

SPACE|R A C E

A Small Step/Giant Leap Toward True Interactivity or We Shall Overcome the Limits of Technology

SPACE|R A C E, an interactive multimedia piece about the 1960s U.S. Civil Rights movement and space program, encourages viewers to experience paradox and ambiguity as natural parts of human existence in a complex world.

"I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation."

*Opening of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s
"I Have a Dream" speech, August 28, 1963*

"One small step for man. One giant leap for mankind."

Neil Armstrong, July 20, 1969

"This is the greatest week in the history of the world since the creation."

*President Richard Nixon, week of the moon walk,
July, 1969*

About 500 million people around the world watched the first moon walk on television. "I Have a Dream" is one of the best-known speeches of modern times. How are these monumental shared pieces of our history remembered by different kinds of people? Using a broad range of memories about both events, I am experimenting with simulated conversations between those who probably would not otherwise exchange stories in our socially stratified society.

Most current interactive computer works are limited by what the creators have input. My piece allows viewers to "interact" with other points of view and add their own memories to the database of responses.

Perceptions have increasingly replaced information in public discussion of issues. Clearly perception-based, this piece puts different points of view right next to each other somewhat randomly and without editorial comment to examine the relationships between "facts," perceptions, cultural mythology and "reality." I hope to present varied points of view from a particular time in history without moralizing or solving specific problems. Multimedia is a perfect way to juxtapose alternative realities and show their respective inherent seductiveness.

Cultural mythology in the United States tells us that the space program is noble and necessary, vital to national security, science, and "progress." In fact, the number of U.S. citizens who are ambivalent about or opposed to the space program has always been about equal to the number who vehemently defend it.

The Civil Rights movement is largely perceived by white Americans as the solution to our societal race problems and relevant only to African-Americans. There was no concerted national effort made, aside from legislation, to change the cultural dynamics of institutionalized racism, which is widely perceived to be nonexistent. There are always contrasting realities.

Looking at media coverage of the space and race stories shows the real-time, resonant impact of broadcasting on the first TV generation. Those who watched the moon walk on television as it happened feel that they were somehow part of the event. When parts of the "I Have a Dream" speech are broadcast on Martin Luther King Day or when a child recites it in school, the words are reinforced as part of our history and value system.

Both of these historic endeavors, in space and in human rights, are remembered as examples of what is good about the U.S. as a society. In contrasting the two movements, questions of meaning arise. How do the values of courage, freedom, striving toward moral and scientific ideals, persistence in the face of setbacks, and resistance to the status quo play out differently, or the same?

I believe that the most fascinating possibility for art in "public" spaces via computers is the potential for true interaction among viewers and the creator. Communication no longer has to flow in one direction from artist to audience. Right now, interactive computer works fall somewhere within a range of singular-voice "private broadcasts" and collective "public conversations." The truly interactive visual public conversation is still evolving as an art form. I hope that my experiment with *SPACE|R A C E* is another step toward creating true socially engaging interactivity through computers.

Contact

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