Consciousness Reframed II
Nonsense Logic and Re-embodied Intelligence
Bill Seaman 1998

How can our understanding of nonsense be applied to the field of interactive art as well as to the examination of symbolic logic? Nonsense, jokes, and puns can potentially illuminate particular forms of language and image use through displacement or malfunction within a constructed context. The computer, a mechanism entirely predicated on logic, can be used to explore nonsense as well as illogical and elusive resonant content. This paper will examine issues surrounding the employment of specific forms of nonsense in computer-based interactive works of art.
Nonsense, Symbolic Logic, Re-embodied Intelligence, Interactivity, Emergent Content

Could an artist, using the computer as vehicle of research, define an art practice where the subject of that practice was an examination of meaning? As computer-based systems and technological sensory extensions change our relation to both nature and language, we need to create mechanisms that function at the highest possible level of human/machine interaction in order to reflect upon this complex plethora of emergent relations. Given the limitations of language to reflect the complexity of lived experience, we need to move toward the creation of more sophisticated systems of communication that will allow us to both share and create new reflective experiences. A rich variety and complexity of experience requires equally complex transformative technological systems to reflect upon that experience. In the light of this comment, might we seek to engender new forms of poetic expression to reflect upon the nature and construction of meaning?

There is a poignant irony to the fact that the computer, a mechanism entirely predicated on symbolic logic, can be used to explore non-sense as well as illogical and elusive resonant artistic content. A work of art can be seen as an organism like vehicle of content that is both generated and experienced through interaction. Roy Ascott, very eary on, saw this potential. In his paper entitled *Behaviourist Art and the Cybernetic Vision* published in 1966, Ascott articulated the following vision:

> Behaviourist Art constitutes, as we have seen, a retroactive process of human involvement, in which the artefact functions as both matrix and catalyst. As matrix, it is the substance between two sets of behaviours; it neither exists for itself nor by itself. As a catalyst, it triggers changes in the spectator's total behaviour. Its structure must be adaptive implicitly or physically, to accomodate the spectator's responses, in order that the creative evolution of form and idea may take place. The basic principle is feedback. The system Artefact/Observer furnishes its own controlling energy; a function of an output variable (observer response) is to act as an input variable, which introduces more variety into the system and leads to more variety in the output (observer's experience). This rich interplay derives from what is a self-organising in which there are two controlling factors; one, the spectator is a self-organising subsystem; the other, the artwork is not usually at present homeostatic.

Ascott goes on to say:

> There is no prior reason why the artefact should not be a self-organising system; an organism, as it were, which derives its initial programme or code from the artists creative activity, and then evolves in specific artistic identity and function in response to the environment which it encounters. (Ascott, 1966, p. 11)

My research focus has been in exploring what I call Recombinant Poetics. A Recombinant Poetic work seeks to enable the exploration of a set of authored media-elements of language, image and sound such that the media can be made operative in a computer-based environment. Thus a user of such a techno-poetic mechanism can explore the contextualisation; recontextualisation;

navigation; as well as a number of other processes, through interaction with that system. The participant potentially brings about interpenetration and juxtaposition of media-elements through their interaction with the following categories of processes: construction processes; navigation processes; processes related to authored media-behaviours; editing processes; aesthetic / abstraction processes; automated generative processes; processes related to distributed virtual reality; and chance processes of a *semi-random* nature. The system seeks to function in a self-organising manner.

Works of art that explore such operable media do so within technological environments that enable the generation of emergent content and potentially open up entirely new fields of artistic investigation.

I am seeking to define a particular approach to the authoring of systems that enable engagement with specific forms of operable media. "Re-embodied intelligence" can be defined as the translation or encoding of authored media-elements and/or processes into a symbolic language, enabling those elements and processes to become part of an interactive computer-based system. Artworks that explore "Re-embodied Intelligence" do so on a case by case basis, where the author and programmer encode a particular set of art related processes, concepts, or aesthetic attributes, into a computer-based, operative form. Specifically, the output of such a system seeks to manifest the encoded sensibility of its author.

The encoded model of the sensibility of the artist is rendered operative within such an environment such that the system appears to exhibit intelligent behaviour, i.e. In one case it can be engaged to build a virtual world informed by this sensibility. Most of us would consider the building of a virtual world a task that requires intelligence. In this particular case, "Re-embodied Intelligence" seeks to encode this sensibility such that the computer, functioning autonomously or in conjunction with a user, can generate environments informed by the artist's mind set.

We must be careful to differentiate the kind of "intelligence" exhibited by such an mechanism, to that examined through the Turing Test. Thus the value of the Turing Test to determine "intelligence" may be seen as relevant to a particular context but for the purposes of art content, may be completely irrelevant. An artwork may explore any approach that the author (or authors) finds appropriate. The artist is not trying to "fool" someone into believing the machine is thinking. The artist is attempting to "intelligently" translate particular kinds of potential relations, enabling an experiential exchange that may include specific kinds of responses by the system to the user's input and/or behaviour. During this interaction, the mind-set of the programmer/artist, can be experienced by the user in the service of this content, in the form of process oriented artefacts.

Now that I have outlined the notion of Re-embodied Intelligence I would like to examine a particular aesthetic sensibility. Given this emergent interactive environmental context propagated through Re-embodied intelligence, I am seeking to explore the field of nonsense as artistic content (among other aesthetic explorations). More specifically, using the computer as vehicle of research, as stated above, I am seeking to define an art practice where the subject of that practice is an examination of meaning. In this case, aspects of meaning are approached though pointed nonsense relations.

If we look historically at the use of nonsense in literature and other forms of art, we find a fertile realm of creative exploration. How can our understanding of nonsense be applied to the realm of interactive art as well as symbolic logic? Here, Lewis Carroll becomes an interesting subject for investigation in that he both authored texts about logic as well as texts exploring nonsense. Deleuze states in his book entitled *The Logic of Sense:*

> The work of Lewis Carroll has everything required to please the modern reader: children's books or rather, books for little girls; splendidly bizarre and esoteric worlds; grids; codes and decodings; drawings and photographs; a profound psychoanalytic content; and an exemplary logical and linguistic formalism. Over and above the immediate pleasure, though, there is a play of sense and nonsense, a chaos-cosmose... Deleuze continues: The privileged place assigned to Lewis Carroll is due to his having provided the first great mise en scène of the

> paradoxes of sense-- sometimes collecting, sometimes renewing, sometimes inventing, and sometimes preparing them. (Deleuze, 1990, p. xiii)

One goal of the use of computer systems is to come to better understand ourselves. Computers can function as mechanisms of discourse, enabling the exploration of embodied models made operative through interactive mechanisms. Within this computer-based context, through the exploration of nonsense, one can witness a contrasting critique of sense. The subtle displacement of a particular element from a selected context can actually help to illuminate aspects and/or qualities of functionality. In the *Philosophy of Nonsense* by Jean-Jaques Lecercle, the author states:

> My thesis...is that the negative prefix in "nonsense" ... is the mark of a process not merely of denial but of reflexivity, that non-sense is also meta-sense. Nonsense texts are reflexive texts. This reflexion is embodied in the intuitions of the genre. Nonsense texts are not explicitly parodic, they turn parody into a theory of serious literature; [for example] Lewis Carroll's metalinguistic content on points of grammar ... (Lecercle, 1994, p. 2)

A nonsense statement can potentially release a field of potential readings. The playful use of a pun is one example. As the meaning forks into a field of alternate readings, and the relations between those readings, an elaborate conceptual process in the mind of the reader/user is set into action.

We can observe the employment of nonsense in computer-based works, as potentially setting out a complex field of emergent potential readings. Such a layered field can point at the complexity of how meaning arises and falls away in everyday experience. Nonsense relations inform our understanding of reality just as sense relations do. It is this relation between sense and nonsense that I seek to explore, where the use of nonsense becomes self-referential, communicating simultaneously about a particular authored context while also "throwing off" or playing with the meaning. In this way non-sense can function as "meta-sense."

In his book *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze states:

> The play on words would be to say that nonsense has a sense, the sense being precisely that it doesn't have any. This is not our hypothesis at all. When we assume that nonsense says its own sense, we wish to indicate, on the contrary, that sense and nonsense have a specific relation that can not copy that of the true and the false, that is, which can not be conceived simply on the basis of a relation of exclusion. This is indeed the most general problem of the logic of sense: what would be the purpose of rising from the domain of truth to the domain of sense, if it were only to find between sense and nonsense a relation analogous to that of the true and false? [he later continues] The logic of sense is necessarily determined to posit between sense and nonsense an original type of intrinsic relation, a mode of co-presence. For the time being, we may only hint at this mode by dealing with nonsense as a word which says its own sense. (Deleuze, 1990, p.68)

If one thinks of the computer of often being predicated on a binary logic of true/false, yes/no, on/off (fuzzy logic aside) then in a specific sense I am trying to approach more delicate and subtle modes of communication and intellectual exchange through the playful and pointed employment of nonsense.

In terms of exploration of the interface as content, significant to the operation of an authored computer-based environment, I have chosen to explore punningly complex interfaces that are outwardly expressive, while inwardly, function as the outer-most layer of symbolic logic. Thus the interface becomes a vehicle of symbolic logic. When we include puns, nonsense and jokes on this symbolic layer of the system as an operational part of the interface, we can potentially make observations about the nature of logic though interaction with such a system. It becomes a goal in my work, to present for the user an opportunity to observe the functionality of consciousness in action, through the intermingling with complex multi-layered systems of authorship and inter-authorship, placement and displacement.

By developing a computer system that explores pointed nonsense as its content, we come to better understand the complexities of context construction. It is often the nonsense text, that through displacement, opens up a new relation, a re-seeing of the original context, a form of active comparison built into, or compressed within, the signifying environment.

The permutations inherent to recombinant structures present a situation in which nonsense relations can arise and/or be intentionally initiated. Each media-element in a recombinational work of art has a potential 'meaning force.' By exploring elements carrying condensed content, or multiple potential readings, we could say the 'force' of such elements paradoxically pushes in a number of directions at the same time. The nature of signification as examined within an emergent, interactive context, exhibiting fleeting and shifting qualities of meaning, can potentially become an experiential focus. The user experiences a temporary glimpse at a continuous process where elements of language, image and sound qualify the readings of particular elements, and are themselves qualified in relation to these other elements, within this process. Nicholas Rescher in his book entitled *Many-valued Logic* states:

> The very idea of truth-values other than the two orthodox truth values of truth and falsity is obviously central to the conception of a "many-valued" logic. To obtain such a logic, we must contemplate the prospect of propositions that are neither definitely true or definitely false, but have some other truth status such as indeterminate or neuter. [or other, emphasis the author] (Rescher, p.2, 1969)

In terms of Recombinant Poetics, I am examining the term 'logic' as a compression of logics - a pun on logic - where multiple logics are compressed and made operative within a mechanism that bridges and enfolds the textual, the sonic and the imagistic within an experiential computer-based environment. This multi-logical system explores the following logics:
• a logic of nonsense
• a psychological logic
• a physiological logic
• a mechanic logic
• a logic of virtual mechanisms and/or conceptual machines
• a logic of economy
• an aesthetic logic including:
>   • a sonic logic
>   • a pictorial logic
>   • a linguistic logic

All of these logics are made operative within a compressed, shifting, meta-logical mechanism. In a world whose obvious complexity presents situations that can not simply be read as true or false, the specific employment of Nonsense Logic functions in works of art, as a contrasting conceptual perspective mechanism to that of more traditional forms of logic. The meaning arising from the exploration of this pointed nonsense is a meta-meaning. Such operative Recombinant Poetic environments enable the exploration of both specific and emergent fields of meaning through the active engagement of authored-media elements and processes. The non-linear experiential examination of nonsense-logic also presents an alternative to the hierarchical logic that computers are most often predicated upon. The "re-embodied intelligent" employment of nonsense-logic, makes sense.

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