correctly spell the word the game is complete without a finished hanging. I was hoping to highlight in this that whether or not Saddam deserved to die the way our president and government went about it was largely based on ignorance and misinformation. The idea of winning a free ring tone, a marketing ploy common on internet advertising pop up games, came primarily from the fact that Saddam's Hanging was recorded on a cell phone device.

The second interface in this series is entitled *Tragedy*. In this work a group of 10 images are presented in a random order and the viewer is asked to decide if the image presented is a portrait of an American Idol reject or a victim of hurricane Katrina. If the player guesses correctly the game continues with nothing happening, but if the player guesses incorrectly the image begins to flood. In this work I don't aim to make fun of the American Idol rejects that seem to react with as much pain as those who were victims of

hurricane Katrina, after all it is always difficult to distinguish between personal tragedies except in hindsight, rather I am questioning the society that can elevate this reality show to such importance that it is capable of creating tragic affects on individuals.

The next interface is a work called *Bush's Memory Game*. This game is setup as a standard game of memory in which cards are flipped until matches are achieved. The additions in this particular game of memory is that none of the matches actually match and correctly finding some of these uneven pairings stops an audio file of protest. The idea behind the game is what I view to be the incorrect associations that the bush administration and the religious right commonly make. Each match comprises of one card that represents something as it actually exist and one card that represents an ultra conservative viewpoint of this thing or lies perpetuated around this subject. For example matches include: oil and nuclear weapons, Bush and John Wayne, and Harry Potter and Satan.

The final interface is a work called *Mass Media Roulette*. In this game the player is told to bet on which headline they think will be chosen for air by major media. Included are 22 story possibilities 18 of which are taken from the web site project censored and 4 are celebrity news stories. Project Censored is a group which devotes time to trying to inform the public of major news stories which have been glossed over by mainstream media for one reason or another. The idea of the roulette game is to create the illusion of random possibility in which any story could be chosen for air. The actuality of the situation is that only the four celebrity news stories have the chance to be chosen. Each result is recorded in a box to the side so that hopefully the player would

have the ability to recognize the pattern. Making a roulette game also shows how money is a key factor in deciding what gets aired and that many of the mass media's decisions are largely corporate based. If one wants to increase in credits all they need to do is continue to bet on the same stories over and over again.

These interfaces have really begun to express my own view of reality. By pushing them to into the realm of game play and giving an amount of hyperbole to the events and ideas depicted I am able to express a somewhat simplified but clearer view of my relation and what I view to be the general public's relation to the world in which we live. These pursuits have left me with not only artistic growth but personal growth and awareness as well.

"I'm not suggesting that the play is without fault; all of my plays are imperfect, I'm rather happy to say-it leaves me something to do." -Edward Albee

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