
The Lair of the Marrow Monkey
Web site by Erik Loyer

Prix Ars Electronica 1999 Entry
.net Category

Entry Number: W-237

URL: <http://www.marrowmonkey.com>

System requirements: Shockwave plug-in, 28.8kbs+ connection, 120Mhz+ CPU, 12MB+ memory allotted to browser, 800x600+ monitor resolution, external speakers or headphones.

Project objectives: To explore the use of abstract, real-time interface in art-making and storytelling, and to present a new perspective on "being digital" that uses fictional characters and situations to illuminate issues unique to life in the digital age.

Target audience: "Wired" adults familiar with digital media.

Project Overview, Objectives and Benefits

The Lair of the Marrow Monkey is an interactive investigation into the seductive power of digital technology. The website's main focus falls on a single character who goes by the name of Orion17. Orion is a minimalist composer who is fascinated to the point of obsession with the patterns and logic that frame reality. "I would leave all this in a moment if I could be the marrow, the idea, the virus, the entity whose self is not corporeal," he explains. When a powerful vision shows him the way to achieve his dream of uniting with the world of abstraction, Orion makes the leap and joins a small team of researchers at the newly-founded Institute for Investigation into the Mind of Marrow. There, he experiences first-hand both the euphoria and the frustration that comes from living life as a "marrow monkey."

This project grew out of a realization that the severe limitations of the Internet could actually have a positive effect on my creative work in digital media by forcing me to take a

fragmented approach to the design. The expansive storage capacity and (relatively) high data transfer rates of CD-ROM had influenced me in the past to conceive highly centralized, sprawling pieces. My experience in game design, however, had made me familiar with the dangers of this type of approach, most damaging of which is the temptation to lock in features and design elements for the sake of streamlining the development process, but which actually hamper creativity in the long run. Doing a piece for the Internet meant that I could experiment with many different approaches on a much more practical scale.

Shockwave was adopted as the sole plug-in technology to be used throughout the site both because of its maturity and its still-untapped power. Most Shockwave applications on the Web today are either linear animation pieces or novelty games, and relatively few developers have tried to create truly dynamic pieces that respond in detailed, meaningful ways to user input. This was one of the main objectives of the site: to begin to show how a highly dynamic, abstract interface can play a significant role in communicating setting and narrative to users. Representational graphics have been deliberately avoided in an attempt to strip down the language of interactivity to archetypal levels. Music, on the other hand, is used extensively to contrast with the spare visual language, and will play an increasingly important role in the interactivity as the site evolves.

The site consists of nine scenes, each of which functions much like an aria in an opera, a "frozen moment" during which a character's current situation and concerns can be revealed in detail. Many scenes require active participation on the part of the user in constructing or exploring the meaning being conveyed. Users are encouraged to make use of the interface for these scenes to enact the relationships between the ideas, events and characters being presented as part of the narrative. The visceral and dynamic nature of the interactions help to make these relationships tactile and interesting for users, allowing them to experience Orion17's obsessions from the inside out.

Five-Minute Suggested Navigation Path

NOTE: External speakers or headphones recommended. Turn it up!

1. Enter the URL (<http://www.marrowmonkey.com>).
2. Click on "Enter the Lair".
3. Use the 3D menu to select item #6, "The mnemonic membrane," and click.
4. Experiment with dragging the words at the left over the membrane.
5. After playing with the membrane for a bit, click the "Contents" button.
6. Use the 3D menu to select item #2, "I couldn't sleep, that night".
7. Roll the cursor over each of the elements in the window to activate them and reveal the text.
8. Once all the elements have been activated, click in the window to bring up the next tableau.
9. Repeat steps 7 and 8 as desired...