

Entertainment

Big Joy Stick, Big Fun at the Beall Center

By **Elizabeth Watkins**

The Grand Text Auto show, currently at the Beall Center for Art and Technology, is a tactile experience running the gamut from freewheeling play to somber contemplation, with something to amuse a viewer in any mood. This is no run-of-the-mill gallery experience; as always, the Beall eschews the all-too-common distance between the audience and the artwork. There is plenty to see, touch and play with in this exhibit, which actually grew out of an online artists' blog GrandTextAuto.org.

The title of the show/blog is a playful twist on one of the most popular video game series ever, Grand Theft Auto. Anyone expecting guns and violence because of this title might be disappointed, but any student who is interested in the future of video games, digital literature or technology or their impact on culture will be pleasantly surprised.

The show opens whimsically with “giantJoystick,” a six-foot-tall joystick connected to an Atari game system. Putting one's whole body into moving the joystick around – or watching others throw their weight into playing flat, retro-kitsch games like Pong or Asteroid – can be a great way to burn off some of the stress of beginning a new quarter.

Once you get past the huge joystick and the four-foot-tall old-school dot-matrix printer, strap on some specialized electronic sunglasses and gloves and wade into “Screen,” a piece of art that uses digital technology and written anecdotes to explore the link between ourselves and our memories. Through the sunglasses, words from personal, touching anecdotes displayed on a large screen seem to fly forward.

The participant must play a physical role in interacting with these “memories” and actually reach out and touch them. This work prompts interesting questions on the role fading memories play in our day-to-day lives and the formation of our personalities. “Façade” was one of the more eye-catching pieces, created by Georgia Tech.

Through the act of conversation, this work's first public showing investigates new frontiers of artificial intelligence and player interaction. The participants are hooked up with headphones, a microphone, a miniature head-mounted eyepiece screen and laptop/backpack equipment that allows them to intermingle with two digital people having an argument (loosely based on “Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”).

The two people can only be seen by the participant through the eyepiece, or on a screen by other viewers, but the apartment that the game takes place in is real. The participant can walk around the apartment, pick up objects, comment on paintings or pictures and converse with the digital couple. Their artificial intelligence and database of gestures, words and facial expressions allows them to respond to questions, comments, common conversation and even touch—the digital man in the relationship can even become angry and storm out if the participant hits on or “touches” the woman.

The game is also presented in the gallery on a laptop PC. This dichotomy is presented to explore “a new physical embodiment,” according to Michael Mateas, a computer science professor at UC Santa Cruz and co-creator of the game.

“By viewing artificial intelligence as an expressive medium, my work raises and answers novel AI research questions while pushing the boundaries of the conceivable and possible in interactive art,” Mateas said.

Grand Text Auto runs through Dec. 15. More information can be found at <http://grandtextauto.org/> and <http://beallcenter.uci.edu/>.

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