

Competitive interactions

THE interaction of the everyday starts in the crib. For the new born baby there is no day or night, no sleeping or waking, no objects or persons. It is completely immersed in the original experience of pleasure, almost outside time. It lives in a paradise of fluid shapes, a pre-chromatic world of primal light, intershot with the beginning of colour and form. As yet it has no conception of what its eye sees. "Claude Bailble describes the development of sight. The comprehension of sight and its connection with sound follows, conveyed quite freely 'through the ether' of the spaces between each one of us. The complexity of what then develops in terms of language, social convention and social context then determines the way in which social interaction is utilised and the vigour which it can bring to broadening and expanding the individual and therefore society.

Technologies have developed as an integral part of this process, commencing probably with the charcoal stick, continuing to develop currently as the interactive computer. Linked to other computers via the Internet and using browser tools such as the World Wide Web, everyday interaction expands in potential as well as practice.

At the end of June an annual event which has highlighted the electronic arts for the past sixteen years took place in Linz, Austria. This year, Ars Electronica was sub-titled, Mythos Information - Welcome to the Wired World and like many other international events concerned with interactive multimedia took the Web as its main topic. (Indeed someone has observed that this year there are only 17 days when there isn't an event concerned with IMM occurring somewhere in the world!)

Over five days an intensive program of symposiums, exhibition installations, performances and a competition for computer art, computer animation and

electronic music, the Prix Ars Electronica. This is augmented with a virtual visit to the substance of the proceedings via, on the one hand a most exhaustive set of books, and on the other a Web Home Page. Many events this year established a 24-hour a day presence by being linked from other Web sites of similar intent and interest, publicising and giving access to the papers involved. Ars Electronica had received in advance, details of sites which were to be in competition for one of the substantial prizes. The

competition has included a section for interactive art for nine years but this was the first year that the Web was to be a separate section within the category.

As a mark of significance, the jury

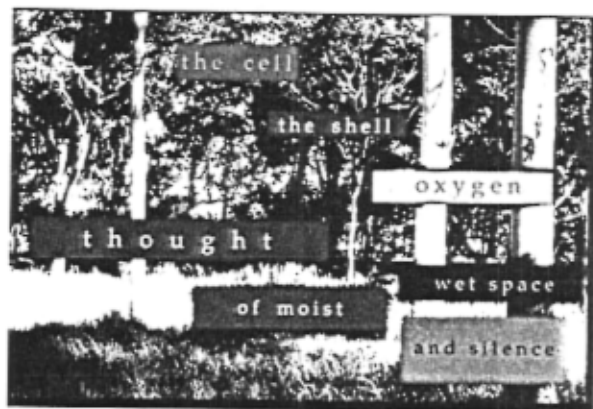
awarded a special prize to Tim Berners-Lee, the English computer specialist who created the first version for the Internet of hypertext linking only six years ago whilst working at the CERN labs in Switzerland. In its current manifestation this has become Netscape, the most sophisticated system so far for full graphical display using HyperText Markup Language (HTML) and responsible for the explosion of not only the sites developed by artists since the beginning of the year but also for the exponential increase in traffic. Waits of several minutes for the simplest of text to appear is now not unusual - having the Autoload Images option switched off obviously speeds things up and a click on the image area will bring-up the picture when required. Things will not improve for some time until the broadband network is more widely installed throughout Australia and various overseas Internet bottle-necks are also widened out.

The Interactive Art jury made awards three pieces of work: one of which was developed for a ballet piece by William Forsythe; another by Michael Tolson an installation involving an artificial life ecosystem pressing into the 'next reality' of neural nets; the other, an installation by the Sydney-based artist Bill Seaman,

Passage Sets / One Pulls Pivots at the Tip of the Tongue, which 'combines interactive videodisc, a navigable poem and an automatic poem generator which work simultaneously to create a poetic net work.' A recently completed piece of work, it will receive its Australian premiere at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in September.

The World Wide Web jury had to determine as the first jury, some criteria to work with when viewing the 82 sites submitted for competition and as such was the part of the event in Linz that can be experienced from anywhere in the world with a connection to the Web. 'We decided to consider art not as an object to look at, but as a lens to look through' and decided that Idea Futures, developed in Canada by a small team led by Robin Hanson, fulfilled all the criteria - 'webness, distributed presence, community forming and supporting, powerful metaphorical value, and creation of sustainable virtual entities'. Part game, part ideas database, the site asks registered users to trade in the future investment potential of scientific claims and artistic projects. 'It deals with our collective creative power', and in the opinion of the jury, 'this site is the best collective forward thinking process the jury encountered on the Web'. (<http://skyler.arc.ab.ca/~jamesm/IF/IF.shtm>)

Two other sites received prizes. The Austrian Institute for New Culture Technologies / Public Netbase provides public access facilities to the Internet for their geographical community from their premises where they also administer this Netbase site for the community of interest which, unlike most magazine sites, includes 'user input coupled with a self-organising database that works either on the chatline or the conference basis.' (<http://kernighan.imc.akh-wien.ac.at/OtO/OtOhome.htm>) Ringo++ is a site designed by Pattie Maes and Max Metral at the famous MIT Media Lab in Boston where while working in the rarefied areas of Artificial Life and Artificial Intelligence, have come-up with a system which 'provides a personalised music recommendation service to the Internet community' by comparing ratings given by individual collectors to their album collection to the details recorded from other collectors. It computes how "similar" users are and having found close matches in taste, recommends titles to be added to collections! Whilst of undoubted



usefulness to those of us without any taste, the system is a model of centralised data processing and group profiling that like other models which have been used off-line for nefarious purposes for some years now, will find applications in more positive social and artistic fields. (<http://ringo.media.mit.edu/ringo/ringo.html>)

Other honorary mentions, each offering interaction and or/participation to greater or lesser degree, included: Self Server - Station

Rose Homepage (<http://www.well.com:80/user/gunafai/index.html>) Watchdog - The File Room (<http://fileroom.aup.ac.edu/FILEROOM.html>) Community Resources - OTIS (<http://sunsite.unc.edu/otis.html>) Experimental Gallery - Face to Face (<http://www.nd.edu/~art/jdoe/sref.html>) Netzine - HotWired (<http://www.hotwired.com/>) Device - Snowball Camera (<http://www.rl.af.mil:8001/Cdds-n-Ends/sbcam/rlsbcam.html>) Sensors - Current Weather Maps (<http://rs560.cl.msu.edu/weather>) Homepage/Display - aMAZEing Web (<http://www.dba.tu.wien.ac.at/cgi-bin/aMAZEingweb>) Mindware - Digital Art Endeavours, which includes Diverse Paths illustrated in the previous issue of Storm. (<http://ziris.syr.edu/home.html>) Best Adaptive Response to the Market - DigiCash (<http://www.digicash.com/shops/complet1.html>) Virtual Id/Entity creation - Kaspah's Home (<http://www.hfbk.uni-hamburg.de/TelematikWWW/twg/Kaspah/KaspahHome.html>) Most Likely to be Censored Page - Microsoft Hate Page (<http://www.oeh.uni-linz.ac.at:8001/~chris/HATE/hate.html>)

Though discussed in the documentation, Waxweb, an entity devised by David Blair did not receive an honorary mention. Classically, it fell between the two categories invented by the competition this year, being in its latest manifestation part Cd-Rom and part WWW. The project began some ten years ago and, as a videotape, WAX or the discovery of television among the bees, was projected at the Third

International Symposium of Electronic Art (TISEA) held in Sydney in 1992. The project then pupated into text-based Internet form where it became a collaborative writing project using specially written Storyscape software - something like exquisite corpses in a Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) - before buzzing onto the Web where it became



'an image-processed narrative'. In this Waxweb form of the project all the picture and text material in digital form was conveyed to the viewer's computer over lines from the host computer

which auspices Blair, in the University of Virginia. So the time taken to 'draw' a screen complete with images varies from a few seconds to a few minutes, which, when in pursuit of an interactive narrative, can be tedious.

Thus the next pupation to hybrid form - the substantive part of the image and text database, together with the HTML reader software, compiled by Blair onto a recently released Cd-Rom. The main body of the hypertext/picture document amounts to 3100 pages of text, and 1630 color stills, each in 3 sizes (about 5000)...(and)... the entire Quicktime version of the movie...

Currently the enterprise has gestated another step from involving invited collaborators to an open invitation. Waxweb 2.0 is an html-speaking multimedia MOO, and as such is a dynamic document. MOO's are tools for computer supported collaborative work and play, etc., which allow realtime intercommunication - they are text-based virtual realities. ... We have used the dynamic processes of the MOO to make it possible for visitors to add hypermedia to Waxweb. Using a forms-based interface, users have the ability to make immediately visible links from any word to any other word, add comments to any page, and also to create their own pages (or many pages!), thus adding to narrative of the main Waxweb. (<http://bug.village.virginia.edu/>)

'A return to something like an aural culture, richly permeated and inflected by images' is how I have described where the Web might be leading us and Blair's project is an example of the precept and in following issues the huge range of sites

emerging related to all artforms will be described and discussed. These 'art sites' will be dependent on the continued vigour that can be brought to artistic development in these new mediums, and the use of these newer means of interaction with one another on the global scale. The potential of the interaction of the everyday will only be in relation to the continued expansion of the availability of the ether that is the Internet.

Mike Leggett

WAXWEB MosaicMOO can be found on the World Wide Web at URL: <http://bug.village.virginia.edu/> By the end of June 1995, the image-processed narrative site had received some 95,000 visitors in approximately 12 months of operation. To participate rather than just visit, you will need an eMail address. The creators of WAXweb would like to encourage you to buy a copy of the videotape or the CD-ROM referred to in the article - they now have an experimental ecash system in place.

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