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The Exquisite Corpse

<http://www.repohistory.org/circulation/exquisite>

Sharon Denning
sharon@denning.net

BIO

Sharon Denning is a NYC based artist who has been working in interactive media since 1992. She received an MFA from S.V.A. in 1998 with a thesis on interactive narrative. Her individual work has toured internationally and she is a member of the artist collective RepoHistory.

PHOTO

attached

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The digital Exquisite Corpse studies the growth of a story, examining how stories are built collectively from individual episodes and how stories translate in the telling. It is a database of possible stories, a map of tellings and retellings, a network of routes from one beginning to many possible endings.

Like the original Exquisite Corpse, the digital version is made up of story sections that grow from previous contributions. It differs by collecting and presenting not just a linear continuation, but multiple variations as well. Each chapter can branch into an infinite number of stories. Users can choose to read an existing branch or to create a new one by adding their own text. It is up to the user to continue the present theme of a storyline or to send it in a different direction.

The online version takes advantage of several ways of spreading the story on the web. Though the Exquisite Corpse users can ask friends to continue their story and the Exquisite Corpse can notify them when their story is continued. Their friends ask other friends, mimicking the stories are spread through conversation and the way jokes and stories are forwarded around the net -- a viral marketing program for the Exquisite Corpse.

Contributions can be made through a Flash interface or HTML forms on the Web, or via email, allowing as many people as possible to contribute to the story and spreading it through several communications channels. The story, visible through several interfaces, demonstrates a flexible relationship between data and interface. Users can not only choose their stories, but choose how they view and contribute as well. The interface maps the relationships between each contribution and allows the user to navigate between them, mapping the birth and growth of a story.

The Exquisite Corpse has two views -- a map view that looks at the whole story, and a chapter view that lets a user read the story one section at a time. The map traces the growth of the story as a whole and is updated as chapters are added. Selecting a chapter in the map opens that section and users can then read one section and follow links to its continuations. While reading chapters users can select manual mode or automatic mode. In manual mode, users choose which branch to read. In auto mode the Exquisite Corpse chooses randomly from the branches and "tells" the user a story.

Under the hood, the Exquisite Corpse is a classical example of a tree structure that computer science students learn in their first courses on data structures. It is analogous to a family tree: A new chapter added to the story becomes a new "child" of the "parent" chapter that was continued. Others who add onto that same chapter create

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"siblings" to the "child." If the continuation is itself continued, "grandchildren" of the original will be created.

Email submissions to the Exquisite Corpse are processed by Procmail, an automated email-processing tool. Web submissions are processed by a CGI script written in Perl. Both use the same object interface to add "children" to the tree. That interface defines a "node" in the tree. Nodes have methods allowing new "children" to be created and allowing navigation of the tree by the user interface.

The web interface is written in flash. It can both open each node's file to "read in" the text, and send information to create a new node. It calls the same CGIs as the web form.

The Exquisite Corpse is currently included in RepoHistory's online project CIRCULATION, which explores the city as body by examining the flow of blood through the city; blood as both a physical entity and as a metaphor for identity.