44. [Introduction]
The Fantasy Beyond Control

Lynn Hershman's *Lorna* is considered the first interactive video art installation (1979–83). It was elegantly simple: a woman, Lorna, sat at home watching her television, clicking her remote. The viewer sat and watched her on television, making choices with a similar remote. The piece began with a mock survey and proceeded to show the space of Lorna's apartment, which contained items the user could select. These items led to branching narratives which proceeded based on further user selections. The interacting viewers were repositioned relative to television, identifying with the character and the gaze in a manner quite different from film theory's "suture." Hershman also anticipated, by a decade, the navigational structures presented by 1990s branching narrative CD-ROMs. Her video disk design was not without precedent, however. Its structure was similar to that of written, rather than video, works such as Raymond Queneau's "Story As You Like It" (◊12).

Hershman's work grew out of an installation art and performance tradition. Grahame Weinbren's, on the other hand, grew out of an experimental cinema tradition, informed by his work with cutting-edge commercial video systems. After *Lorna,* Weinbren's *The Erl King* (1986, a collaboration with Roberta Friedman) and *Sonata* (1991) took the interactive video installation into new territory. In these pieces (which, like *Lorna,* are documented on the CD) the language of cinema was reinvented for the context of interaction—with the development of techniques such as the viewer-controlled cutaway and wipe. Like Hershman, Weinbren chose psychological themes for his exploration. But rather than the agoraphobic, media-saturated character whose study is central to *Lorna,* or a focus on a single character or situation of any sort, Weinbren chose a technique that may remind one of early cinematic work such as Griffith's *Intolerance:* parallel, metaphorically related stories. In this context, link-following becomes a poetically-interpreted activity. The viewers do not "make choices" for the characters. His work provides an interactive role quite different from that of *Lorna,* and from branching "interactive movies" or video games.

Hershman's 1989–90 *Deep Contact*—aspects of which are discussed at the end of her essay below—used elements such as the touch screen, which Weinbren had used to control cinematic effects, in a new way. *Deep Contact* featured a leather-clad guide, and the user was invited to touch this woman all over her body as a means of navigation. Needless to say, this was a remarkable departure from the everyday remote of *Lorna*—akin, perhaps, to Yoko Ono's embodied, interactive-invasive *Cut Piece* (described in the introduction to Allan Kaprow's essay (◊06)). However, during the *Deep Contact* interaction, a surveillance camera could be triggered, replacing the image under the viewer's gaze and touch with their own.

More recently, interactive video work has provided dynamically arranged links to video fragments, as with *A Random Walk Through the 20th Century* (included on the CD in its entirety) and has extended hypertext concepts into video, as with *Hypercafe* (excerpted on the CD) and Janet Murray's *Hot Norman.* As video compression improves and bandwidth increases, interactive video work will continue to become both easier for individuals and wider in its audience, existing in a networked context and making use of the network—as with the recent work of Chris Hales.
—NWF & NM

Further Reading

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Sawhney, Nitin ("Nick"), David Balcom, and Ian Smith. "HyperCafe: Narrative and Aesthetic Properties of Hypervideo." In *Hypertext '96 Proceedings.* New York: ACM Press, 1996, 1–10.

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44. The Fantasy Beyond Control

The Fantasy Beyond Control
Lynn Hershman

A (pre)condition of a video dialogue is that *it does not talk back.* Rather, it exists as a moving stasis; a one-sided discourse; like a trick mirror that absorbs instead of reflects. Perhaps it was nostalgia that led me to search for an interactive video fantasy—a craving for control, a longing for liveness, a drive toward direct action. This total, cumulative, and chronic condition I suffered from is reputedly a side effect (or for video artists an occupational hazard) of watching television, a medium that is by nature fragmentary and incomplete, distanced and unsatisfying; like platonic sex.

My path to interactive works began covertly not with video, but in performance when in 1971 an *alternative identity* named Roberta Breitmore was created. She was a breathing simulacrum, a persona, played first by myself, and then by a series of *multiple* individuals. Roberta existed in both real life and real time and during the decade of her activity engaged in many adventures that typified the culture in which she participated. She had a checking account and a driver's license and saw a psychiatrist. That she existed was proved by the trackings of her psychiatric reports and credit ratings. Her construction included specific language and gestures as well as a stereotyped cosmetic ambience. By accumulating artifacts from culture and interacting directly with life, she became a two-way mirror that reflected societal biases experienced through time. Roberta was always seen as a surveillance target. Her decisions were random, only very remotely controlled. Roberta's manipulated reality, or bending of time, became a model for a private system of interactive performance. Instead of a disk or hardware, her records were stored on photographs and texts that could be viewed without predetermined sequences. This allowed viewers to become voyeurs into Roberta's history.[1] Their interpretations shifted depending on the perspective and order of the sequences.

Two years after ROBERTA's transformation,[2] *Lorna,* the first interactive art video disk was completed. Unlike Roberta, whose adventures took place directly in the environment, Lorna was a middle-aged agoraphobic, fearful of leaving her tiny apartment. The premise was that the more she stayed home and watched television, the more fearful she became—primarily because she was absorbing the frightening messages of advertising and news broadcasts. Because she never left home, the objects in her room took on a magnificent proportion, they were to her what Mount St. Victoire was to Cezanne. In the disk, every object in her room is numbered and becomes a chapter in her life that opens into branching sequences. Viewer/participants access information about her past, future, and personal conflicts via these artifacts. Many images on the screen are of the remote-control device Lorna uses to change television channels. Because viewer/participants use a nearly identical unit to direct the disk action, a metaphoric link or point of identification is established between the viewer and referent. The viewer/participant activates the live action and makes

Figure 44.1. Lynn Hershman, Roberta's Body Language Chart, 1978.

Figure 44.2. Lynn Hershman, Constructing Roberta Breitmore, 1975.

surrogate decisions for Lorna. Decisions are designed into a branching path. Although there is only seventeen minutes of moving image in the disk, the thirty-six chapters could be sequenced differently for several days. There are three separate endings to the disk, though the plot has multiple variations that include being caught in repeating dream sequences, or using multiple sound tracks, and can be seen backward, forward, at increased or decreased speed, and from several points of view, like an *electronic cubism.* There is no hierarchy in the ordering of decisions. These ideas are not new. They were explored by such artists as *Stéphane Mallarmé, John Cage,* and *Marcel Duchamp*—particularly in Duchamp's music. They pioneered ideas about random adventures and chance operations fifty years before

invention of the technology that would have more fully exploited their concepts.

Lorna literally is captured by a mediated landscape. Her passivity (presumably caused by being controlled by media) is a counterpoint to the direct action of the player. As the branching path is deconstructed, the player becomes aware of the subtle yet powerful effects of fear caused by media and becomes more empowered (active) through this perception. Playing *Lorna* was designed to have viewer/participants transgress into an inverse labyrinth of themselves.

Despite some theories to the contrary,[3] the dominant presumption is that making art is active and viewing it is passive. Radical shifts in communication technology, such as the marriage of image, sound, text, and computers, and consummation by the public of this consort, have challenged this assumption. Viewer/participants of *Lorna* reported that they had the impression that they were empowered because they held the option of manipulating Lorna's life. Rather than being remotely controlled, the decision unit was literally placed in their hands. They were not simply watching a narrative with a structure predetermined by an invisible omniscient. Implications of the relationship reversal between individuals and technological media systems are immense. The media bath of transmitted prestructured and pre-edited information that surrounds (and some say alienates) people is washed away. It is hosed down by viewer input. Alteration of the basis for exchange of information is subversive in that it encourages participation and therefore creates a different audience dynamic.

Interactive systems *require* viewers to react. Their choices are facilitated by means of a keyboard, mouse, or touch-sensitive screen. As technology expands, there will be more permutations available, not only between the viewer and the system, but between elements within the system itself. Some people feel that computer systems will eventually reflect the personality and biases of their users. Yet these systems only appear to talk back. That they are alive or independent is an illusion. They depend upon the architectural strategy of the program. However, there is a space between the system and player in which a link, fusion, or transplant occurs. Content is codified. Truth and fiction blur. Action becomes icon and relies on movement and plasticity of time—*icono plastics and logomotion.* According to Freud, *reality* may be limited to perceptions that can be verified through words or visual codes. Therefore perceptions are the drive to action that
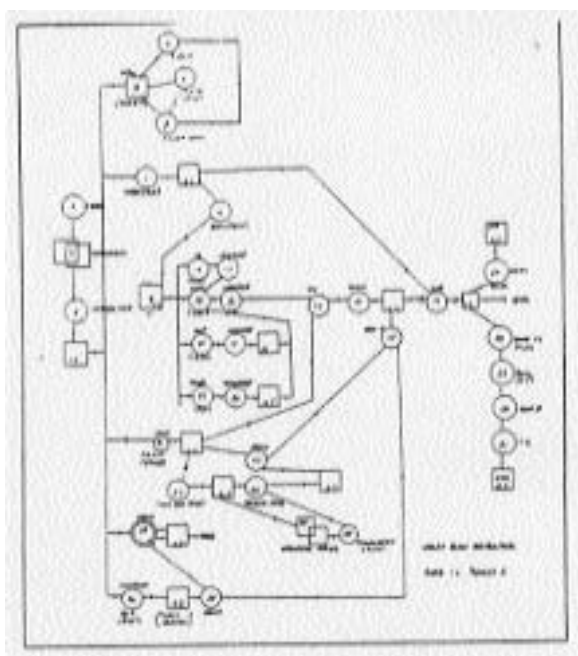
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Figure 44.3. Lynn Hershman, Lorna, Video Disk Design, Garti/Hershman, 1984.

influences, if not controls, real events. Perceptions therefore become the key to reality.

Electronic media are based on the speed of information. The terminal, once a sign for closure, has become the matrix for information expansion. The introduction of new mass media in the late 1940s created an unparalleled opportunity to control mass perceptions. Immediate communication tended to increase the importance of media. Beaming pictures into millions of homes every night had the effect of speeding up time, of increasing the pace of life and destabilizing traditional communities, replacing them with a distanced *global village*. Individuals were left powerless to affect what was being imposed, other than simply turning off their sets and becoming even more alienated. A similar sense of cultural time displacement had occurred with the invention of the automobile when traditional sense of distance shifted.

There is a debate among scholars of media about whether or not it is possible to observe phenomena without influencing them. In physics this can be equated to Heisenberg's theory. The very act of viewing a *captured* image creates a distance from the original event. The *captured* image becomes a relic of the past. Life is a moving target and any

object that is isolated becomes history. Mass media redesign information by replacing the vantage point of the viewer with the frame provided by a cameraperson/journalist photographer. When information is presented beyond individual control, viewers are separated from the referent, resulting in a diminution of their identity. Personal identity is tenuous territory. According to Roman Jakobson, "personal pronouns are the last elements to be acquired in the child's speech and the first to be lost in aphasia."[4] When an area that was inhabited by a viewer is emptied by a displaced identity, it is replaced by a sense of absense. This loss of anchorage (perhaps healed by a contemporary shaman/anchorperson?) results in a suspension, a flotation, a feeling of discomfort or a low-level cultural virus, perhaps the locus of the nostalgia mentioned in the first sentence of this paper.

Lorna was developed as a research and development guide, but it is generally inaccessible. It was pressed in a limited edition of twenty-five, of which only fourteen now exist. It is only occasionally installed in galleries or museums. Creating a truly interactive work demands that it exist on a mass scale, available and accessible to many people. The HyperCard program works on most Macintosh computers and can be gen locked to a disk player or a CDV, or be used alone. It can access moving or still images and has a wide range of sound capabilities and is relatively inexpensive. The next two interactive works in progress, which I hope to complete in 1989, will use the HyperCard as a base. The motives of these two very different works are to explore ideas of contact and perception, not only metaphorically but actually through the process of the playing.

The two in-progress works are, very briefly, the following:

1. Deep Contact: The Incomplete Sexual Fantasy Disk,[5] which is designed around historical icons such as Freud, Bach, Joan of Arc, and a vampire. The player will be able to change his or her personality or approach to these icons or change their personality. An *emotional joy stick* will be used in concert with a touch-sensitive screen. This piece will work with a real phone modem and programmed surveillance camera allowing the piece to transgress the screen (or distanced observer) into really contacting and interacting with other players as well as others seeing themselves as part of the manipulation.

Figure 44.4. Lynn Hershman, Lorna, 1983.

2. Paths of Inner Action[6] involves a personal journey in which the viewer integrates into the system that he or she is looking at. The viewer will be guided by a shadowy figure that, like a Zen master, will direct the players' trail, asking questions about the meaning of experience or how the color of a leaf, eight frames past, balances with the textural opposites of the bridge in the future. By making surrogate decisions and routing their own paths, they will be given opportunities to understand perceptions about the media, technology, and the integration of both with individual personality. Trails will be designed to be reconfigured, or recontextualized, giving an evolving and essentially never-ending time frame to the piece.[7]

Because interactive media technology is becoming increasingly visible in all areas of societies (particularly outside the art world), the political impact is spectacular. Traditional narratives (beginnings, middles, and ends) are being restructured as genetic engineering advances simultaneously reshape the meaning of life. Participating personally in the discovery of values that affect and order their lives, allows individuals to dissolve the division that separates them from subversive control, and replaces some of the nostalgic longings with a sense of identity, purpose, and hope.

Notes

1. ROBERTA never was exhibited while she was in process. Rather she was invisible until she became history.

2. ROBERTA was exorcised in 1978 at Lucretia Borgia's crypt in Ferrara, Italy, where her victimization converted to emancipation.

3. For example, some ideas presented by Leo Steinberg.

4. See Roman Jakobson, "Child Language, Aphasia and Phonologica Universals," *Janua Linguarum* 71 (The Hague: Mouton, 1968) and "Studies on Child Language Aphasia," *Janua Linguarum* 114 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

5. This was originally conceived as a short-lived collaboration among Paula Levine, Starr Sutherland, Christine Tamblyn, and myself.

6. Much of this project derives from a collaboration with Ann Marie Garti.

7. Both ideas were completed in the videodisk installation *Deep Contact* completed in 1990 which premiered at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.