Visage: A Face-U-Mentary

Design Document

Background

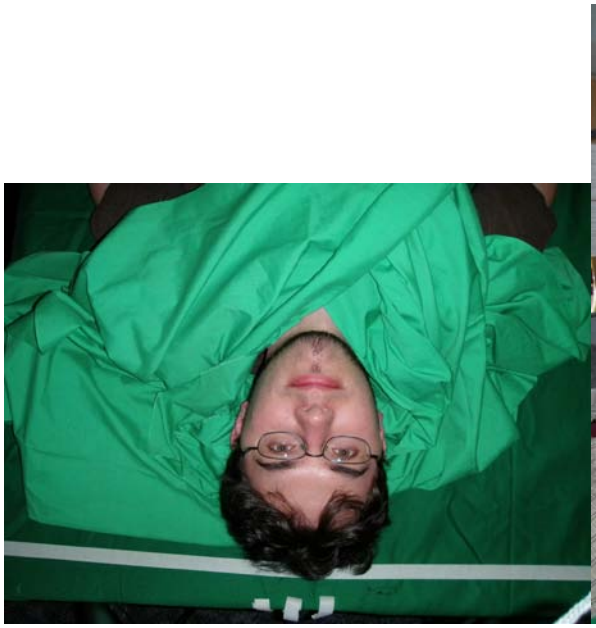
This project was primarily inspired by several readings concerning critical views of categorization and its effect on the formation of identities such as Harrell's "Computational Infrastructures of Stigma," and *Sorting Things Out* by Bowker and Star. My goal in this project is to explore the relationship of individuals' personal experiences with their outward appearance. The idea is that by narrowing a person's communication (in this case to a disembodied face), and then introducing schisms between personal narratives, the individuals performing them, and the pieces of their face conveying the ideas, the hidden relationships between these features will become more salient.

In pursuit of this larger goal, an additional target arose to remake the old videogame "Facemaker" with the constraint of using real, physical faces. Facemaker was a very simple (rather meaningless) game for consoles like the Colecovision and the Apple II, which was imposed on a generation of elementary school students throughout the United States. The game had eight varieties of eight different facial features (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hair, ears, head shape, chin) with which to construct different "faces". The entire gameplay consisted of just creating faces, and then making the faces perform odd scripted motions, like "twitch", "wink", or "tongue stick out". When I played it when I was little, I never really understood what the point was, but our school only had that or "Oregon Trail".

By remaking the game but with real faces, I would get to examine how well the original "Facemaker"'s categories could be applied or to find other ways to break apart real-recorded faces into 8 recombinable semantic units. I also wanted to substitute the twitches and winks of the original "Facemaker" with something more meaningful to the individuals' identities. Thus, I had the subjects' record personal narratives dealing with some aspect meaningful to their identity.

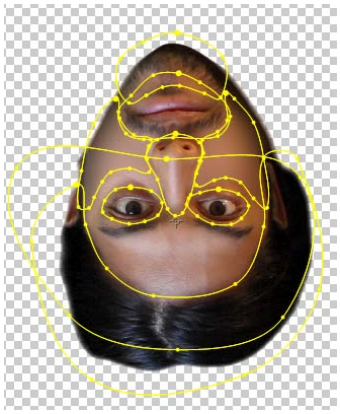
Procedure

First I solicited eight people and had them write an eight sentence narrative concerning a story "personal" to their identity. All the stories were then were returned to each person anonymously, and each person was asked to take ownership of the other narratives and was able to change up to 2 sentences of another's story.



Next I loaded all the participants onto my green screen covered table (the "Face-Extractor") to read their story as well as the seven others'. The videos were then edited in Premiere and a resting state for each person's face was extracted. All these base, resting heads for each person were brought into a series of After Effects compositions and centered between where the subject's eyebrows would meet (on the Anja (Third Eye) Chakra). Next the heads were passed through motion tracking at this point to reduce head movement (though this effect was not sufficient for some of the heads).

Then I experimented with dividing the faces into 8 meaningful yet recombinable segments that would also perform temporally.



It then turned out that the optimal way to segment the faces was into: hair, eyes, nose, mouth, chin, cheeks, a glasses/brow region, and an underlying “base head”.

Each person’s eight features were then rendered for each story in an extremely lengthy rendering process lasting over a week resulting in 576 individual flv clips that are able to be dynamically loaded into flash.

The Game / Visual Design

The end product follows the same basic format as the original "Facemaker" game: build a face from a set of features, and then make the face do something. In this product though, the user is told a story by the face of their own creation. The resultant story is decided by an algorithm comparing the dominance of a particular individual in the traits of the overall face, with weighted factors decided by the participants. These weights were determined how much the participants felt a certain feature of their face related to their personal narrative and identity. For example a face might be constructed of a 3:1 ratio of participant 1 to participant 2, but if key features of participant 2 were chosen, the resulting story may be participant 2’s.

I also recreated its visual style by using an Apple II font, retro color scheme, and feigning an overlay of the original Apple II monitor. Since this is still a flash applet merely mimicking a retro interface, I wanted the mouse to be the primary method of interaction (as compared to the keyboard on the Apple II). For this reason I modeled simplistic yet strong mouse-based user interaction for the piece with bright colors vivid feedback. In order to not break the style of the piece though, I established a system where most of the visual design was laid-out in the green monochrome of the original game, but the mouse-controlled interactions triggered events in colors beyond that scheme such as yellow and purple . These intermediary points also served as links between the low-res graphics of the program and the smooth faces of the content.

Future Extensions / Lessons Learned

Flash is very finicky when it comes to streaming multiple overlaid streaming videos. Great care and tweaking must be done to get videos to play smoothly.

Cameras should be mounted directly to individuals' heads in order to reduce head movements.

Flv video does not deal with alpha channels well: in a counterintuitive fashion, the only way to render unmatted flv video is to choose the "matted" option and to render it against a black background.