

Digital Boundaries: The ACM Multimedia Interactive Art Program Exhibition

Alejandro Jaimes
*FXPAL Japan,
Fuji Xerox*

Pamela Jennings
*Carnegie Melon
University*

Hugo Ortega and
Mark Tribe
*Columbia
University*

Christina Yang
The Kitchen

At no time in history has multimedia technology had the prospect of making a stronger impact on cultures. Multimedia is everywhere: regardless of where we are we can access multimedia originating in many parts of the world as easily as we can create content to be shared with people from different cultures across the globe. The gap between the haves and the have-nots, however, is growing (the “we” above refers to a very few). Wealthier countries are using multimedia to reinforce physical boundaries (for example, requiring fingerprints and photographs at airports) and multimedia content from only a few cultures is proliferating.

Thinking multiculturally and internationally

At a time where, like never before, governments, individuals, and organized groups are using multimedia to influence the way we think about our own culture and the culture of others, it’s crucial to consider essential questions about the international impact of multimedia, technology, and culture. We have to ask ourselves, for example, Does the new proliferation and imbalance of multimedia technology and content help reinforce boundaries and cultural differences? Does multimedia contribute to defining cultural identity in a new age in which everyone talks about multiculturalism? Does multimedia raise cultural awareness or does it simply numb our senses so that we take cultural differences for granted because what we “see” or “hear” is commonplace in this “new” multicultural world?

The ACM Multimedia Interactive Art Program 2004 exhibition (29 September–15 October 2004) challenges visitors to think about those and related questions. The 14 works presented in the exhibition by 16 international artists and their

collaborators touch on many of these issues and on aspects of multimedia technology, including interaction, content and search, and many others.

Culture and interaction

The relationship of culture and interaction with art is strongly represented in the exhibition. In Shawn Lawson’s *Wu Wei*, (see Figure 1) a computer vision interface detects a participant’s movements as he observes a projection of a Japanese scroll painting. Drawing on the Wu Wei Taoist principle (meaning “without action”), the work reacts to stillness rather than to motion (nonmotion reveals details of the painting; motion does not).

Cynthia Rubin’s and Bob Gluck’s *Layered Histories* is based on a medieval Hebrew biblical manuscript that reflects on the convergence of cultures in Islamic Spain. Interaction takes place through a reading pointer like those traditionally used in public Torah (scriptural) readings in synagogues. These works serve as interesting examples of how culture may be integrated into the way we interact with multimedia and encourage us to think of new culture-dependent interaction paradigms. Other examples of new forms of culture-based interaction from the show include Brian Ireson’s *Minions* (motion sensors to control videos of different religions), Michael Hohl’s *Radiomap* (global awareness in physical space), and Marc Böhlen’s and J.T. Rinker’s *Whistling Machine* (whistling as communication).

Cultural interpretations of content

Works in the exhibition also invite us to reflect on the source of multimedia content, its metadata, and the interpretations we give the content based on our own cultural background. Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo’s *Vox Populi No. 2*, for

example, mixes news headlines about Colombia, interviews, and input from participants to create a mixed reality that raises questions about the multimedia information we're constantly bombarded with. It also addresses how Colombian cultural identity is represented and perceived.

Stephen Wilson's *Traces of Culture* explores image search keywords in relation to culture, and Andrew Senior's *Shibboleth* explores the cultural barriers enforced by pronunciation differences of culturally charged words.

The relationship between multimedia and culture, however, also has a strong relationship to physical space. For example, Winston Yang's *Pictopia* uses architectural grids to map images to a model of the streets of Hong Kong, linking navigation in digital space with urban structures. Sheldon Brown's *Scalable City* represents urbanization in the Mexican-American border, an area in which two cultures are in constant flux. Ricardo Miranda Zuñiga's *Vagamundo* is a video game about immigrants moving to the US. The game is played in a food vendor cart to raise questions about cultural assimilation.

The show also presents works that remind us that cultural differences aren't always determined by geography. For example, Carroll Parrott Blue's *Dawn at My Back* installation explores racism's impact on a mother's and daughter's relationship and invites the participant to co-create the narrative and dialogue about the relationship. Roxanne Wolanczyk's *Princess Series* questions vertical cultural barriers with an imaginary character that makes a living creating junk mail, and Patrick Tarrant's *Planet Usher* explores issues of memory and narrative relative to culture.

The exhibition raises many questions about the roles of content and context in multimedia, as a means of expression and exploration about



Figure 1. In Shawn Lawson's *Wu Wei*, the interface responds to stillness rather than to motion.

Further Reading

To learn more about the art and goals of the exhibition, please review the following resources:

- *Proc. ACM Multimedia 2004*, ACM Press, 2004.
- ACM Multimedia Interactive Art Program 2004 exhibition Web site: <http://www.acm.org/sigmm/mm2004>.

issues of culture and identity. The art presented should generate the discussion of new ideas, while reinforcing the dialogue between the arts and technical communities to create an interdisciplinary impact. **MM**

Readers may contact Alejandro Jaimes at ajaimes@ee.columbia.edu.