

THE CREATIVE USER - a broad definition

Prior to setting out the research, observations and recommendations regarding the current state of play and future directives that constitute this Creative User Research analysis, it is advisable to offer a definition of the CREATIVE USER.

At the most basic level, the CREATIVE USER can be defined as anyone whose participation in an interactive artwork, installation or performance involves a level of interaction that results in them creating any form of content which did not previously exist without their input. It can be argued that once the participation moves from complete passivity to demanding an active role, interacting becomes creative use. As long as the user is extending the artwork, installation or performance away from its base state, that user is creative.

This is a very general definition but given that different levels of creative use exist, a prototype definition is required. Different types of interactive works (see Interface and Interaction) also enable differing levels of creativity. Once we accept that an audience, faced with an interactive work, has become a CREATIVE USER, we can then move on to deeper, more detailed observation of that participation.

This report identifies three basic modes of participation within the role of the user: the user as Observer, as Performer and as Creator (see Role of the User). In typical non-interactive works, audiences could be thought of as receivers - mirrors, reflecting their own interpretation of an experience and absorbing an experience that they could not directly affect. Even the most basic of interactive experiences allow users to react, albeit in defined, rigid ways - to affect an outcome, but with little room for true creativity. It is debatable whether reaction can be defined as creative use. A higher level of interaction allows the setting up of a symbiosis between user and interactive work. If that feedback is at all sustained, then creative use emerges. When the level of interactivity allows users - whether the raw materials are their own which they have introduced into the interactive system, or pre-exist within the work - to create content that did not exist without their input, the creation of a unique experience and therefore creative use is taking place.

CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

Participation - as provided by interactive digital artworks - offers engagement in creative play and interaction with people, media and spaces. It also causes the arts audience to shift from observers to interactors. This shift has the potential to develop human understanding and experience of human/digital interactions.

As proactive producers of interactive digital artworks, Future Physical's responsibility is not just to support growth in public attendance and user satisfaction, but to help identify the production and marketing strategies that can best accelerate the field.

Due to the pioneering nature of many interactive artworks, it can be difficult to explain what form they will take, what they are designed to achieve and what sort of experience they will offer. To that end, the Creative User analysis summarises what can be perceived as the key future directions in the field.

But first, consider the question: **"Are you response-ABLE?"** (note 5) This is key when planning, designing and improving the interactive art experience - which places new responsibilities on both user and artist-developer. The interface must be functional and transparent, plus offer the user choices, while the user must understand the rules of play in both practical and conceptual terms.

The purpose of this report is not to impose on an artistic vision but to highlight particular issues of creative user involvement in design and prototyping and promote the development of strategies and methodologies for introducing creative users to artworks - so they enter them not with preconceived notions but with knowledge of the works potential.

Artist-developers have the most complex role in the creation of interactive works and they, more than any other members of the team, must bear in mind the needs, diversity and preferences of creative users.

There is often a conflict between artistic theory - particularly in such potentially complex and experimental objectives as interactive artworks - and the needs of the CREATIVE USER. But it is vital that the needs and diversity of creative users are integrated from the outset at as early a stage as is possible.

Future Physical's experience of co-producing several interactive works (see Case Studies) highlighted that overambitious design combined with lack of funding for prototype field testing could lead to levels of interactivity which were considerably more basic than those originally envisaged. Budget levels prevent the hosting of interactive works for a sufficient length of time to enable developers to test the marrying of different technologies and systems and for users to develop the necessary familiarity to engage creatively with the works. Lack of prior explanation of, or instruction in, the works also hampered user abilities and therefore satisfaction with interaction experiences.

Future Physical is fully aware of how difficult it is for the development teams to fulfil visions completely, both in terms of receiving the necessary funding, exposure and staging.

Economics dictate that one-off performances, or nightly runs, must provide the life-blood of arts venues which often struggle for funding, and many galleries lack the technical resources required.