Box Me Dumb Human Installation

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the *Box Me Dumb Human* installation is described. In this installation, a large leather bunny puppet with red glowing eyes is boxed by the player, while insulting/motivating him/her with arguments taken from the AI debate. The player is fighting for all that is good about humanity, what distinguishes it from abstract mechanism, and he/she is fighting against the machine or system.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5 [**Arts and Humanities**]: Performing arts.

General Terms

Performance, Design, Experimentation.

Keywords

Play, art, tangible interaction, installation.

In the *Box Me Dumb Human* installation (Figures 1–4), a large leather bunny puppet with red glowing eyes (a boxing bag for now) is boxed by the player, while insulting/motivating him/her with arguments taken from the AI debate. The player is in a way fighting for all that is good about humanity, what distinguishes it from abstract mechanism, and he/she is fighting against the machine or system.

In this installation the computer is invading the sphere of the player, that is, it is posing as a boxing opponent, and is challenging the player to a match on his/her own turf. In taking up the fight, the player interacts with the boxing bag and not with computer hardware. None of the usual input devices are used. The screen, which is positioned somewhat to the side of the action, shows only the remaining seconds of the round during a match, and the title image and the high score list between matches. The feedback for the player during boxing is only communicated through audio by a pseudo-human (male) computer voice from inside the bag. The voice was recorded with the *Amiga*'s standard

speech tool, has the classic monotone pronunciation and makes the typical mistakes that marked computer speech for a long time. After the match is over, a photograph is taken for the high score list. Instead of pushing an OK button the player hits (i.e. boxes) the robot rabbit on the nose (or waits 20 seconds).[1]

Figure 1. *Box Me Dumb Human* installation

Figure 2. Setup

The installation has now been publicly exhibited.[2] Subsequently, it was revised slightly. In the original version, the puppet

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[1] There are many other interactive installations which use a boxing bag, e.g. fur's *SoundSlam* (www.fursr.com (26/10/2007)).

[2] At the DeSForm 2012 conference in Wellington, New Zealand

announced to the player the next boxing hit (left/right, jab/straight/hook) to be executed to a specific spot (head/body), and the player had to (re-) act as fast as possible. The order was fixed and made sense boxing-wise, and it was possible to memorize it. Each round was 60 seconds long. If the player missed hits, stopped hitting the puppet or was too slow, it would start to insult him/her (e.g. 'Humans are slow', 'Humans are irrational', 'Fight like a man', 'The machines will win'), the tone of the comments going from friendly to nasty. After each hit the puppet reacted (e.g. 'Uff', 'Ahh', 'That wouldn't stop me from telling what I know') and then announced the next hit (e.g. 'Right straight to head').

The revised version keeps the basic concept, but the interaction has been simplified to engage the player more, provide easier entry into the game and to create more (inter-) action. The challenge is still to score as many hits as possible in the given time, but there are no longer specific places to hit or a specific order of hits. This is intended to lead to less standing and listening, and to more boxing. The rounds have been shortened to 30 seconds. If the player stops hitting the puppet or is too slow, it starts to insult him/her as before.

Figure 3. Photos from the high score list

The installation is intended as a contribution to the debate that is coming to the front every few years about being able to construct intelligent machines. It draws on Norman White's *Helpless Robot* [1], being a playful comment on the often uneasy relationships between machines and people, taking the everyday struggles with e.g. telephone answering systems, ticket machines, network connections or computer applications to a tangible level. Paradoxically, the conflict unfolds at the same time as the player/user/human is trying to do exactly what the machine is telling him/her. The conflict is articulated as a communication breakdown between the player and the machine. On the one side the poor and limited vocabulary of the player who is trying to articulate him/herself through boxing, and on the other side the machine, using pseudo-human speech with its obvious inability to understand what is going on.

In playing the game, the player takes sides, and fights against the machine. This action can spark participants' reflection on what makes us human, and on the question if we are losing out to the system. The installation attempts to point out that living is not about abstract existence, reasoning, problem solving and sensory perception; but about bodily existence and lived experience; activities which are always connected to location and situation, and appropriating these (J. J. Gibson). Living is neither pre-planned [2] nor clear-cut, but creatively, associatively, initiatively

moving on and creating meaning along the way. Being, experiencing, acting, reasoning, learning, understanding and making belongs together, naturally – how could we imagine otherwise? The dynamic process of having a world is intimately connected to concrete, direct and immediate practice. Acting in and experiencing the world (Debray), changing it, change oneself, being changed, experiencing time and space (Heidegger), living and dying, is making us human. Our bodies do not limit our being, but enable us to be. They are not only our vehicle or tool in the world, but we are our bodies (Merleau-Ponty), we are what we were, we are our actions, we are what we do, we are our opinions and emotions. Don't we feel so alive when we do certain things, or when we experience certain situations? When we are fully in-tune with our surroundings, with what is happening [3], with other people? Our being is movement, rhythm, tone, tension, relaxation, ambivalence, play, success, failure, trying, texture, material, images, dreams, love, chaos and structure. This is what we as humans are concerned with, what we thoroughly enjoy (and despise), and it's called life.

Figure 4. Player and spectators

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