

Interactive Media Arts

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Don Ritter

The Ethics of Interactive Installations

There are two contrasting perspectives that can be used when discussing art or media of any type. An artwork can be discussed according to its mechanism or according to its function. If an artwork is described as being a surrealistic painting that was created by the Spanish painter Joan Miró, this description focuses on the mechanism of the artwork: its medium, its style, and the nationality and name of its painter. In contrast, a discussion about the function of this painting might emphasize why it was painted, Miró's reputation as an artist, the painting's selling price, and the reason it was purchased. When we consider an artwork according to its mechanism, we pursue an understanding of what it is. When we consider an artwork according to its function, we seek an understanding of what it does. A particular artwork may have the ability to function as a mechanism of beauty, prestige, investment, historical artifact, or whatever.

This article discusses the relationships between interactive installations and ethics by describing a perspective that emphasizes the social function of media. In order to avoid any misunderstandings about what is meant by the ideas within this text, terminology pertaining to ethics, installation art, and aesthetics are described in detail. These definitions are not meant to be definitive, but as guides to clarify the ideas being proposed.

This article uses the perspective that the social function of all media is similar, being the promotion of particular entities and, ultimately, certain ethics. Television advertisements, e-commerce web sites, Hollywood films, modern paintings, and interactive installations are all technically different, but each has a potential for promoting a certain moral,

such as depicting a materialistic lifestyle to be more desirable than others. If the social function of media is to promote certain ethics, which are being promoted through interactive installations?

THE INTERACTIVE INSTALLATION

An interactive installation will be defined in this text as a work that contains the following features:

1. It is a physical environment that uses real three-dimensional space as an aesthetic feature, it has an architectural component; the room surrounding the installation is a conceptual aspect of the work, not only a physical space for containing the work.
2. In order to experience the work, an audience must make certain physical actions with their bodies, limbs, voices, brainwaves, breath, or whatever.
3. The work is interactive, its physical form changes in response to certain physical actions of its audience. A change in form could be physical shape, position, colour, brightness, sound frequency, sound loudness, or whatever.

AESTHETICS

A primary goal in the field of aesthetics is to investigate *aesthetic judgments*, the decisions people make when they decide what is art and what is good art.[1] An artwork is comprised of a collection of characteristics, called *aesthetic features*, that can influence a person's liking or disliking of an artwork, its *aesthetic value*. [2] The symbolic content of its imagery, a particular video editing software, or a work's production cost can all be aesthetic features within an interactive video installation. A broad definition of aesthetic features is being proposed to support the perspective that a compositional element is any characteristic of an artwork that can influence its aesthetic value, including characteristics that some writers might consider to be context or extrinsic features.

An aesthetic perspective is the idiosyncratic method used by a person for judging the quality of artworks. Traditional writings on aesthetics may refer to an aesthetic perspective as "taste." [3] People prefer artworks containing the aesthetic features that they associate with

good artworks, while they dislike artworks lacking in those features or containing features that they associate with bad artworks. The judgment of an artwork is dependent on its aesthetic features and, also, on the aesthetic perspective used by a person for judging it. When experiencing the same artwork, people will vary regarding which aesthetic features they notice, which they understand, and which aesthetic criteria they use for evaluating its features.

Aesthetic features are classified as intrinsic features when they are physically present and perceivable within a work, such as colour, physical size, loudness, or any characteristic of a work that can be seen, heard, or physically felt by an audience. Some theories of aesthetics consider intrinsic features, also called formal qualities, to be the only factors capable of influencing a work's aesthetic value.[4] In contrast, extrinsic features are not physically present within an artwork and they are recognizable only by people who have the appropriate knowledge. Extrinsic features include the symbolism within a work, the age of the artist of a work, and the manufacturer of a work's technology.

Aesthetic features can also be categorized according to their perceptual, conceptual, social, and technological characteristics. Perceptual aesthetic features are the visual, audible, and temporal characteristics of artworks. The conceptual features of a work refer to the ideas and symbolism that are associated with it, including interpretations not intended by the artist of a work. The concepts conveyed by artworks are extrinsic features because they are intangible and cannot be viewed or heard directly through perceptual features. Conceptual features are recognizable only by audience members who have the knowledge for distinguishing and understanding specific concepts. The social features of a work refer to the social relationships that exist between the creator of a work and the audience of that work. Because of this characteristic, the social features of a specific work are idiosyncratic; they will vary between audience members. The social feature "friendship," for example, will be present in an artwork only for audience members who are friends of the artist of the work. The technological aesthetic features of a work correspond to the specific technologies used for creating, distributing, or experiencing a work.

Aesthetic judgements are carried out through the fulfillment or lack of fulfillment of the *aesthetic criteria* contained within a person's aesthetic perspective. When a person makes an aesthetic judgement, the fulfillment of a specific criterion does not always increase the aesthetic value of a work. Some people may use beauty as a negative aesthetic criterion within their aesthetic perspective: the recognition of beauty within a work decreases its aesthetic value. For other persons, beauty may be a positive aesthetic criterion: the recognition of beauty within a work increases its aesthetic value. When a positive aesthetic criterion is fulfilled, the judgement of a work moves towards a positive aesthetic value. When a negative aesthetic criterion is fulfilled, the judgement moves towards a negative aesthetic value. The outcome of an aesthetic judgement can be viewed as a summation of fulfilled criteria, each criterion having a different direction and degree of influence on a work's aesthetic value.

When a person judges a work to have a positive aesthetic value, the person can express this judgement in the following ways: a verbal or written statement; interest held by the work for a long duration; discussing the work with others in a positive manner; voluntarily re-experiencing the work; physically affected by the work; intellectually stimulated by the work; emotionally affected by the work; providing an opportunity to the artist of the work; purchasing the work; or paying to experience the work.

Although hundreds of aesthetic criteria exist, they can be classified into four general categories according to their associated aesthetic feature. Conceptual aesthetic criteria respond to the ideas or concepts conveyed by a work; perceptual aesthetic criteria respond to the perceptual experience provided by a work; social aesthetic criteria respond to the social relationship between an audience member and the artist of a work; and technological aesthetic criteria respond to the technology used to create, distribute, or experience a work.

This text uses an approach to aesthetics that can be labeled as *cognitive relativism* because it acknowledges the idiosyncrasy of aesthetic perspectives.[5] Using this approach, an artwork cannot have an inherent or universal aesthetic value because a person's liking of a work is primarily dependent on the aesthetic perspective used for judging it.

ETHICS

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that studies morality by investigating which human behaviors are valuable, desirable, or good. Topics encompassed by ethics include human rights, religion, world poverty, racism, sexism, and euthanasia. Within the field of ethics, the terms moral value, moral principle, ethic, or human value refer to a specific human behavior that people consider to be valuable. The specific collection of moral values that people hold, their ethics, determines how they behave in certain situations.

The complication with ethics is that people often disagree about which behaviors should be endorsed as moral values, such as disputes within a society regarding the acceptance of abortion, capital punishment, and same-sex marriages. Philosopher Peter Singer writes, "The problem is not so much to know 'the difference between right and wrong' as to decide what is right and what is wrong." [6]

Another interpersonal complication regarding ethics is that people may agree about adopting a specific moral value, but disagree on using it in all situations. *Deontological theories of ethics* propose that people should use moral values consistently, regardless of the consequences of their use. *Teleological theories of ethics*, also called consequentialism, consider the use of moral values to be dependent on the desired consequences. Consider a moral value that states a person should never be aggressive with another person. If a deranged person began attacking a group of innocent people, a person who uses this value in a teleological manner may find it ethically acceptable to attack the deranged person. In contrast, people who use this value in a deontological manner would consider it unacceptable to harm the attacker because they do not harm people in any situation, even to protect themselves or others.

Because of their disregard for consequences, deontological theories of ethics are similar to *inherent aesthetic theories* that consider the value of art to be within an artistic experience, with little or no regard for the consequences of the experience. Inherent aesthetic theories consider a particular aesthetic perspective to be appropriate in all situations, while *consequential aesthetic theories* permit the adoption of an aesthetic perspective according to the desired consequences. Teleological

theories of ethics are similar to consequential aesthetic theories because they also consider consequences. When selecting artworks for an exhibition, the director of a private art gallery may prefer artworks that are potentially salable, but this same person may prefer artworks that are beautiful and complex when they are intended for personal enjoyment. This person is using a consequential approach to aesthetics.

Because this text makes considerable use of the terms concepts, beliefs, and values, their intended meanings will be described. A *concept* is a “principal of classification,”[7] within a person’s mind, such as the concept “lemon” being used by a person to distinguish lemons from objects that are not lemons. Concepts provide people with orientation, the ability to recognize and distinguish objects in their world.[8] Concepts can also perform evaluative functions by classifying certain objects as being good, desirable, or whatever. The concept “good art is beautiful” enables a person to distinguish what is good art from what is not.

In order to exist, a concept does not need to be true or believed, it must simply be known. When a person accepts a concept as being true, it becomes a *belief* for that person. When people use particular beliefs to direct their behavior in the physical world, these beliefs become *values* for those persons. The concept “generosity towards others is good” becomes a person’s value if the person believes this concept and acts in accordance with it.

ETHICS AND AESTHETICS

In the field of social psychology, *functional attitude theories* examine the relationships between people’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. These theories define an attitude as an evaluative judgement made by a person that expresses a degree of liking or disliking for an “attitude object,” being any abstract or concrete entity.[9] An attitude object can be a certain concept, a certain type of food, or a particular artwork. If a person holds the attitude “this interactive installation is a good,” the attitude object is the installation.

The core concept of functional attitude theories is that a person holds a certain attitude not because it is objectively true, but because it serves

a desired function for that person. Five general functions of attitudes have been proposed by these theories: to seek award or avoid punishment; to obtain a perspective for understanding the world; to defend the ego; to express personal values; or to obtain membership in a particular social group.[10]

The relationships between beliefs, attitudes, and attitude objects are similar to the relationships between aesthetic criteria, aesthetic judgements, and artworks. An aesthetic criterion is a person's belief, such as "good art is beautiful." The artwork being judged is the attitude object, and the aesthetic judgement is the person's attitude, such as "this artwork is good." Functional attitude theories propose that attitudes are instrumental at providing psychological benefits to the holders of the attitudes and that "...the primary benefit lies not in the attitude object being evaluated but in the expression of the attitude." [11] If we apply this perspective towards aesthetics, the function of art is not determined by the specific aesthetic features within artworks, but through the aesthetic criteria that people use for judging art.

This text uses the perspective that aesthetic judgements function as mechanisms for promoting specific concepts, people and social institutions, and that these promotions will occur with or without people's awareness. The term *promotion* will refer to any action that contributes to the advancement, strength, or prosperity of a conceptual, personal, or social entity. Liking minimalist art is a promotion for the conceptual entity, "minimalist art is good." Telling a friend that you like a specific artist's work is a promotion for that artist, a personal entity. Attending an exhibition at a specific museum is a promotion for that museum, a social entity, and for any person associated with it.

The term entity refers to anything "which is perceived or known or inferred to have its own distinct existence (living or nonliving)." [12] An entity can be a person, a physical object, or an intangible concept, such as "integrity." A conceptual entity refers to the existence of a specific concept, such as "good art is meaningful" or "selfishness is good." Conceptual entities are strengthened by becoming known and admired by more people and, similar to beliefs, the existence of a conceptual entity is determined by it being known by people rather than it being objectively true. A personal entity refers to a particular person whose value is

determined by the presence of particular personal attributes, such as authority, wealth, or accomplishments. A social entity is an organized group of people, such as a particular family, city, country, business corporation, university, or art museum. The strength of a social entity is determined by the presence and strength of attributes that it considers desirable. If popularity, size, authority, or financial worth are considered important attributes for a social entity, the enhancement of any of these features becomes an increase in the entity's strength.

Aesthetic judgements can contribute to the strength of conceptual, personal, and social entities by enhancing their popularity, social status, authority, financial worth, or any other characteristic considered valuable by the entity. The aesthetic criteria used by people for judging artworks determine which entities are promoted through aesthetic judgements. Some people, however, may be unaware of which entities are being promoted through their judgements because of a lack of knowledge or awareness, or because *media subterfuges* are being used. Media subterfuges refer to media content that is created or distributed for reasons other than what an audience believes, or for reasons other than what is proclaimed by the producers and promoters of the content. A common example of a media subterfuge is a specific product appearing in a commercial film because the manufacturer of the product has paid for its inclusion: product placement. Although this text proposes that the general function of all media is to strengthen particular entities, which entities are being strengthened will be unclear to audiences when media subterfuges are used.

A common strategy for a media subterfuge is the creation of content that fulfills an audience's existing aesthetic criteria while concurrently fulfilling the goals of the producers or distributors of that content. As more people become aware of advertising strategies, covert forms of persuasion have become increasingly popular, such as product placement and viral advertising. The common feature of these and other forms of stealth advertising is that they do not appear to be persuasion. Examples of viral advertising are certain video files that are shared by friends through email or posted on personal websites. These videos are often macabre, humorous or sexual, and they usually have a reference to a commercial product, though the actual association with the manufacturer of the depicted product is ambiguous.

The promotion of an entity is essentially a moral act because it advocates certain human behaviors to be more desirable than others. If a person likes an artwork because it received recognition from a reputable institution, the person is treating that institution with admiration, thereby enhancing the reputation of the institution and of any person associated with it. Similarly, if a person likes an artwork because of its concept, the concept and any associated entities are strengthened through an increase in popularity, credibility, authority, or whatever.

An aesthetic judgement produces a stratification of certain ideas, people, and institutions as the affected entities obtain particular levels of worthiness. When an entity is given a high level of worth, it will receive opportunities that are not available to those judged as less deserving. In this manner, the moral treatment that an entity receives from people will correspond with the perceived worth of the entity.

THE ETHICS OF INTERACTIVE INSTALLATIONS

The ethics promoted by an artwork, including interactive installations, are primarily determined by the aesthetic criteria used to judge the work. If a person judges an installation to be good because of its concept, the person is popularizing that concept, and any persons and social institutions associated with the concept. For example, a person who likes an interactive installation that conveys the concept “genetic manipulation will help humanity” is permitting the concept to exist, and is also promoting any scientist, university, or corporation working in the field of genetic manipulation. A person who acts in accordance with the belief that “genetic manipulation will help humanity” has accepted the concept as a moral value, as an ethic. In a similar manner, if an interactive installation is judged according its technology, the manufacturer of that technology is being promoted. A person who uses this criterion might also buy the technology or encourage others to buy it and, thereby, enrich the manufacturer even more.



I will use my most recent interactive installation, *Vested*, as an example of using the perspective being proposed in this text.[13] The perceptual aesthetic features of *Vested* include a 12 x 19m room, a military vest containing lights and wireless communication, two green spotlights, and a high resolution 12 m video projection of slow moving clouds. If a visitor to the installation puts on the vest and walks in front of the projection, a large panorama of international buildings appears. If the person walks left or right, the panorama tracks accordingly while the spotlights track the person's movement. Different types of panoramas become active according to the vested person's distance from the panorama. The panoramas present well-known art museums, political buildings, ancient buildings, towers, churches, and temples. At certain locations near the panorama, live video imagery of the vested person is overlaid with the panorama.



If the vested person presses the red button on the vest, the building panorama is overlaid with large explosions accompanied by sound. Multiple explosions are activated if the person hits the button repeatedly, though the button will be disabled and the cloud imagery will reappear after the explosions have finished. After a ten second pause, the explosion button is re-enabled and a new panorama of buildings appears in response to the vested person's movement. If the vested person walks to either side of the panorama, the cloud imagery returns and the spotlights scan the room, apparently searching for the vested person. If the vested person does not return to the panorama and places the vest back on its stand, one spotlight illuminates the vest, making it available for another participant.



The conceptual features of the installation include an environment that permits people to enact a suicide bombing in front of an audience, an activity that would be considered a human tragedy in real life. For thousands of years, humans have entertained themselves with the killing of their fellow beings under the guise of sports, religion, or being informed. The poet Byron coined the phrase “Roman holiday” in reference to a gathering of people to enjoy the suffering of others, sadistic entertainment for the masses.[14] Although this phrase is a historical reference to the gladiatorial events of Ancient Rome, which were presented on dates declared as civic holidays, various forms of contemporary news media supply today’s audiences with real-life executions, corpses, interviews with the traumatized, and intricate facts about human tragedies that are so detailed that their function as news is questionable. *Vested* is essentially a Roman holiday, a social portrait of this sadistic phenomenon as it exists today.



The technical features of Vested include four computers, three high resolution video projectors, a five channel sound system, an infra-red tracking system, four video cameras, a vest with infra-red and wireless transmission, two moving yoke lights, a moving light control system, a network, a programming language, and custom control and video playback software.

The social features of the installation include the countries and institutions that provided support for the creation of the installation, and the identity, gender, nationality, age, and institutional affiliations of the artist.

It is not possible to state which specific ethics are being promoted through an aesthetic judgement of Vested because this is dependent on the aesthetic criteria being used by a person when judging the work. It is also not possible to discuss every aesthetic criterion that a person

might use when judging the work, however, the most likely ones will be described. When mentioning a particular aesthetic criterion in this text, the format will be the name of the associated aesthetic feature followed by the word "aesthetics," such as *idealistic aesthetics* being an aesthetic criterion that responds to the presence of idealism within a work.

A person who uses perceptual aesthetic criteria when judging this installation might use the following criteria: beauty aesthetics, cinematic aesthetics, entertainment aesthetics, familiarity aesthetics, formal aesthetics, high resolution aesthetics, large scale aesthetics, perceptually aggressive aesthetics, or physical aesthetics. The conceptual entities promoted through these criteria would include "beauty," "depictions of aggression are entertaining," "good artworks involve a viewer's entire body," and "large is better than small." The personal entities being promoted are the artists who create large scale video installations, and the social entities being strengthened include the institutions depicted within the panoramas, including the British Museum, Centre Pompidou, Documenta, Guggenheim Museum, Louvre, Museum of Modern Art, Saatchi Gallery, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom, and the USA.

A person who uses conceptual aesthetic criteria within their aesthetic perspective might use the following criteria: accessible concept aesthetics, good concept aesthetics, intellectual aesthetics, humanistic aesthetics, or meaningful aesthetics. The conceptual entities promoted through these criteria include "meaningful concepts," "humanism," "human tragedy should not be used as entertainment," and "intellectualism." The personal entities promoted include any person who is humanistic, and the social entities being strengthened include any institutions devoted to humanism or to the criticism of violence in media.

A person who uses technological aesthetic criteria when judging this installation might use the following criteria: artist-written code aesthetics, expensive production aesthetics, interactive technology aesthetics, large resources aesthetics, newest technology aesthetics, network technology aesthetics, or technology manufacturer aesthetics. The conceptual entities promoted through these criteria include "artist-written code," "interactivity," "good artworks use many resources," and "new technology." The personal entities being promoted are the artists who

create interactive installations and who write software for their works. The social entities being strengthened include: the manufacturers of the specific technologies in the work, and the cultural and educational institutions that support technology based works.

A person who uses social aesthetic criteria when judging Vested might use the following criteria: artist nationality aesthetics, artist reputation aesthetics, foreign artist aesthetics, humanistic artist aesthetics, institutional aesthetics, or tool-builder aesthetics. The conceptual entities promoted through these criteria include "foreign artist," and "humanism." The personal entity being promoted is the artist of the work, and the social entities being strengthened as a consequence of using these criteria include: Canada, Germany, the institutions who have provided support and resources towards the work's creation, the educational institutions who provided the artist's education, and the institutions that have employed the artist in the past.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this article has been to present a perspective that focuses on the social function rather than the mechanism of interactive installations. The primary conclusion is that all media, including interactive installations, have a similar social function, being the promotion of particular conceptual, personal, and social entities. The promotion is carried out through the aesthetic judgement of a work, and the primary entities being promoted usually correspond with the aesthetic criteria used to judge the work. If beauty is used as a criterion for judging art, the concept of beauty and any persons or institutions associated with beauty become strengthened.

Although the general function of media is considered to be the same, to promote an entity, different media and genres may be more capable of promoting certain entities. A photograph of flowers is more capable of promoting the traditional concept of beauty than an interactive sound installation that presents the sound of road traffic. Conversely, an interactive sound installation is more capable of promoting the concept of interactivity than a photograph of flowers because it contains interactivity as an aesthetic feature. Although the aesthetic features of a work are involved with what it promotes, the specific entities being enhanced

through an aesthetic judgement are primarily determined by the aesthetic criteria used for judging it. A particular aesthetic feature may exist within a work, but it cannot be involved in the promotion of an entity if it is not noticed or regarded. The one exception is when a media subterfuge is used. In that situation, an audience member may be purposely misled regarding which entity is being promoted through a work.

When an entity is promoted knowingly or unknowingly through an aesthetic judgement, that entity is given a certain social stratification, a degree of desirability and worthiness for the concept, persons, or institutions associated with the entity. When an entity is given a high level of worthiness, it is treated with respect and given opportunities that are not given to other entities. In this manner, an aesthetic judgement is ultimately an ethical decision.

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