

Crispin Jones

Artistic Statement

My work is about exploring aspects of our relationship to technology. With *An Invisible Force* I am exploring how we use technology as a tool for making decisions. Computers fulfil a role which has certain parallels with the way in which horoscopes are consulted - both are used as psychological tools for absolving us from taking the absolute responsibility for a decision.

Early computers were developed for specific predictive purposes - to know where a ballistic would land given certain information about prevailing conditions. *An Invisible Force* is an exploration of the visionary role which technology seeks to occupy (this aspiration can be clearly seen in the name of one of the largest computer companies in the world - Oracle). One of the first television appearances by a computer was in the capacity of predictor of the future: *"At the suggestion of Remington Rand, CBS-TV used a UNIVAC [the first commercial computer system] to predict the outcome of the 1952 presidential election...At 9pm Eastern Standard Time, with only 7 percent of the vote in, UNIVAC awarded 43 states and 438 election votes to Eisenhower and 5 states and 93 election votes to Stenvenson. Most pollsters had forecast a close election, and the programmers, fearing that they had made a mistake, decided not to release this prediction. Instead, they reprogrammed the machine to render a more conservative judgement... As the returns poured in, however it was obvious that UNIVAC had been right in the first place, and the original prediction was announced at midnight."*²

Historically there are many devices which have sought to exploit people's fascination with divining the future. There is a long tradition of systems and devices for telling the future, within this tradition are such items as fortune-cookies, newspaper horoscopes and fortune-telling automata. All of these devices, no matter how crude, provide people with an intriguing and rewarding experience. Irrespective of the accuracy of the prediction people enjoy the ritual and derive pleasure from "knowing" their future. *An Invisible Force* differs from the tradition of fortune-tellers in that it tries to obstruct the user from seeing their entire fortune, as the plate heats up under the user's fingertips a bargain must be entered into with the table - in order to read the answer you must endure the pain. I hope that at this stage users question their belief in the system, or at least have some weighing up of their desire to see the answer against their willingness to endure the discomfort.

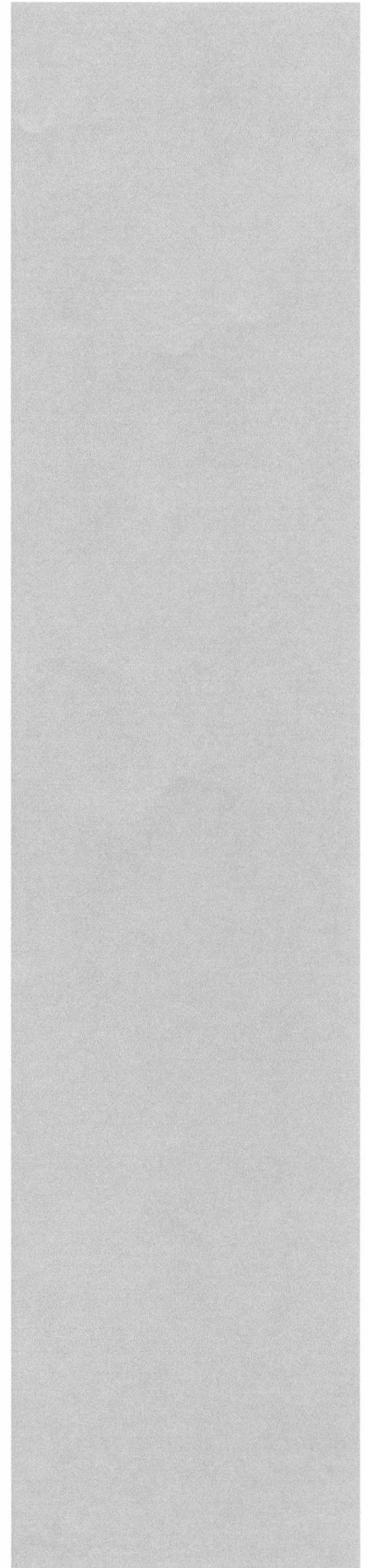
An Invisible Force

Part of the research for this piece involved looking at the Victorian Spiritualist movement. What particularly interested me about this movement was people's desire to carry on believing in the phenomena in the face of tireless debunking. I was struck by the similarity between the circumstances which led to the emergence of Spiritualism and the present day. Ronald Pearsall describes how: "beneath the rationalism and optimism of Victorian England, there was a wide feeling of unease. God had been dismissed from His universe and had left a yawning chasm."¹ The upheaval of the industrial revolution has parallels with the current climate of technological change.

In popular culture people are inclined to attribute a capricious power to computers - computers are perceived as intelligent objects over which we have little control. This has parallels with people's belief in fortune-telling: there is a sense in which we want to believe that there is an underlying force or power at work in the world. The piece explores the tension between rational disbelief in the phenomena and the desire to believe that the future can be foretold. On one level it is also a kind of experiment into whether by enduring the pain the overall fortune-telling experience is enhanced - do people believe *more* if they have struggled to see the prophesy? *An Invisible Force*, by making the fortune telling process worse allows us to see more clearly how strong the urge to believe is.

References

1. The anecdote is featured in Nic Costa's "Automatic Pleasures" 1988
2. Stan Augarten "Bit by Bit" 1985



Technical Realisation

An Invisible Force as a system works in the following sequence:

1: A user selects a question card and inserts it into the card-slot. On the back of each of the cards is a disguised barcode. The barcode is scanned by a barcode reader and the identifying number of the question is passed to an IBM compatible PC which is concealed in drawer cavity of the desk.

2: A Peltier Heat Pump, connected to the underside of the metal plate, begins to heat up under the user's fingers.

3: The PC in the desk runs software written in Macromedia Director. The software selects a random answer to the question from a pool of 30 possible answers for each question (the text of the questions and answers comes from an historic fortune telling system called *The Mystical Oracle* which was apparently consulted by Napoleon). The selected answer is broken down into 10 letter sections. The text of each section in turn is passed through the serial port to a Basic Stamp Microcontroller.

4: The Basic Stamp controls an array of 150 solenoids which are under the central section of the table. Each solenoid activates one pixel of the display. The Basic Stamp pulses the correct solenoids to spell out the answer on the surface of the table.

5: After a delay to allow for the answer to be read, the PC passes the next section of the text to the Basic Stamp at which point it "wipes" the existing text and displays the next section of the answer.

7: When the whole answer has been delivered the table displays the message "That's all" until the card is removed from the slot. Once the card is removed the system resets itself and waits for the next card to be inserted.