



Photo: Tom Paskal

I confess that in a given time-grain of about two hours, we as video manipulators brought about a kind of behaviour that would not have been possible divorced from the medium which enhanced it.

If you are a male watching your image on a screen and it superimposed, in real time, with the body of a female, there are not a lot of behaviours you can perform.

Similarly if screens are split so that one half body is male, the other half female, predictable activities follow. And if the image of a mouth is placed adjacent to the image of a full breast.

The mission—video-induced heat—was successful to the point where Anode became so aroused that he broke through his room, left television space, and entered Cathode's chamber for real space, and the "real thing". If it hadn't been for the weakness of (crack!) wood, that is the cube upon which Cathode was lying when Anode mounted her—the experiment would have been complete.

We investigated the ramifications of this equipment assiduously after hours and on weekends.

There are a couple of things to note about the above processes. First, what is interesting to me is that all the control over screen information was vested in the control room. That is, the participants themselves had very little, excuse the expression, 'hands-on' control of the system. They were completely dependent upon us to vary the sequence of effects which set the context for their play. This is unfortunate because it probably resulted in a certain predictability.

Further this lack of 'user' control is a serious weakness if one considers some theoretical notions

of how any organism should react or interact with any environment. It is critical for any kind of "resonance" in a communication that people have active participation in the messages which they are receiving. Another way of saying this is that "involvement" or "good" interactions depend on the organism receiving information (i.e. those messages which make a difference in behaviour) critical to adaptation and survival. More simply, although our experimental system provided the two participants with "feedback" i.e. they could monitor their results, they could not actively explore the range of effects the system could provide for them.

A rule of thumb for self-processing activities, especially in the psychotherapeutic domain, should be to provide the participant viewing his own image some kind of control over his screen-information. This can be done in a number of ways ranging from providing the viewer with a primitive special effects generator which dissects the space in real time into halves, quadrants, etc., to playing around with different kinds of delay-loops which permit him to reflect upon past behaviour while still maintaining a degree of control over it. These loops can be like playing "Simon says" with yourself.

Back to the interaction. This lack of responsiveness, our failure to permit either Anode or Cathode to participate directly in system's messages resulted at one point in Anode's anguished cry, "Oh, oh please superimpose, superimpose."

Moving to a different experimental environment

During an interaction which involved two little girls playing with each other's images on the monitors, a tape which contained a sequence of one of

the girl's fathers was placed on her monitor along with her own real-time image over which she had control. Astonishingly, she began interacting with him as if he were really capable of responding. I suppose she thought that he was broadcast from another room. She continued to call to him, to respond to his movements and voice until it reached a point where his non-response was becoming frustrating and upsetting and so the tape was ended.

One striking moment stays in my mind. It is when, unable to get real feedback or control of the screen image of her dad the little girl began miming his movement. When he raised a hand she raised a hand. It was the first and only time I have observed someone enter in good faith into an interaction with a non-human taped image.

The implications of this are fun to toy with. Suppose, just suppose that cable or picturephone become all they are supposed to, that someone has on hand a tape of you when you were interacting... you might be party to an interaction and never know it.

So, what have I learned?

Although it may not be possible to specify a video system to provide good messages like an instrument provides good music, one thing is sure in whatever system is contemplated, in whatever context, from cable systems to self-confrontation—just as playing an instrument is not a passive activity, so the terminal interface must allow the user to actively and continuously control, in real-time, the images and messages being displayed.