

DOG OF ZONE

GESTURE IN DIGITAL INTERACTIVE ENVIRONMENT

The Zone. Seemingly dead space. In a presence of a human being it becomes a dominating, uncontrolled, autonomous entity. It manifests its reactions by changing state of objects that belong to it. The Dog is one such object. It's an expression of an abrupt, aggressive motion and destructive influence of the Zone. Human being is an undesirable phenomenon in the Zone, an intruder who disrupts the balance and causes perturbations.

The concept of the Zone refers to three sources: *Roadside Picnic* - a novel published in 1972 and written by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Stalker* movie based on the book, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979), and finally to a real nuclear disaster that occurred on 26th of April 1986 in Chernobyl in Ukraine.

Dog of Zone is an intermedial project that merges traditional drawing, 3d computer animation, programming and organic but digitally processed sound. The purpose of the work is to create an impression of being in a place such as The Zone. The final effect takes a form of interactive projection and utilises game mechanics. The participant is directing the progression of events through his/her own physical activity and as such becomes co-author of the dramaturgy of events.

In general, the projection is meant to provide a strong, compressed experience. It is tuned for an instantaneous, iterative perception rather than a slow, contemplative one. The structure of the work is based on dynamic mixing of a limited number of pre-made source contents (image sequences and sounds), repetitions are apparent which in turn brings musical composition into mind. The Zone offers a journey and some kind of reward. It does not put any pressure on a observer though, the observer will experience only as much as he/she is willing to.

The course of the projection is divided into three basic stages. First is the manifestation - an appearance of a dog caused by the initial presence of the participant within the bounds of the Zone. A strong enough physical movement will throw the animal out of its momentary balance and the second phase of the projection will begin - the deconstruction. Each and every subsequent strong enough movement will cause involuntary, sudden reactions from the dog. These in turn will cause gradual disintegration of its form. This process cannot be stopped, only slowed down. The essence of the dog is contained within the process of its expressive deconstruction. Narration or dramaturgy are only derivatives of the creature's visual transformations. The reactions of the Work are dichotomous in their nature. The dog repels, discourages further activity, struggles to maintain its territory and the relative state of equilibrium extending its existence. The Zone, on the other hand, tempts, encourages action revealing subsequent stages of the disintegration of its object. Eventually, the animal will transform into deconstructed figure, a still image which will remain on a screen as long as the observer stays within the bounds of the active area

of The Zone. This transformation is the third and final stage of the projection. As soon as participant leaves the Zone the dog is irreversibly erased and the space is asleep again. There is no activity, no objects, no defense or attack - only a white lit wall.

Dog of Zone is a notion of a living being built from a gesture transformed into a solid form moving through three-dimensional space. The artistic concept draws from experiences of abstract expressionism, especially the work of Franz Kline. Therefore it is mainly a problem of scale and gesture. It is about translating the gestural drawing to the language of computer animation while preserving its original qualities. These problems are then enhanced by the temporal aspect of the project - motion, tempo and rhythm. It leads to moving picture that features an expression possible to achieve with traditional techniques only but at the same time with precision, photographic details and spaciality of digital environment. The digital nature of visuals becomes clear in motion - observer realises that the dog is a three-dimensional form built from a matter that has real world properties. This makes the motion, in addition to gesture and scale - the primary means of expression. It is not about acting though, the motion is a kind of an extension of the gesture that comes from the drawing.

The founding rule for animation was to preserve this initiating all gesture. It had be clearly perceptible in the final effect - after all the transformations required to transfer a flat drawing into three-dimensional space. The motion was created in a hybrid process from two layers. The first layer is a computer animation crafted using traditional key frame techniques with quick sketch or drawing serving as a reference. The second layer is a hand made animation in which every frame of the sequence is a separate drawing made based on the finished animation from layer one. Both layers are imposed on each other directly in three-dimensional space. They both contribute to the solid form of the animal and in this way coexist in the final picture. Gesture is both the beginning and an end of the process of animation and this is how it remains visible throughout.

The exploration of the frontier between still image and animation is an internal visual theme in the project. Animated sequences are crafted with minimal number of frames required to convey desired effect and as such use variable frame rates. In general, loops that represent subtler motion consist of larger number of frames while these depicting strong, vast motions work with just a few images. The exploration of the frontier between stillness and animation is coupled with the exploration of the transition from figurative to abstract. As a result of this, sequences with subtle motion that require more frames are at the same time figurative ones while these representing fast movements can gravitate towards short series of static images or even single frames. There is a sharp distinction between smooth, figurative sequences and these which cross the territory of abstract graphics.

The creative method revolves around a concept of structured improvisation. It is based on a workflow in which a digital environment is built using highly technical skills first. This environment is subsequently used for a freeform creation within precisely defined bounds. In effect two opposing creative approaches are mixed together - the aforementioned freeform expression and methodical, multi-stage

digital creation that includes programming. The method takes advantage of the directness of the traditional drawing, computer animated film production techniques as well as the iterative character of programming.

The essential part of *Dog of Zone* is a proprietary application implementing chosen model of interaction. This custom software controls playback of both video sequences and audio samples based on participant's physical activity and a script of interaction. The script defines the entire experience of interacting with the Zone and its object. It describes all possible events, the way in which they flow from one to another and assigns audio and video contents to them. When the projection is running the software is continuously mapping participant's real world position to the section of digital space that represents the current state of the projection and all potential of further interactions. As the projection progresses through the script of interaction participant's avatar is being moved from one section of digital space to another each time providing the observer with a different set of possible events.

Another proprietary software was used to animate all the sequences of the moving dog. However, this software is not an integral part of *Dog of Zone*. It is commercially available tool aiding in rigging and animating digital characters.