

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SCENOGRAPHY AND INTEGRATED MULTIMEDIA

*If the doors of perception were cleansed,  
Everything will appear to man as it is, infinite.*

— William Blake

As mentioned, the *Messaging in the Noosphere* theatre art was simply a *simulated* three-dimensional human-computer interaction environment. It was disappointing to me that the necessary tools and technology were not available to attempt even crude human-to-computer implementation, but the benefit was that by keeping it within the realm of imagination, I was afforded the opportunity to take the theatre art in directions that would have been impossible if implementation had been an option.

Because it was a fiction, the visual text or “scenography” of crystal doorknobs, cellular telephones and plasma screen initiated a process of storytelling where the rhetoric of the narrative informed the rhetoric of the computer and vice-versa. Folded into this informational agreement between story, characters, and computer was an understanding that they all relied on each other to create a complete experience.

### POST-HUMANISM AND TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

This brings up the notion of symmetry between humans and computers. In *The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain* Robert Pepperell suggests that “it is clear that humans are no longer the most important things in the universe and that complex machines

are an emerging form of life... As computers develop to be more like humans, so humans develop to like computers more.” (Pepperell 2004, 177)

To Luddites, or opponents of technological progress, this cause/effect dependence between humans and computers could be seen as a frightening prospect. However, post-humanist Daniel Ust sees it as a way “to use technology to overcome our limits, to transcend.” Ust’s feeling is that “posthumanism will expand upon those things that humanity prides itself on, such as intelligence, courage, curiosity, and inventiveness.” (Ust 2001, 4)

Further to this idea, Daniel Chandler, a media researcher at the University of Wales, describes the premise of “technological imperative” which is an assumption that “because a particular technology means that we can do something (it is technically possible) then this action either ought to (as a moral imperative), must (as an operational requirement) or inevitably will (in time) be taken.” (Chandler 2001) Technological imperative, or determinism, could, therefore, be seen as an enabler of upheavals, both good and bad, that motivate societal, economic, and artistic transformations. Daniel Ust poses a question that helps define a role for *Messaging in the Noosphere* and other futuristic fictions. He asks “If technological upheavals push us into posthumanist changes, isn’t it better to know where we might be heading?” (Ust 2001, 5)

On the most elevated spiritual level in *Messaging in the Noosphere*, the resident ambient intelligence, God in the Machine, unconditionally accepts direct input from the characters through the crystal doorknob devices and cell phone messages and delivers direct output to the characters by plasma screen “whirling words and phrases” text messaging. She also communicates indirectly through the Noosphere Reality Game Show. Before describing, in chapter five, how this affects the behaviour and physicality of the characters themselves, it’s important to consider the metaphors and meanings of the input and output devices and the mechanics of the HCI.

### CRYSTALS AND PLASMA AS SYMBOLS AND METAPHOR

Back when it was still called “Project X,” the first thing I knew about this project, was that I wanted to create a space through which people could move within an array of crystal door knobs. Cosmically, the crystals would be the stars of our galaxy — a vast, pulsating web of divine life and energy.

Practically, the crystals would be symbols of computer controllers or input devices. The crystals would be suspended in such a way as to suggest a volumetric space in which both the actors and the audience could watch the results of their human-computer interactions on a big plasma screen display. This screen would be symbolic of a computer output device. In combination, the crystals and the screen would be scenically metaphoric of a futuristic three-dimensional computer.



Figure 5 (a). A cluster of crystals symbolic of input devices.

Figure 5 (b). The plasma screen running the Integrated Multimedia as output display.

I bid on crystal and glass doorknobs from auctions on eBay and within a month I had amassed a collection of twenty-two sets of antique doorknobs from New York, Connecticut, Georgia, Florida, and all over the eastern United States. Knobs that had once opened parlour and bedroom doors in family homes were now destined to access computer windows, zip around cursors, pull down menus, and open the doors to perception of the God in the Machine. Some were coloured but most were clear. When suspended by monofilament

strands from the rungs of the overhead lighting grid, they sparkled and spun, shone and refracted the white light focused on them through the theatre space. The individual clusters of faceted-glass and crystal objects, “Crystals One through Eight” controlled the computer input needs and desires of each of the characters of the Noosphere. The most beautiful doorknob became a Shiva lingam, or phallic symbol of the primeval energy of the creator — a remnant from the original Indian gods backstory line. When not in use by the characters within the Noosphere, it rested at the feet of the sculpture of Shiva.

The forty-two-inch plasma monitor was an eye on all this. It was installed in a harness frame and hung fourteen feet above the floor with the screen facing straight down. That way the reclining audience members could see, hear, and feel the full impact of the filmic screen art and the live performance, all within the same “gulp” of experience. I based this on the sensation of watching a TV on the ceiling of the dentist’s office while reclining in a comfortable chair. The role of the plasma screen was to react to the input desires of the characters so, for example, when each character initiated their log-in to the “Crystal Eight” cluster, a constant throughout the performance, their specific preferences would parade by on screen.

#### **THE INTEGRATED MULTIMEDIA**

The first instance of “Integrated Media” appearing in this project was the 35-minute computer-initiated multimedia presentation that ran uninterrupted throughout the show on the plasma screen. During the performance, it ran off my same G4 Apple Powerbook computer that it was created on — my trusty technology partner, the “Silky V” computer, that enabled not only creation and delivery of the audio/visual content, but functioned as a set piece as well as seen in Figure 6 (b).

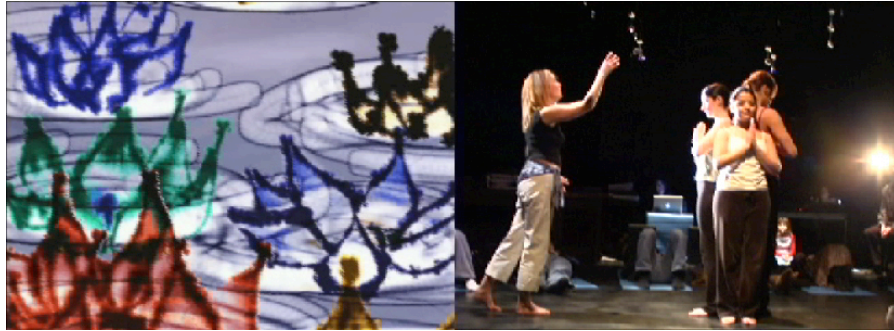


Figure 6 (a). The chakra flower animation on the plasma screen display at the end of level five.

Figure 6 (b). Corresponding live action from level five with Silky V as a “set piece.”

Thematically and metaphorically, the Integrated Multimedia mediated the performance in an exchange of creative interaction where the performers had a relationship between a “real” space, a “sound” space, and a “screen’ space. It also provided evidence of the characters’ simulated human-computer interaction thereby exemplifying the rhetoric of the performance informing the rhetoric of the computer. Secondly, it provided instructions, in the form of the God in the Machine’s “whirling words and phrases,” that incited the characters’ CHI, or the computer-human interaction exemplifying the rhetoric of the machine informing the rhetoric of the performance. These ideas will be explored more thoroughly in chapter five.

Technically, the Integrated Multimedia contained both sound and visuals. The digital soundscape was made up of an original music score, downloaded sound effects, and hip-hop music samples. The digital video production was primarily a composite of original animation, “found” media sequences, and repurposed rehearsal footage.

### *The Music and Sound*

The original digital sound created for the show was composed primarily by Zach Zamisky, and his group Old Sun Storage, who related his philosophy of sound design in this way:

It begins with a flash of light or perhaps insight into our lives, unleashing our fullest potential, rendering everything else consequential. When blinded by light we constrict, granting only the sharpest images allowance, but when we are blinded by darkness we dilate and allow all that is vague and formless to consume our occupation.

Zamisky's technique of creation was aligned with conventional movie soundtrack composition where he worked from a videotape of rehearsal footage and then developed sounds that coincided with his feelings about the action and meaning of the scene.

The squelchy, fifties-style synthesizer sounds that run throughout the show were contributed by electro-acoustic experimentalist Diego Medina who used a rare analog synthesizer called a Steiner Parker Synthcon. The actor playing HexaKali composed the haunting "song jingle" for the Noosphere Reality Show, and the actor playing the role of the God in the Machine performed the non-verbal chakra "soundings" that were integral to the visceral "messages" of love and hope delivered in level five. I montaged and "mixed up" additional sound and music files out of downloaded sound samples of Nokia ringtones, sine wave textures from 20 kHz (high-frequency) to 20 Hz (low-frequency), and three-second clips from hip-hop artists Aesop Rock, Swollen Members, Non-Phixion, Dr. Dre, Truth Hurts and Rakim, among others. The assembly was accomplished using Steinberg's Nuendo software on the "Silky V" computer that was then exported and integrated into the Final Cut Pro video timeline. During the production run, the "Silky V" computer was hooked up to the sound system by stereo miniplug output to RCA to XLR and then on into the mixing board in the sound booth. These signals were fed into left and right channels in the existing ceiling-mounted speaker system with an additional channel allocated to low frequency sounds that were distributed to a pair of enormous sub-woofers that were brought into the theatre space especially for this show.

The goal for the general sound ambiance, both computer-delivered and live, was to create an aural text of mystery and electricity, of non-specific space and time — a continual organic throb and pulsation.

#### *The Video and Animation*

The most effective way of understanding the look and feel of the Integrated Video Multimedia in *Messaging in the Noosphere* is to review the storyboards in the script in chapter three. The screen show was entirely edited on the “Silky V” computer, and the chakra flowers were created on an older Mac Powerbook, “Silky IV,” loaned out to animator Travis Wall. Software applications used were Final Cut Pro for video editing, Photoshop, iDVD, and Corel Draw for animations, and Quicktime for prototype exports used in rehearsals and for soundtrack composition. The video cameras used to shoot footage of the actors and the media clips were EMMEDIA Production Society’s Canon XL1S, and my own Sony VX1000.

During the production run, the “Silky V” computer was connected to the plasma screen via an “S-video” cable that was strung up through the ceiling grid. On only one occasion was there was a glitch in the communication between the “Silky V” computer and the plasma screen and that was when I hit the computer’s “sleep” corner in error, causing the screen saver slide series of the universe to play instead of the *Messaging in the Noosphere* footage. This occurred in level one amid a sequence of events describing HexaKali’s lighting of the sphere and the error fit in to the theme of the creation of the Noosphere, becoming, therefore, a “happy accident.”

#### *The Display Screen and the Noosphere Reality Game Show*

If a conventional stage play had a huge game board fly in from the grid from scene to scene, it would, no doubt, be considered a scenographic set piece. The Noosphere Reality Game

Show, in *Messaging in the Noosphere* was magnetic in its appeal to the characters and demanded instant attention each time it appeared on screen.

George Black, a theatre practitioner widely known for his innovation within traditional environments, urges directors to acknowledge that set pieces, especially if they represent a human habitation, reflect the personalities of one or more of the occupants. Black observes that the visual statement of the setting will not only stimulate certain responses in the audience but the environment will have a significant affect upon the actors in their characterizations and relationships. (Black 1991) This theory seems to hold true for *Messaging in the Noosphere* because from the time it first appeared on screen in level one, the Noosphere Reality Game Show, like a big crystal ball, significantly affected characterization, giving the audience a sneak preview of the characters in advance of their appearances on stage. It also gave the characters a reflection of themselves by displaying games designed specifically for their interests. Accompanied by a song jingle, the Noosphere Reality Game Show provoked a predictable response of awe and surprise and each character, when confronted by the power of its interface, immediately mobilized their computer control device in order to partake in their customized game adventure.

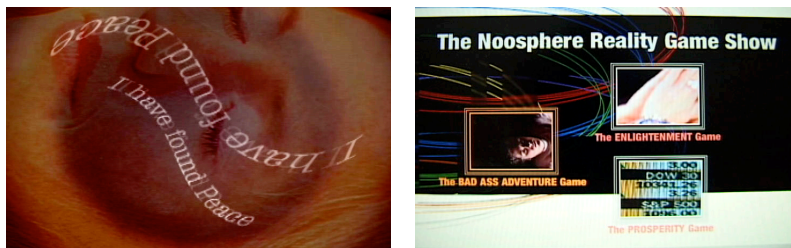


Figure 7 (a). God in the Machine and the style of her CHI-inducing whirling words and phrases.

Figure 7 (b). The user interface of the Noosphere Reality Game Show.

The display screen is an essential focal point in *Messaging in the Noosphere*. Just as the God in the Machine character appears as a recurring image on the plasma display, figure 7 (a), the Noosphere Reality Game Show, figure 7 (b), recurs as a set piece, like a huge game board. If there had been possibilities of interaction in this performance, this would have been a compelling point of entry for audience interactivity. As it stands, this very same hypothetical point of entry in the performance art becomes an implemented menu interface in the DVD — cementing the visual relationship among the components of the Integrated Media Series.

#### THE CHERUBIM AND THE AUDIENCE

*We are separated from the cherubim (heavenlies) by an invisible barrier so that we cannot see what is going on in the invisible world where the angels and demons function.*

— Aldous Huxley, *Doors of Perception*

The spherical shape of the crystal array and plasma screen physically defined the rich interior space of the Noosphere where direct human-computer interaction (HCI) would occur. The array also defined the space exterior to the sphere that was the “Cherubim.” The Cherubim, or the “Not Noosphere” was conceived as a place exterior to the electronic, nerve-like crystal constellation that encircled the HCI action. It is a “place of the angels” in which I conceptualized the beings, including the audience, as silent characters who, as I wrote in my journal, “should be content to merely exist like the sculptural figures of Egyptian Gods, Boddhisatvas of China, the Seated Buddhas of Khmer, the steles and statues of Copan, the wooden idols of tropic Africa — all profoundly still.” (Huxley 1932, 98)

From the project’s outset, I visualized that the audience would be positioned comfortably on the floor at an angle that would enable perfect lines of sight for both the live

action and the filmic action on screen. Being gathered together in this way, the audience was immersed into a “zero distance of experience” for intimate involvement in the audio-tactile experience of the theatre art — the feel of the actors’ breath, the smell of their hair, the visceral reaction to the low frequency sound waves, the zing of SatanKali’s Chinese knives as they sliced past their ear. At several moments throughout the show, the audience members were completely surrounded by the performance action.

Simultaneous to being amidst the action of the live theatre art from this immersive or zero distance of experience, they were also positioned in a fourteen-foot distance of experience from the plasma screen — or about the same distance that an average television viewer would be from their monitor in their own family room, and in the same general physical condition as well — reclined and propped up on cushions. Each invited audience at *Messaging in the Noosphere* could, indeed, be seen as an invited semi-circle of TV-watching “couch potato” friends with all the conveniences except their own remote controls to change the channels — and all profoundly still except for their gaze that darted from screen to live performance in a most intriguing way.

The audience was also conveniently positioned in the same relative viewing distance from the actors as was the camera lens on the many occasions that I videotaped the show. This was planned to allow an efficiency of planning and collection of the video assets that would be used in the DVD film component of the integrated media series. Under normal conditions, when the theatrical audience is positioned at a twenty-five- to fifty-foot distance of experience from the performance action, the “theatrical” performance is too big and emotionally magnified to qualify as truthful acting for the camera. By locating the audience in the same relative proximity as the camera, the performers instinctively provided a performance that multi-purposed the needs of both mediums, the live art and the film art.



Figure 8. ASAP strolling amongst the reclining audience.

The audience played a pivotal role in the planning stage of the mise-en-scène of the Integrated Multimedia display video. Since they were positioned on both sides of the plasma screen, and both sides were equally important in terms of viewer status, the entire screen display film needed to be readable both upside- up and upside- down, as seen in the storyboard figures in the script in chapter three. This was both a curse and a blessing — a curse in that the production of the video was doubly difficult because images had to be rotated and re-rendered, and a blessing because of the unique look that these visual manipulations enabled. (Sketches of set drawings plus the lighting plot are attached as appendix items # 3 and # 4.)

### SPACES WITHIN SPACES

The space itself held an interesting challenge — a space that was as tall as it was wide as it was long — a black, volumetric environment that was almost impossible for actors to “fill.” I chose the Reeve Secondary Theatre as a venue for *Messaging in the Noosphere* partly to see if I could express a warm and meaningful experience for an audience of spectators in this volume of space that seemed to defy intimacy. Further to the idea of experimenting with spacial volumes, in his book *Experimental Theatre*, James Roose-Evans cites Richard Schechner’s description of “environmental theatre” as being,

Literally spheres of spaces, spaces within spaces, spaces which contain, or envelop, or relate, or touch all the areas where the audience is and/or the performers perform. If some spaces are used just for performing, this is not due to a predetermination of convention or architecture but because the particular production being worked on needs space organized that way.

And the theatre itself is part of larger environments outside the theatre. These larger out-of-the-theatre spaces are the life of the city; and also temporal-historical spaces — modalities of time/space. (Roose-Evans 1984, 79)

Segmenting the floor space into a Noosphere within a Cherubim and breaking up the vertical space through which the characters ebbed and flowed, on and off the plasma screen, was my way of attempting to make this big black box into an intimate environment.

#### **THE CELLPHONES AND MESSAGING**

A primary notion I had when conceptualizing this project was that archetypal characters would message each other over time and space. When the project evolved into the four-text modality chart phase, each scene, or level, was introduced by a “downloaded” message from the character in the previous scene and ended with a message “upload” to the character in the next scene. This concept prevailed relatively unscathed by script revisions right through to the final iteration where HexaKali downloads a message from ASAP in level one and uploads one to TLK2U. TLK2U gets the message from HexaKali (mediated by Àngel) and is unfortunately interrupted and neutralized by the evil virus SatanKali in level two. In level three, ASAP receives a message from the God in the Machine and then uploads a message to himself on his voicemail. He receives his own message in level four and uploads a message to the sisters in level five about having doubled his prosperity.

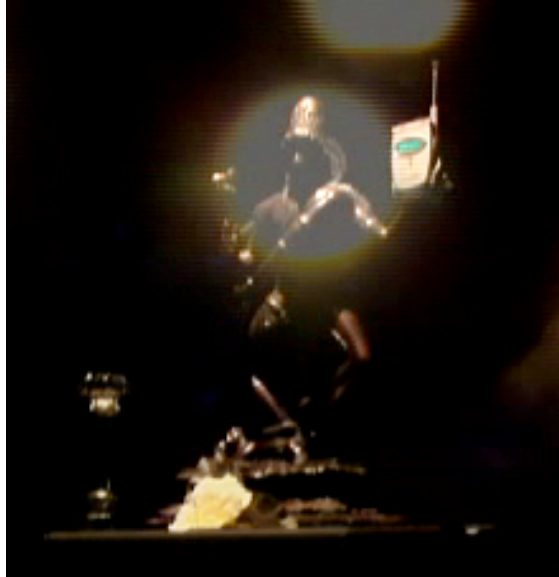


Figure 9. Cluster of set pieces and props at HexaKali/SatanKali’s “resting” area —  
Lord Shiva, Shiva Lingam doorknob, and cellular telephone.

Originally I had in mind that each set of crystal clusters would house a cellular phone that would glow and illuminate the doorknobs. However due to financial constraints, the five cellphones that were used in the show belonged to the cast members and to myself. My own phone was the only one that had a clip on it, so it was used as the primary messaging device throughout the show.

It’s a terrible taboo to bring activated cellphones into a theatre or cinema and my inclusion of them in the production was a mischievous act of defiance. However, I wanted to find ways to use them creatively as intentional elements rather than gratuitous ones, so I wrote them into the visual text, the aural text, the verbal text, and the physical text. Visually, they appeared as set and prop pieces, (see figure 9 of Shiva and phone); aurally, they rang in the soundtrack, and rang as part of the live soundscape; verbally, they were conversation partners; and physically, they were always fully operational computer input devices, evident in every scene as being actual tools of human-computer interaction.

Cellular phones are, in fact, fully fledged digital control devices within the world of “digital media convergence.” The bits and bytes of wireless cellular or mobile telephone signal transmissions are the same type of digital data used by the Internet and television broadcasters, especially at the intersection where these signals get received and delivered. More and more, our computers are becoming the dissemination platforms of choice and convenience. For example, as of February 2004, Apple Canada announced the release of iSynch, a “synchronization” partnership with Nokia and Siemens mobile phones where calendars, to-do lists, games, and even pictures can be swapped wirelessly between computer and cellular telephone.

European countries such as Finland and Scotland are more advanced with their mobile telephony and convergence with other media than we are in North America. At the time of this writing, picture phones are just entering the market in Canada but in Finland, for example, there are mobile phone games where the gameplay is initiated on a telephone handset and the results of the input, and subsequent rewards, are displayed on broadcast television. This has exciting implications for research in interactive game systems and narrative content delivery and brings an extra factor into the HCI — human to computer to TV to mobile interaction.

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The cause and effect between the crystals and the plasma screen simulates an entertainment technology HCI scenario of the “future of tomorrow.” In fact, even in today’s marketplace three-dimensional home-theatre systems such a “Sensio 3-D” work with conventional DVD players and projectors to deliver pay-per-view and video-on-demand. (*Calgary Herald*, May 12, 2003) My assumption is that if this system can deliver television signals, its just a matter of creative cabling that would allow this same system to surf the Internet or deliver picture

phone or Web camera conversations — as is simulated by the Noosphere. Users of a system like this could be freed from the repetitive stresses associated with mouse to screen ergonomics, flowing through an ambient space like a second skin to experience a kind of freedom in a fully physicalized human-computer interaction with entertainment media.