Freedom to Affect

Choice in interaction

In the world of software, the concept of freedom is often discussed in a manner of different ways, perhaps the biggest points of contention being debated between free software communities, proprietary software holders and everything in between. For my paper however, I would like to explore a different angle on freedom and software, namely freedom *within* software. In life, the word 'freedom' bears many positive connotations, freedom to make decisions, to act and to move without constraints are highly sought after qualities in general, and a perceived lack of these qualities may lead to one feeling constrained or otherwise held back. Freedom in software is thus a tricky subject, for is it possible to act freely within the constraints of a program that has already been defined in advance? And seeing as more and more aspects of day-to-day life are beginning to incorporate digital artefacts, including both utilities and entertainment, are we thus entering a world with a lesser degree of choice?

A main topic of discussion of this assignment could be whether or not it is possible to quantify what it means to have a freedom to choose, seeing as the perception of freedom may in fact be just as important as having some degree of freedom in general. In order to tackle this subject, I'd like to discuss the often-perceived rigidness of software, in order to make the argument that software can in fact be more dynamic than what is often perceived. In this context, bringing of generative software and art is perhaps relevant. Using the text "The Aesthetics of Generative Code" by Geoff Cox, Alex McLean and Adrian Ward, as well as the Keynote presentation "Art That Makes Itself Symposium" by Frieder Nake, I would like to explore how user-choice can be related to generative software, and how user-appropriation of generative artworks can put to question the notion of authorship.

As an extension to the concept of user-appropriation of experiences, I would very much like to discuss how freedom and choice can affect the nature of how we experience digital media. A big focus here would be how narrative structure is affected by the agency of the person involved in the media. I've had some struggles finding a proper angle for this topic, but I've now been introduced to the book "Hamlet on the Holodeck (Updated Edition)" by Janet H. Murray. One focus of this book is the exploration of how the nature of the artistic practice has changed with the

advent of interactive media, and how this has impacted traditional narrative structure in storytelling.

"Digital environments are procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic. The first two properties make up most of what we mean by the vaguely used word interactive; the remaining two properties help to make digital creations seem as explorable and extensive   as the actual world, making up much of what we mean when we say that cyberspace is immersive."

- Hamlet on the Holodeck, Janet H. Murray, p. 74

-

In opposition to the notion that a more digitally-integrated society would lead to less freedom of choice overall, one can look at how interactive media has affected the nature of storytelling. In video games for example, player choice lays out a variety of different choices at the user's disposal, giving the user the option to shape and appropriate the overall experience to their liking. An example of traditional narrative structure being applied to an interactive media can be seen in the video game "The Walking Dead: Season One" developed and published independently by Telltale Games in 2012. As the name implies, this game borrows heavily from the serialised television format, with chapters of the story being divided into five episodes. In this game, one is able to step into the shoes of a drama show protagonist, through which you are able to interact and shape the story and character-relationships as you see fit. However, the participatory aspect of interacting directly with a non-linear narrative is quite novel, it is also heavily reliant on maintaining the illusion of player-choice and agency. Perhaps the illusory element of this game can be compared to the ELIZA program, which offers a similar form of illusion of direct participation, while the actual processes of the program remain quite simple.

Another common perception of software is that one has to adapt their own behaviour in order to interact correctly with computer programs, whether it be by adopting certain conceptual models or otherwise learning new systems and software architectures. A more recent development in the digital world is the rising use of digital personal assistants, such as Siri, Alexa and Google Home. Unlike the previously mentioned common perception of software, these digital assistants are designed to adapt seamlessly to the lives of those who use them. These assistants are programmed in such a way that they appear both procedural and participatory, storing your

information and various preferences, while also being able to interact with various other appliances and databases. In order to discuss this topic I'd like to draw from the chapter "Intelligence" by Andrew Goffey in the Software Studies Lexicon. I'd like to discuss how the expectation of intelligence and pliability in these programs can be very valuable to the users feeling of having a program adapt to their decisions. But on the other side I'd also like to discuss the risk that the expectation of intelligence can be lead the user to become disillusioned with the limitations of these programs, and that the limitations of the program become more noticeable the more seamlessly a program presents itself.

Software is becoming more pliable with a greater emphasis on user involvement and choice, but how are we to experience this form of computationally-defined freedom? and is the ultimate goal of software really to mend itself into our daily lives as seamlessly as possible? It almost seems like a seamless integration would disregard some of the qualities which make software special. If freedom and choice in our daily processes is mostly dependant on the perception we have, then perhaps software is not so far off from the real thing after all.

These are some of the topics I would like to discuss in relation to user choice and freedom. In the final paper I'd like to delve a lot deeper into these subjects, as well as exploring freedom and choice as cultural concepts more in-depth. I think I will need to gather some additional sources for this to work properly, and I will have to give some serious thought to prioritisation and pacing At this time I do have quite a bit of uncertainty on the topic, but I hope that I have at least made somewhat of a case for it.