EVERY BODY ELSE

By Cory Arcangel

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, listserves like thinglist, nettime, & rhizome seemed to be the primary mode 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 kinda art? Are Jodi.org humans?

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. Remember, this utopian spirit truly meant that everybody was invited to this party! And here comes everybody: moms, teens, celebs, goths, tots, wizkids, noobs, lamerz, gamers and… oh yeah, artists.

After Google 1 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, ftping, and permissions, 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 on them 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. Olia, Dragan and their students know that among the ongoing discussions of freedom from the tyranny from the traditional fine art world, that there is another much bigger show in town — "everybody else".

Sifting through the accumulations of net culture, the contributors to the "Digital Folklore Reader" are somewhere in-between researchers, scientists, academics, and poets. The common ground is that all are inspired by their favorite moments of human technological expression on the web. The results highlight the beauty and importance of gifs, 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. ¶

1   http://www.google.com

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WE ARE ALL NAIVE USERS AT SOME TIME OR OTHER; ITS NOTHING TO BE ASHAMED OF. THOUGH SOME COMPUTER PEOPLE SEEM TO THINK IT IS.
"

TED NELSON, DREAM MACHINES, 1974

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 Comic Sans over it and announce a chapter on LOLCATS 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 Plan, to which this book is only a tiny contribution, is to truly reconnect users and computers, users and developers, users and the history of their favorite medium. If this plan works out, perhaps a reasonable relationship between computers and people could be restored.

The personal computer (a meta medium), and the Internet (aka network of the networks), are mistakenly regarded as mere extensions of pre-computer culture. Net, web, media, computer, digital, are the miserable and inadequate prefixes 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," "realism" 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 "appliance," 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 often heard statement that computers are a common thing in today's world is a fallacy. Never before has computer technology been so widely spread and computer culture been so underdeveloped 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 "internet art," you would get linked to galleries selling paintings and sculptures online, even though net art (where "net" was more important than "art"), had long been a unique art form. Computer games are subject to similar attitudes. 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 elements of visual, textual and audio culture that emerged from users' engagement with personal computer applications during the last de-

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cade of the 20th and the first decade of the 21st century.

This seemingly over-determined time frame is needed to distinguish Digital Folklore from Home Computer Culture, which ceased to exist in the 1990's. Before, home computers – machines elegant and quirky 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 computer'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 complex and business oriented, the role of computer users changed.

So what do we exactly mean by user? The movie Tron marks the highest appreciation and most glorious definition of this term. The film is mostly set inside a computer network; programs, represented by actors in glowing costumes, are the main heroes. One program asks another: "You believe in the users?" The other answers: "Yes, sure. If I don't have a user, than who wrote me?" In another conversation it becomes clear that both an account manager and a hacker are called "user" by "their" programs. 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 responsible and dedicated progeny.

This was in 1982. Ten years later the situation became dramatically different. The term "users" was demoted to what the fathers of computer technology dubbed "Real Users," [1] those who pay to use a computer but are not interested to learn about it, or "Naive Users," [2] those who simply don't understand the systems.

In 1993 AOL connected their customers to the Internet for the first time and naive users showed up in the thousands – invading the Usenet discussion system formerly only frequented by computer enthusiasts with a university background. These AOL-ers became part of the Internet without any initiation and none of them had any of the technical or social skills deemed necessary to the previous generation of Internet users. The "old guard" was unwilling to deal with a mass of "users" who were ignorant of their highly developed culture and the increasing onslaught was often referred to as an "Eternal September." [3] "User" became a derogatory term for people who need things to be as simple as possible and they became cannon fodder for system administrators and real programmers.

In 1996 The New Hackers Dictionary clearly distinguished two classes of people: Implementors (hackers) and Users (lusers). [4]

Twelve years later, "Software Studies: A Lexicon", released by the same publisher The MIT Press, doesn't contain an article on User at all. As a way to deal with this new influx of "lusers," the prevailing tactic was to give them a nice and colorful playground [5] ("user-friendly," "user-oriented") where they could not cause any real damage and leave the hackers alone. This rather cynical 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 these lusers used computers very intensively, producing and uploading content non-stop.

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

Consider the way early amateur websites were made. As clumsy as they might appear to trained professionals, in terms of spreading the Internet's architecture and culture, they were of huge importance. In fact, the mental image we have of the medium today: intelligence on the edges of the network, many-to-many communication, open source (even if it was just about how to use the <blink> HTML tag), is the result of these early efforts. Users could easily write the code for their own web pages and were, by building their pages, literally building the Internet.

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

These days we can witness how the users' role has been reconsidered in the Web2.0 hype: noble amateurs, crowd-wisdom, user generated content, folksonomy – all crowned by the triumphal "YOU" as the person of the year on the cover of TIME magazine. [6] This grand "comeback" of the user, heralded by the glossy 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 Web 2.0 time the users' creativity earned a lot of praise, whether it was "blinging up" their kids, rating books at Amazon.com or rickrolling colleagues. But being so busy and creative, we missed the moment when Web2.0 was replaced by a new trend, The Cloud: users in front of dumb terminals, feeding centralized databases and über computer clusters. One is easily reminded of the Master Control Program, the boogie man from the aforementioned movie TRON. Whatever association your mind is offering here, whatever the name of the system, it is about powerful computers, not powerful users.

But it won't be technology that will stand up for values like free speech and free thought. And the technological mastery of a few bright minds will not protect the Internet from being blocked, split up, throttled or censored by repressive regimes, conservative industries or religious zealots. Hackers and professionals will have to understand that in order to advance "their" medium and "their" culture, they, too, have to tap into the powers of Digital Folklore.

In Germany, where this book originates, the problem has its own specificity because one gets the feeling that "The Internet" is happening somewhere

else. Journalists praise Iranian bloggers in their struggle for freedom, yet regard German bloggers voicing their concerns about German governmental 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, unscrutinized adoption: In the 1980's 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. By contrast, today's school children are educated as "Real Users." They learn how to use Microsoft Office to type business letters and design PowerPoint presentations, before they learn how to make a game or even spell IKEMZDOL <u>7</u> 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 users the power they have earned and deserve.

The domain of the digital must belong to 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 Bernes-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.

Henry Jenkins wrote in his 2002 article "Blog This!" <u>8</u>: "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 message."
To rephrase him, we could say that we have studied the history of hypertext, but not the history of Metallica fan web rings or web rings in general. This book is an attempt to fill this gap.

It is a collection of texts and projects on the digital vernacular, online amateur culture, DIY electronics, dirtstyle, typo-nihilism, cats, teapots and penis enlargement. We are grateful to our students, former and present, for participating in research and contributing to the book. ¶

<u>1</u>   "People who are buying computers, especially personal computers, just aren't going to take a long time to learn something. They are going to insist on using it awfully quick." J.C.R. Licklider: "Some Reflections on Early History", quoted from: A. Goldberg: A History of Personal Workstations, ACM Press, 1988, p.119

<u>2</u>   "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 the70's", in Dream Machines, Tempus Books, 1987, p.9

<u>3</u>   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://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Eternal_september

<u>4</u>   Eric S. Raymond: "The New Hacker's Dictionary",The MIT Press, 1996, p. 463

<u>5</u>   The graphical user interface for "users" is also often called "WIMP," for "Windows, Icons, Mouse Pointer." Real programmers would use a command line interface of course.

<u>6</u>   Issue December 25, 2006/ January 1, 2007

<u>7</u>   IKEMZDOL = "Ich könnte mich zu Tode lachen", the German version of ROFL or LOL

<u>8</u>   Henry Jenkins: "Blog This!", Technology Review Issue March 2002, online at http://www.technologyreview.com/ energy/12768/

DO YOU BELIEVE IN USERS ?