

Interview

***Eavesdrop* and New Media**

David Pledger talks to Rosemary Klich

David Pledger is founding artistic director and producer of the Melbourne based, multifaceted company, Not Yet It's Difficult (NYID). On his recent project, *Eavesdrop*, presented at the 2004 Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney Festivals, he collaborated with Executive Director of the i-Cinema Centre for Interactive Cinema Research, Jeffrey Shaw, to produce a 360-degree cinematic landscape that invites the user to explore the scene before them from a podium-like user console.

In a kind of purgatorial club, the characters share intimate conversations that explore certain moral, spiritual and psychological conditions, while the user/audience assumes a role that is both detective and director as s/he 'eavesdrops' on these interwoven stories. Described as 'part game, part real-time filmmaking, part spectator sport, part magical realism' (NYID), *Eavesdrop* expands the borders of the cinema screen and allows users to navigate their own path through the multi-narrative, multi-layered, theatrical terrain.

Rosemary Klich spoke to David Pledger about his work on Thursday 20 January 2005 at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

Rosemary Klich: *Voyeurism and surveillance are themes that run through a lot of your work. What is it that so intrigues you about this concept?*

David Pledger: You see, right now I'm watching those two people over there. I guess I just like watching people, like checking them out and seeing what they do, looking at behavior, bodies and shapes, the way people interact, and the way they walk along the street. I honestly think that is an animal thing.

But when I look at the way that impulse is refracted into the public domain, then it is about detachment and monitoring, and making sure that you know what people are doing at any given moment. The perversion of that natural impulse is what I find really interesting. And I find that, as a way of controlling society, it starts to limit the way that we actually see ourselves. I like to critique that, because I think it is tied into things like civil liberties, repression, terrorism and all that.

RK: *What was the impetus that drove you and Jeffrey Shaw into collaboration for this project? Were there any difficulties in the process of collaboration?*

DP: Jeffrey approached me about four years ago, when he was working with a mutual friend of ours, a French artist called Jean-Michel Bruyère. Jeffrey was coming out to Australia, and Jean-Michel said, 'While you're over there and if

you've got a project in mind, why don't you contact David?' And he did. He said, 'I've got this idea that I want to do, which has got to do with putting stories into this sort of installation framework, with the circle and the rotating platform, and I was just wondering whether or not you'd be interested in working with me on developing a project.' It started as a fairly rudimentary idea—people of different nationalities sitting around in a club. We sat with that for a while, until we could actually get the project up, and by the time I was able to find money for it, it had changed. The things that were going on at the tables were completely different from that original set-up, which was much more improvisational, more about establishing a physical ambiance rather than actual storytelling.

He was interested in it being about narrative mediation. So, over a period of the next three years he came out to Australia and saw some of my work and then invited me to ZKM (Karlsruhe, Germany) for an artist-in-residency, and over that period of time we got more of a handle on each other and how each other thought, what my work meant and what his work meant, and I got an understanding of things like programming. Being at ZKM was very good, I think, because watching everyone work together there's a very good collaboration between the artists, the programmers and designers. So it was a good experience. However, it's one thing to have an idea for a project and quite another to get the money to get it up. It was able to get up basically through a one-stop-shop for funds, the Major Festivals Initiative (MFI).[1] And then we had some other support partners in there as well.

The thing about collaboration is that it exists both creatively and financially, and we were using both his contacts and mine to actually produce the work. I think it's something that people don't really discuss very much, but in the kind of maelstrom of creating and financing, we discovered a way of working together. I think at a certain point I proposed a different concept for the content, which, because we'd been discussing it for a long time, seemed like a natural progression, even though it was kind of a large leap. And that had an effect on the programming, because there were things I wanted to do—like the internal landscapes. And that became a real point of discussion, like how can we actually customise the visual program that was driving the content, so that we could get inside the characters' heads.

RK: *The characters are linked by their existence in the same purgatorial club, and user-interaction focuses on exploring the psyche of the characters and identifying areas of interconnection across their narratives. Is there a particular theme or moral position that unifies the various narratives? What was the inspiration for the characterisation?*

DP: This is the third time I have used 'Scott and Charlene' [who were characters originally played by Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan on the popular 1980s television soap *Neighbours*, and are reinterpreted in *Eavesdrop*]. I'm very

interested in those characters iconically, as soap-opera, middle-class, white Australians. Initially, Scott was played by a Vietnamese actor and Charlene by a Japanese actor. For this project I stayed with Yumi Umiumare as Charlene and introduced Benji, to have that kind of friction. The old man and the old woman were new creations, as were all the others.

Really the stories are about a middle-class Australia in purgatory, which is basically how I see the country at the moment. I see it as being in a kind of limbo. You see, the difference with theatre is that in theatre you can be very direct with your politics, but in an environment like this, if you are direct with your politics, people will just turn off. You have no control over it. I wanted to be more indirect and subtle. It was a very good experience for me. In a way, the process of writing *Eavesdrop* had a strong effect on the process of writing *Blowback*, the theatre production that we've just finished in Melbourne.

RK: *New media allows for greater levels of immersion and interactivity. Do you see these features characterising the future for cinema, and also for theatre?*

DP: My theatre has always been immersive theatre. I don't get proscenium-arch theatre, I don't understand what is going on and I start giggling. I get the giggles, I look at them and go, 'C'mon, we all know that you're all pretending up there', so let's get all grown up about it and take away the fourth wall and the proscenium arch and look at a kind of architecture that relates to living in Australia. So, I open the environment up and I always have done. For example, the last piece *Blowback* we publicised as 'immersive tele-theatre', because the audience were actually immersed in the performance which happened around them, in front of them and beside them. And that is a real characteristic of NYID's theatre work. I don't think that it has come from new media or from thinking that new media is the way forward. I just think it comes from actually understanding what daily life is.

I mean, look at us. We're sitting in a café and we're immersed in the space around us. To actually put this in a frame that you sit and look at in a theatre is really kind of ridiculous. Spatially it makes no sense, architecturally it makes no sense, and creatively it makes no sense. There's no reason why, when you're in a theatrical environment, you can't see what's going on over there [*He turns.*] or turn around and see what's going on over there [*Turns again*]. It is the conventions that are so powerful. Because they are so conservative at the moment, there has been very little evolution in theatre practice. From the nineteen-fifties, other performing arts forms like dance have really made progressions, like dance theatre, but there has been very little progression in theatre. I think that one of the great things about new media is the potential for it to allow the edges of practice in other art forms to merge and overlap. Good art always works best when it is asking those questions of practice.

RK: *Lev Manovich suggests that, 'In general, creating a work of new media*

can be understood as the construction of an interface to a database'. Could Eavesdrop perhaps be viewed as presenting a database or paradigm of narratives from which the participant creates his/her own syntagm or story?

DP: Yes, I think that's one of the objectives. The other objective is to have that experienced communally by other people who are in the space. The relationships between the person who is using the machine and the people who are both waiting to use the machine or watching what somebody else makes of it is in fact where the theatrical elements of it are.

RK: *As a member of the audience I felt I was presented with a plot from which I was invited to develop a story.*

DP: That's absolutely it. Say if you were to watch all 81 minutes of the film, you would see it more like a feature film. However, the way that it has been designed is for people to go in at different points and make their own story. You are a detective, and you are putting together a story and trying to find out who is related to whom. The way that you negotiate this is absolutely individual and unique, and no-one else can do it the way that you do. Moreover, when you get on the machine, it is at a certain point where somebody has left off, so there is no beginning and no end even though it loops.

I think that the only way you can experience narrative in that form is by constructing it in a very conventional way. Each story, three 3-minute acts that all begin and end together, is guided by the music. The music is three variations on a theme. I structured the music so that after 2' 40" the musicians have a singing break. At 5' 40" there is a dance break. The end of that is at 6', and the last three minutes is the final act, where you basically reach the climax of each of those scenes and then it loops back in on itself. So, in a way it is very classical and I think that is why you can mediate the narrative; it is so structured in the most conventional format that it is quite subliminal. I would never use that structure in my own theatre work.

In *Eavesdrop*, however, I needed to employ some sort of stable dramatic literary convention off which the interactivity could bounce. When you go into the internal landscapes and come out, there is a sense of confidence in the structure; you come straight back out and you pick up the conversation where you left off. The piece is structured both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, there are seven stories and they each have a moment at 3', 6' and 9'. Vertically, each story has a first act, second act, third act. So it is set up as a series of blocks that sit upon each other and you can look at it that way [*He gestures.*], or you can look at it that way [*Gestures with turned hands*] or you can look at it that way.

RK: *Could you describe that system of blocks as presenting the image of a database?*

DP: In fact, that is the image for the programming, where you have these set of concentric circles, that sort of go out, and you layer them one on top of the other like slices of stories. Then you break them down into the wedges. By doing that then you can locate sound and vision within the sectors, the wedges.

RK: *I was fascinated by the behaviour and creativity of the individual users as they interacted with the work. Do you think the user-interaction becomes a kind of performance?*

DP: Yes. That is what I find makes it different from other artworks. The banality of *Eavesdrop* is really one of its attractive features, because a lot of media artworks you can only experience individually. You cannot experience it in a communal environment. You put a headpiece on and you interact with it, and people watch you, but they do not understand what you are doing, because it doesn't manifest. Whereas in *Eavesdrop* it manifests for everybody to see; you're turning it, you make a choice that you like that person and you zoom in on them; that conversation is boring you, but you think that person's interesting so you turn and go inside their head and then all of a sudden you're in there for five minutes and people are saying, 'C'mon, get a move on'. So that is indeed the performance of the work.

RK: *You obviously had a set of intentions in mind at the outset of the project. How do you gauge whether the project has achieved these intentions and what feedback have you found valuable in assessing the success of the work?*

DP: It's been very successful in terms of what I set out to do. I think a lot of media art is about finding content that demonstrates technology, whereas I think what is most interesting about media art when it is successful is that it uses technology that allows content to have its own authority and vice versa. I am not really interested in the single-glance novelty acts that I think a lot of media art is made up of. You are simply looking at how technology is evolving and using content to display how great that is. It doesn't attract me in anyway because I don't understand how that relates to humanity.

RK: *Do you think that in the future there'll be room for more audience agency in this kind of cinematic technology; for the user to interact with the cinematic imagery on a more material level and actually permanently alter the virtual interior world?*

DP: So that the user causes change that stays there permanently?

RK: *And that may continue to be built on and accumulate?*

DP: I think sometimes games work like that. You can get online and you build games with other people. That is a different sort of communality, and in a way you are generating communal authorship over the thing that is being made, and

that is politically very interesting, because no one has made the work and everyone is making the work. In one way it is incredibly bureaucratic, but in another way it is quite liberating. It depends what the interest is. It depends on why you want to do it and what it is for. Because as a mechanism for human interaction, I think that there is a strong desire within us to make things together and for those things to remain and that has really been the story of art.

RK: *In terms of a language to discuss your work, should we be looking more into theatre, or perhaps film studies, or should we look into new media theory?*

DP: I think you can't avoid it. You have to acknowledge the writing of new media. I think people like Lev Manovich are very provocative. They are quite controversial. So, when I was at ZKM, people were discussing Manovich's last work and it was being taught at all the schools. People were sitting saying, 'This guy's crap' and 'No, he's wonderful'. So there was a lot of discussion about the relationship between philosophy and art.

Cinema is the other place to look for it. A couple of years ago I was at the Berlin Film Festival and I was at a small reception where Peter Greenaway spoke. He was there to announce his new project and he stood up and said, 'Cinema is dead. Long live cinema'. Very provocative. His new piece was a series of 72 suitcases; it is an interactive DVD work and a film. And I think that is probably where cinema and new media will actually merge in the lounge room.

RK: *New Media art has been described as 'the most significant new art form to emerge in the past 15 years' [2] and is often discussed in Lev Manovich's terms as 'potentially the key cultural form of the twenty-first century just as cinema was the key cultural form of the twentieth century'. [3] What are your views on these comments?*

DP: I think it's too early to say that. It also depends on what you mean by 'new media art'. It depends what month of the year we are in whether you use the terms 'new media art' or 'hybrid art' or 'interdisciplinary' or 'cross art form'. It kind of depends on how other artforms embrace technology. The potential is that you can create new forms of theatre, for example, if you integrate technology appropriately, without sensationalising or integrating for the sake of it. A lot of dance videos have been really fantastic and there has been a really good merging of new media in dance. So are those crossovers new media art? Is multimedia performance new media art? Or is new media art something that exists in an installation or in an exhibition. I think at the moment new media art is defining itself and whatever it finally decides it is will allow us to answer the question.

Endnotes

[1] The MFI refers to itself as a 'Federal Government initiative to support the commissioning, development and showcasing of new, large-scale Australian performing arts productions for Australia's major international arts festivals and, in the longer term, for the productions to tour internationally'.

http://www.ozco.gov.au/council_priorities/international/mfi/

[2] Safe, Georgina. 'Festival celebrates novel visions of creativity', *The Australian*, October 7th, 2004.

[3] Manovich, Lev. (2001) *The Language of New Media* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press), p. 74.