

An Artist Moves to Digital

Tim Portlock

Prior to being an artist who uses digital technology as an art medium, I was a studio painter and also a muralist. From the perspective of contemporary art, both forms of painting are generally considered to be very different activities. Studio painting is usually associated with individualism, facility, and the rarefied space of the art gallery while the many types of mural projects I have been involved with were collaborative, requiring participants to simultaneously teach and learn different skill sets and usually geared to a broadly defined public. Additionally, while studio and mural painting are distinct art practices, they were for me very complementary activities.

Essentially both types of painting allowed me to explore certain ideas and esthetic issues that would not have been conducive to the other form; for example, at the time I was interested in making very specific autobiographical images. Philosophically this would have been a problematic subject to develop through the large-scale public mural format. On the other hand, I was also interested in making work that explored the cultural miscegenation that occurs between "distinct" social groups in America and how these cultural exchanges influence how we define ourselves as individuals, and with which communities we choose to identify ourselves. While I could have created work that explored this subject to be viewed in the art gallery context, my ideas suggested that I should address a broader public and that the work should be created collaboratively. Collaboration was important because it required the same type of dialogue and exchanges that I was describing through the work.

Part of my decision to make the transition from traditional art to digital technology as art medium involved the possibility to synthesize the aspects of mural and studio painting that I have found complementary as an artist-painter. While these specific issues are not inherent to digital technology, some new digital media do have qualities that make them conducive towards exploring many of these ways of working. There are several reasons for this. For the purposes of this paper I will give two:

- 1) Consumer level technology has developed to the point where it can be used as an art medium that syn-

WORKS AND DAYS 37/38, Vol.19, Nos. 1&2, 2001

thesizes many of the different aspects of studio painting and public art that I had been interested in. One can see this synthesis in art made specifically for networked technologies such as Net.art. Net.art is an art form that is specifically created to be experienced over the internet via a web browser. While individual examples of this art form can range from projects that are geared towards a small social circle to art works that address a wide public, Net.art is accessible by anyone with Internet access.

2) Because of the diversity of digital tools, digital technology as an art medium is conducive to both working in collaboration with others or independently. Beyond the benefit of just having more hands and a bigger knowledge pool, collaboration with others is also a good process to trade technical skills as they are practically applied. For digital artists who work individually, there are also tools available with which one can create rich and complex experiences.

When I began contributing to Virtual Harlem, I had a very rudimentary understanding of many of the skills involved in making a virtual reality work. While I have an art background, my understanding of the specific tools necessary to create the visual elements for a virtual reality project like Harlem were not as developed. The fact that Virtual Harlem essentially had a stylistic template from which to work directed the way I taught myself how to use some of the necessary tools to contribute to the project. I also learned specific skills on the Virtual Harlem project by working with people from different disciplines and skill levels. Though I had taken some very basic computer programming classes, working with people who were much more learned than me and applying their knowledge in real world situations exposed me to things that I later used in my own work. However, without the basic computer classes I would not have been prepared to know what questions to ask.

“Realism”

Because cultural heritage is such a new field, many of the fundamental terms defining what it is and is not are still developing. As I see it, however, most cultural heritage projects fall somewhere between two different poles:

1) Cultural heritage projects that are concerned with precision. This is the simulation of a cultural experience through the precise measurement and recreation of the details of the original experience. This usually involves very high-end imaging equipment such as sonic and laser scanners, satellite images, surveying equipment, et cetera.

2) Cultural heritage projects that foreground the narrative aspect of the cultural experience are projects in which the creators consciously take into account literary conventions in characterization of a cultural experience. The narrative in this type of cultural heritage project generally acknowledges the user presence in some capacity, usually by creating a specific role for the user to assume in the narrative. These types of projects also vary in how much the user can affect the development of the narrative in the virtual environment.

While Virtual Harlem is concerned with the precise representation of material culture, it is also being developed to give the user a sense of what it was like to interact with the people, places, and options of the time. Both categories of realism present interesting creative challenges for the artist.

The goal of realism in visual representation is to focus the viewer's attention on the image rather than the materials used to create the illusions of the image. Although digital tools are good at simulating real objects there are limitations. Due to hardware constraints, virtual reality is not at the point where it can sustain large complex and very detailed environments without there being performance issues. Larger-sized virtual environments require an artist to develop an esthetic that creatively resolves the difference between something that looks "real" and something that can work efficiently within the limits of the hardware. This involves working within the conventions of realism; that is, stylizing an image in such a way that it both minimizes the complexity of an image and it enhances its sense of realness. An example of the conventions of realism in painting would be exaggerating aspects of certain characteristic facial features in a portrait while simplifying other details of the subject's face.

Dealing with the interactive narrative in a cultural heritage project presents an entirely new and interesting creative challenge [see Sosnoski and Portlock in this volume]. How does one create a historically accurate interaction? How does one gauge the historical authenticity of an interaction? While there is precedence for depicting historical events in film and literature, interactive narrative must take into account how the choices of the user affects the development of the story and the environment. For now, because of hardware and resources limitations, most interactive narratives can only offer a limited number of predefined options for the user to influence the development of the story. However, as the capacity of digital technology grows, it will become possible for the user to make choices that have not been anticipated by the authors. This will require a new kind of work of art, one that is capable of improvising with the use..

