Acts Between and Between Acts[1]

Ranulph Glanville

Summary*: Interactivity is based in the interface and the space between. How does this space between support acts between and what is between acts? In interacting, the act of observing is primary. We treat observing "as if" it were of Objects. The "as if" gives the ability to postulate/construct Objects such that we believe they are held in common between observers. We can treat observing by different observers "as if" shared. Thus, we can talk of events: coherent observings in one timespan. And we can connect observing to the generation of the space between. This gives us our answer.*

Keywords: *act, action and reaction, "as if", construct…, cyberspace, event, Object, observing, oscillation, space between, synchronisation, time, Wayang Theatre*

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We observe observing.

Our observing is not of: it is. If we insist it is of, then it is of observing. We do not observe things. We observe observing. If we insist there should be "things" to be observed, these "things" come about through our constructing.[2]

When we insist that our observing is of (some thing), we insist there is an object of observing. Call that postulated thing an Object (with initial capital signifying it is an artefact), the Object of our attention, of our observing. Objects are the artefacts of the Theory of Objects.[3]

Because such Objects are fictions that may or may not exist apart from our contrivance, we can pretend/assume/insist that you and I, observing, observe the same Object. Thus, we can pretend/assume/insist our observing is the same.

In this way we can pretend there is common reference, a reality we can know that is independent of our observing.[4]

But, actually, we observe observing.

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We contemplate observing in two ways.

When we contemplate observing an Object, we think "as if", for we do not know there is such an Object: we create it, invent it to account for our observing, permitting our observing to be of (some thing). When we think "as if", we think not of observing, but of a description of or account for our observing.

In contrast we may contemplate our observing as our observing. While Objects are mere postulates, we give them the reality of observing: Objects are, we assert. This is the way of western knowing. It is a useful device. Both ways of thinking are used here.[5]

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Accept Objects “as if” they were (treat them as existing). We will use this device to generate an account of experience.

To enter the universe of observing each Object must observe. The least it can observe is its self. To observe its self, an Object must be both observer and observed. Yet the Object’s self is its self, indivisible.

However, an Object might be both observer and observed if it treats observer and observed as roles, switching between them, oscillating. Oscillators generate time. Objects switch roles: they have (two) phases.[6]

Thus, each Object is assumed to generate its own time of self-observing.

When not observing themselves (inwardly), this oscillation-mechanism gives Objects a time to observe others—to synchronise with others (outwardly).

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All observing occurs in time. The time of each observing is different. Each observing occurs (to me, observing) in (my) sequence. Each takes time: it starts, it ends.[7]

Since Objects are construct-fictions, all that can distinguish observings, as opposed to explanations of these observings, is the time of observing. The time of observing differentiates each observing.

Observing, beginning and ending, requires and generates time, for it happens in time and time derives from it. That time derives from both the act of observing, and (in the “as if” account) the synchronisation of two Objects, observing and observed, bringing them together by bringing their times and phases together to interact, producing a particular instance, an observing.[8]

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We find observings coming together. Much of what we might think were possible observings does not happen. We make connections, observing, only in relatively few instances of an inconceivably vast variety.[9]

The need to synchronise the self times of Objects explains this.

If, for observing to occur, two times must synchronise, it is not surprising we do not observe much of the potential variety. It is hard to synchronise. Consider the difficulties that face us in real life, and the devices we have created to help us overcome this.[10]

When we synchronise (observe), we may synchronise one observing within another observing. The Theory of Objects explains this, developing a relational logic that arrives from the synchronised times of observing.

We may observe severally within the timespan of an (overriding, or containing) act of observing. Speaking “as if”, we say we observe several Objects within the timespan of another (containing) Object.[11]

If we consider that we place several Objects into the containing Object, we consider the containing Object already formed: it remains constant through different occasions of observing.[12]

If we think the containing Object is not formed, we construct a new containing Object to contain the several Objects. Thus we act creatively: finding the actuality of creativity is nothing to be surprised by.

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These acts occur between. Observing (of observing) we take to be by and of Objects: the observing is between them. This is the interface. Observing creates and occupies the place where observing may occur. This place is the space between, cyberspace. To impress the interface onto an observed Object is to deny that Object the space to be in. As we say colloquially “I need my space”.

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Call how we look at these acts, the collections we make observing (Objects) within the containing observing (Object), events. Events are coherent collections of one or more acts of observing. Events are to acting as Objects are to observing. This usage is accords with everyday usage.

In believing that an Object behind an act of observing is the same to two different observers, and thus that an observing is also the same, we postulate and act “as if” there were such a commonality of experience. Similarly, with the collections of acts of observing that constitute events.

Yet, being different, our observings cannot be the same. Nor can the synchronicities that admit of observing, even when we talk “as if”.

The (acts making up the) events, made of my observings, made of your observings,dance between being thought to be the same yet believed to be different.[13]

This difference is the source of the problem of communication-as-coding resolved through conversation a further source of potential novelty.[14]

Sameness reflects our belief that we can share because we make the same act of observing. Therefore there is a true, a real world. This is the comforting and convenient delusion we derive when we believe we can see Behind the Curtain, when we forget the “as if” of the Objects we claim to see there.

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Events are made by observing. They are the observing that contains the other observings that we account for through synchronisation.

Events (constituted of synchronised observings) occur in the space between. But they also determine that space. Without observing events, there would be no need for a space between. We would and could not deduce the need for it.

Events make up the interface. The interface is observing. Where observing is, in the space between, is where the interface is. This also holds when we talk of Objects. The space between is the observing.

It is useful to think of the sum of all observing (no matter how defined) by differentiating the space between of observing from the space between of all observing, calling this cyberspace.[15]

The interface lies in the "as if" universe of Objects, between (the) acts of the Objects in giving rise to that observing. And the acts between are the events made of observings, for there is nothing else, in this universe.

When we assume the interface is "as if" it were on the Object of our observing, we give no space to that Object to help form that interface. Then the interface only admits action and reaction: behaviour determined by the observing Object. We deny exclusive privacy by invading it, forgetting it is a construction and a mystery, the unique selfness distinct from all others.

We forget the how and the why of our invention. We lose the benefits, the magic.

We assume Objects to be around this space between, the interface, the all pervasive space between. Beyond the interface, the observing, nothing can be observed. Beyond, all is conjecture, designed to allow certain styles of thinking, certain certainties and a certain contentment which is, however, illusory, misleading and dangerous.

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We forget this. We forget that an Objects is a surmise deriving from an observing, not that observing. We observe observing. An act of observing is not an Object, yet we postulate such Objects. We never observe Objects—we cannot. This is the meaning of the metaphor of the Waying Theatre. In this universe, we can never go behind the screen. We cannot know if there is a behind. We never know if there is that puppet and that light source of which we talk so freely—whether there is anything more than the screen. And, if we do not know whether any of what we imagine is there, we no longer know that it is a screen.[16]

We are blessed by ignorance, and the space that leaves for the imagination.

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You are sitting in a theatre. A performance may be about to begin.

What is Behind the Curtain?

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References

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Biographical Sketch

Ranulph Glanville is an Independent Academic who works on personal projects and visits universities in London, Melbourne and Hong Kong to help them develop research in design areas. He also teaches cybernetics. Previously, he spent 25 years teaching architecture.

He is an associate of CAiiA and the Centre for Interaction and Co-operative Technology in Amsterdam, on the editorial board of several journals and the organising and conference committees of several conferences. He runs a consultancy and small publishing house and has around 200 academic and other publications to his name. He has the AA Diploma (from the Architectural Association, London), a PhD in cybernetics and another in Human Learning, and is adjunct professor in the Faculty of the Constructed Environment, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts, Sciences and Commerce, and of the Cybernetics Society, London.

He works in a number of distinct and apparently unrelated areas, referring to those he is not currently doing as his hobbies. Currently, he is looking for funding to construct large interactive sound sculptures and develop a large publishing/art work, “Secret Pieces”.

He has lectured and performed around the world, since he founded and directed the world’s first live, interactive electronic music band in 1964.

He has one son and one wife (not related).

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Notes

[1] A fuller version of this paper is due to be posted on the conference web site. This version was written, at great speed, while Visiting Fellow at the School of Design, Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Thank you to them for giving me the time to do this.

[2] This is the major thrust of von Foerster’s work in epistemology (13, 14, 14).

[3] This is a key to the central argument of my doctoral dissertation (1), in which the Theory of Objects is developed. The Theory develops the notions of time and synchronicity in observing that are crucial to this paper. Several of the other papers cites (2, 3, 4) evolve the Theory further.

Note, also, that the word object, in English, has changed its meaning. It used to mean what we now call subject. I chose the word because of this ambiguity.

[4] I will argue, in (9), that this is the basis on which we can base our science, and the concepts that science involves.

[5] In a certain respect, we always think “as if”. In this paper, we describe observing, and out observing is of observing. This is Wittgenstein’s point of the interface, of the Curtain/screen that cuts off that about which we must pass over in silence (16). See also (5) for an extended examination. Both of these raise the problem that we are different: we cannot see as the other.

[6] This switching role is discussed in my PhD (1), but also, and more picturesquely, in (2). Every clock we have is based on oscillators. However, the notion of time is not the same to the oscillator itself and to an external observer. What may be a perfectly regular beat (changing from observing to observed etc, in sequence) to an Object might appear far from regular to another Object, inevitably observing externally.

[7] Oscillation is essentially circular and hence endless. But it leaves a linear trace, like a cycle wheel on the wet sand.

[8] See, especially, (3). And, again, my PhD (1). Observing both generates and requires time—simultaneously!

[9] Do not take these numbers literally. Their only value is to make a point, drop a hint.

[10] Consider the rituals and devices used in performance—whether in drama, religion, meditation or whatever, to bring everyone together on the one occasion in one event (making synchronicity appear). And think of diaries, timetables etc. It may be much easier and less frustrating if we just fall in with what crops up.

[11] Which allows us to create hierarchy from our observing. Such hierarchy is not, of course, "out there", but is a personal construct. In this universe, the world is not hierarchical.

[12] This is the crucial point in Piaget's developmental psychology. How do children come to recognise objects as remaining constant in a world of ever changing perceptions (as Piaget imagines them, from the impossible vantage point where he already can conserve such objects). Although Piaget's objects (12) (and von Foerster's (15)) are not identical to my Objects, there are strong similarities. The question of how to create constancy is, in effect, answered in the statement to which this note is attached. Of course, this account is very over-simplified.

[13] See (4). For how this may be used in communicating, see (6).

[14] Conversation Theory, perhaps the masterwork of Gordon Pask, is one of very few genuine Theories of interaction. In it, a means of communicating when we do not see the world the same (or the same world) is developed and extended. It is beautiful work, although often difficult to understand. See (11). For an easier, potted version, see (8). For my interpretation in terms of communication and language, see (6).

[15] The assertions are based on my arguments at last year's conference (7), and summarise the findings in that paper. This paper is firmly based in that.

[16] For an elegant recent exposition see (1), which is heavily based in the work of George Spencer Brown, whose edict "Draw a Distinction" has been so influential in (second-order) cybernetics.