EVERYBODY ELSE

By Cory Arneson

My interest in art and the Internet began as a lurker. As far as I could tell from my early Yahoo!+Altavista searches in the late 90's, lister were like thuglist.net, a shizmo seemed to be the primary node of interaction and production for those involved in this new art form. I lurked on these lists because I wasn't sure what all this stuff was about. Who were these artists? What were they interested in? Why make this kind of art? Are Pod.org homes?

One frequent topic of discussion I remember clearly was that net.art had finally freed the artist from the tyranny of the museums and galleries. The artist was free! They now had direct online access to their audience with no middle-man! Victory! The history of art would be forever changed!

Looking back, it is funny to remember that moment of liberation, because what wasn't anticipated was that the self-identified artists myself included ended up being the least fun part of the distribution breakthrough provided by the internet. Moreover, this utopian spirit truly meant that everybody was invited to this party! And here comes everybody: sons, tenants, celebs, gits, lots, wixsides, nobbies, lavers, quers and, oh yeah, artists.

After Google simplified the search, each subsequent big breakthrough in net technology was something that decreased the technical know-how required for self-publishing (both globally and to friends). The stressful and confusing process of hosting, pigging, and permiscus, has been erased bit by bit by, paving the way for what we now call web 2.0.

First we had Geocities [web hosting made easy], then Live Journal [posting text to a web host made easy], then MySpace [Geocities and Live Journal made easy], then Facebook [MySpace made easy], and now Twitter [Live Journal and Facebook made even easier].

So what did the artists do during this simplification? Last time we checked it then they were still celebrating. Still staying up late every night using Photoshop or whatever, still not having to take crap from anybody, and still having access to an immediate audience. But while true in theory, in practice, this freedom has turned out to be a bit more complicated for most of the last decade. Despite an ever-expanding online audience, the fine art audience has remained stubbornly centered around galleries and museums.

But while these artists were doing strange things with the Internet, the online "everybody else" was doing the same. And what is art but human expression?

This is where Digital Folklore comes into play. Oils, pigeons and their students know that among the ongoing discussions of freedom from the tyranny from the traditional fine art world, there is another much bigger show in town - "everybody else". Sifting through the accumulations of set culture, the contributors to the "Digital Folklore Reader" are somewhere in-between researchers, scientists, academics, and poets. The common ground in that all are inspired by their favorite moments of human technological expression on the web. The results highlight the beauty and importance of gits, glitters, backgrounds, construction signs, and tracker compositions - just some of the things that might have been missed in the fast paced Internet evolution.
As a very real example, Yahoo recently notified those who hosted their websites on Geocities that the site, and all its related content, would soon be deleted. Once one of the most active spaces on the web, the potential loss of Geocities (my personal fav on Geocities is the "Shania Twain Mutt Lange Site", a place where we can "learn about Shania and Mutt and how they are forging away with a new type of alternative rock") should serve as a serious warning to all of us who put our content on the web. A warning that cultural capital does not necessarily translate into monetary capital, and that unfortunately monetary capital is what keeps the Internet's lights on. And also, that once the shine wears off our Geocities, our Myspace, or our Facebook pages, all of that content might/will be deleted and forgotten, in light of this grim reality. Publications like the Digital Folklore Reader become even more crucial: increasing our cultural literacy, enabling research, and teaching us about all modes of digital expression before they are forgotten.

http://www.google.com

DO YOU BELIEVE IN USERS?

By Olia Lialina & Dragan Espenschied (Ed.)

In an ideal world, we would love to skip this introduction — or at least the most difficult part of it, where we, as authors have to define the term used in the book's title. Isn't it enough to put a unicorn on the cover, throw a bit of cosmic sans over it and announce a chapter on DOSCAM, in the table of contents? You would know what we mean.

But sharing our fascination with amateur digital culture is only half of the business at hand. The Grand Plas, to which this book is only a tiny contribution, is a truly recruminating users and computers, users and developers, users and the history of their favorite medium. If this planet works out, perhaps a reasonable relationship between computers and people could be restored.

The personal computer (a meta medium), and the internet (a mesh of networks), are mistakenly regarded as mere extensions of pre-computer culture. Yet, web, media, computer, digital, are the miserable and inadequate prefix still used to indicate that something was produced with a computer, was maybe digitized or can be accessed through a computer interface. A lot of effort is put into increasing the "fidelity," "reality" and "emotion" of the "content" rushing through digital circuits, and these efforts are almost always praised. These perceived improvements however are likely to wipe out the very reality and emotion that is living inside the computer. It seems that in spite of its prevalence in our culture, the computer's ultimate purpose is to become an invisible "appli-
cance," transparent interface and device denying any characteristics of its own. Most computing power is used in an attempt to make people forget about computers.

Thus, the oft-endear statement that computers are a common thing in today's world is a fallacy. Never before has computer technology been so widely used and computer culture been so under-
valued in relation.

If you ask a search engine what "digital folklore" is, it will pull up links to e-books on folk art or recordings of folk music in MP3 format. Likewise, five years ago if you looked for "Inter
ternet art," you would get links to galleries selling paintings and sculptures online, even though no art (where "art" was more im-
portant than "art"), had long been a unique art form. Computer games are subject to similar atti-

tudes. Either they are seen only in relation to what is commonly regarded as "real" play (especially in the context of children), or they are judged in terms of the preceding mediums (namely cinema). Respect for the unique narrative and expressive potential of games only appeared very recently.

This has to change for the betterment of human culture as a whole, so we proudly coin the term Digital Folklore.

Digital folklore encompasses the customs, traditions and elem-
ments of visual, textual and audio culture that emerged from users' engagement with personal computer applications during the last de-
A PREFAE

This seemingly over-determined time frame is needed to distin-
guish Digital Folktales from How to Compute Culture, which ceased to
effect in the 1990's. Before, a
computer — machine al-
gent and quixotic at the same time
— nurtured the development of a
passionate community. Using mostly
their free time, these self-taught
experts created their own culture.
Meaningful contributions could be
made quickly and with relative
ease because of the home comput-
er's technical simplicity. When
the home computer became merely
a machine for work, when it became
a requirement in life to know
Microsoft Office, when the workings
of the machine became increasingly
cumbersome and business oriented,
the role of computer users changed.

So what do we exactly mean
by "users"? The movie devotes the
greatest appreciation and most
gracious definition of this term.
Only a few acts from inside a
computer network program,
represented by actors in
glowing costumes, are the main
heroines. One program asks another:
"You believe in the users?" The
other answers: "You, sure. If
you don't have a user, then who
wrote "me?" Now we have
another computer program — a
"Digital Folklore." It becomes clear that both an
account manager and a hacker
are called "users" by "their" program.
The relationship of users and programs
is depicted as a very close and
personal one, almost religious in
nature, with a caring and
respecting creator and a responsi-
bility and dedicated proponent.

This was in 1985. Ten years
later the situation became dramat-
ically different. The term "users" was
denoted to what the fathers of
computer technology dubbed
"Real Users,"\(^1\) those who pay to
use a computer but are not inter-
dicted to learn about it, or
"Naive Users,"\(^2\) those who simply
"don't understand the system.

In 1993 AOL connected their
customers to the Internet for the
first time and naive users showed
up in the thousands — invading the
Internet discussion systems formerly
only frequented by computer enthui-
sasts with a university back-
ground. These A0L users became
part of the Internet without any
initiation and some of them had
any of the technical or social skills
that the previous generation of Internet
users had. The "old guard" was smili-
g to deal with a mass of
"users" who were ignorant of their
highly developed culture and the
increasingly unmanageable
often referred to an "Eternal
September." The "user" became a
lone entity for people who
need things to be as simple
as possible and they became
nanny fodder for system adminis-
trators and real programmers.

In 1996 The New Hackers DIc-
ctionary clearly distinguished two
classes of people: implementers
(hackers) and Users (users). Twelve
years later, "Software
Studies: A Lexicon," released by
the same publisher the MIT Press,
doesn't contain an article on
them at all. As a way to deal with this
new influx of "users," the
prevailing tactic was to give them
a nice and colorful playground
("user-friendly," "user-oriented")
where they could not cause any
real damage and leave the hackers
alone. This rather optical view
is still perpetuated today — users are
being highly entertained,
but also exploited as
content producers and ad-clicking
revenue generators.

While more and more people had
personal computers and net access,
fewer and fewer were seeing the
value of their contributions.
As most had agreed to have "no
idea about computers," it became
virtually impossible for them to
reflect on the medium itself. At
the same time however those users
used computers very intensively,
producing and uploading content
non-stop.

And here we reach the point
where we would like to highlight
antithetical aspects of Digital Folklore,
a distinct user culture developed
inside user-oriented applications
and services despite their
official status and technical
limitations. Their cumulative
output began to dominate that of
hacker culture.

Consider the way early ama-
teur websites were made. As clumsy
as they might appear to trained
professionals, in terms of spread-
ing the Internet's architecture,
social structures, and culture, they were of huge
importance. In fact, the mental
images we have of the modern today:
intelligence on the edges of the
network, many-to-many com munic-
ations, open source (even if it was
just about how to use the
<blink> WIN key), log in, the result of these early efforts. Users
could easily write the code for
their own web pages and were
building their pages, literally
building the Internet.

Already by the end of the 1990's, however the rise of web de-
design, the web designer as
a new profession, the "new
economy" and the whole industry
around it, all compelled to
point the naive users back to
their place.

These days we can witness how
the users' role has been recon-
sidered in the Web 2.0 hype: unable
masters, crowd wisdom, user
generated content, folksonomy
—all crowned by the
triumph "IPO" as the person of
the year on the cover of TIME
magazine. Grand "come-
back" of the user, heralded by the
glory mirrored cover, illustrated
just how vast the gap between
users and their computers
had grown. The implication being
that a powerful user is a one-time
sensation, not the norm.

During a short span 2.0 like
the users' creativity earned a
lot of praise, whether it was
"blinging up" their kids, rating
books at Amazon.com or
recycling colleagues. But being
so busy and creative, we missed
the moment when Weebly was re-
placed by a new trend, The Cloud;
users in front of dumb terminals,
feeding centralized databases
and online services. One is
easily reminded of the Master
Control Program, the boogie man
from the aforementioned movie
TRON. Whatever association your
mind is forming here, whatever
the name of the system, it is
about powerful users, not power-
ful users.

This new technology that
will stand up for values such
ease of speech and free thought.
And from users that, no matter
how bright minds will not protect
themselves from being blocked,
split up, throttled or censored
by aggressive regimes, conservative
influences or religious
zealots. Hackers and profession-
als in their "hacker" culture,
will have to tap into the powers of
their networks, they can
unleash the power of the
Internet.

In Germany, where this book
author and editor lives, it's
its own specificity because one
gets the feeling that the "Internet" is happening somewhere

\(^{1}\) Hackers (hackers) and Users (users) = twelve years later, "Software Studies: A Lexicon," released by the same publisher the MIT Press.
\(^{2}\) This term refers to "user-friendly," "user-oriented," where they could not cause any real damage and leave the hackers alone.
else. Journalists praise Iranian bloggers in their struggle for freedom, yet regard German bloggers voicing their concerns about German government control of the web as nutty freaks.

And there seemed to be little time for reflection in between the total neglect of computers and their sudden, unorthodox adoption: in the 1980s people still generally thought of computers as Cold War machines that guide nuclear missiles, or as surveillance machines turning people into numbers in the 1987 census. Even playing the coin-operated Pac Man arcade machine was illegal for minors. In contrast, today's schoolchildren are educated as "Real Users." They learn how to use Microsoft Office or type business letters and design PowerPoint presentations, before they learn how to make a game or even spell INVENTORS correctly. Users must understand their integral role in the process, demand comprehensible systems, work for better computer education and begin to see themselves as developers again. Studying Digital Folklore can do this, and help give back the power the they have earned and deserve.

The domain of the digital is no longer the province of people, not computers. The personal computer must be regarded as a medium with a cultural history shaped more by its users and less by its inventors. In February 2009, speaking at TED conference, Sir Tim Berners-Lee stated that he invented the web 20 years ago. Though officially he has the right to claim this, the web is in fact 16 years old, because that is when people started to use it. Nancy Jenkins wrote in his 2002 article "Blog This!": "We learned in the history books about Samuel Morse's invention of the telegraph, but not about the thousands of operators who shaped the circulation of messages." To rephrase him, we could say that we have studied the history of hyperText, not the history of Metallica fans who blog about web pages in general. This book is an attempt to fill this gap.

It is a collection of texts and projects on the digital vernacular, online culture, DIY electronics, do-it-yourself, type-ability, cats, Las Vegas and penis enlargement. We are grateful to our students, former and present, for participating in research and contributing to this book.

2. "Person who doesn't know about computers but is going to use the system. Naive user systems are those set up to make things easy and clear for such people", Ted Nelson: "The Most Important Computer Terms for the 70's", in Oscar R. Dumenko and author, Tempus Books, 1987, p. 9
3. September was a special month in the early days of network culture. With the start of the university term there would always be some new users that needed some introduction and caring for their first steps into the online world. See e.g. The Wikipedia entry http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/External_memory
5. The graphical user interface for "users" is also often called "WIMP" for "Windows, Icons, Mouse Pointer." Real programs would use a command line interface of course.
6. Issue December 25, 2006 / January 1, 2007 Issue:
7. INVENTORS = "Ich konnte mich zu 'Pylo Jacker', der German version of BOP, or ISG