

the information age

abstract

Under the guise of a presentation on the history of electronic communications, "The Information Age" examines problematic issues in present computer mediated communication, such as the mystification of computers and the resulting frustration as well as the underlying structures of control and power. It is an artistic approach to revealing our avid commitment to rapidly developing technology and our acceptance of resulting alterations in communication mechanisms, information access and conclusively the rearrangement of social structure.

concept and realization

Throughout history, every technological innovation has caused a controversy between enthusiasm and uneasiness. Both are expressions of unfamiliarity with the new medium and the tendency to envision the unknown with the mind-set of the known.

From the invention of the alphabet until the most recent achievements in network communications, there was always concern that the new technology replaces human intellect. In ancient Greece, the philosopher Plato suggested mistrust in the written word (which is considered to be the first form of communication technology) because he feared that unmediated language loses its communication function by becoming merely a container for information.

Today we find Plato's concern equally manifested in the discussions about the Internet as the future source of information.

In "The Information Age" current technology is both subject matter and medium. Wrapped as an educational CD-ROM product it stages a situation where the viewer experiences the computer's deficiency as intelligent interface for human interaction and his gradually vanishing power of control over the machine. It is a hybrid project comprising two entities: an interactive Director movie which functions as the primary user interface and a Website which is being accessed from within the movie. The Director movie is an interactive presentation about major inventions and achievements in the field of electronic communications. The main interface is broken up into six different sections: the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, the television, the computer and the Internet, each representing one crucial "era" of the Information Age. The navigation within the piece is intentionally linear and fairly limited. Each section can be either directly accessed from the main screen, the table of contents, or in a strictly linear way by pressing the right or the left arrow button to proceed from one screen to the other (linear according to time in history). There is also an option to access a chronicle from each screen which contains a listing of related events from the year 1864 to 1995. Every screen as well includes a help and quit button, to make the generic interactive interface complete. The layout and functionality of the piece follows the principal organization of most educational CD-ROM titles. Information is grouped into logical units which then have one or more subunits. The navigational structure is a logical top-down branching system with some introductory page which, in this case, is a "table of contents".

Apart from this "educational" presentation the project also involves another level of functionality which becomes apparent only after a certain extent of user interaction: Various counters monitor the user's interaction and trigger certain events which are beyond the user's control. At the beginning, the events are alerts and error messages, instructing the user to follow certain instructions in order to proceed within the piece. Parallel to the advancement towards newer technologies within the presentation, the user is experiencing problems of increasing frequency and fatality until control is taken completely out of his hands. Interaction turns into reaction and finally the user is confronted with some intelligent entity which is

communicating by typing chatty messages onto the screen. As the "entity" discloses all the data it has collected about the user and makes him hacking into the pentagon webserver to shut down the Internet, the user finds himself as a powerless marionet who unknowingly defeated control to a machine. The piece plays with our fascination about technology which is sometimes so exaggerated that we are blind for its drawbacks and harms. Throughout the piece the user experiences first joy and then increasingly frustration evoked by the use of this technology until finds himself in a situation where he becomes victim to all evil computers could possibly produce. The level and the form of user interaction in the piece varies from screen to screen, exploring the idea of controlling and being controlled. While some events in the movie obviously result from mouse-clicks and the like the user also triggers more subtle events that follow algorithms and dynamically change every time the movie is played. One example is the use of a background application that retrieves specific data from the Internet and embeds it dynamically into the playing Director movie, whereby the type of the data is determined by previous user's interaction.

"The Information Age" is a comment on problems and absurdities related to electronic communication devices and the way we are using them. It explores the mystification of computers and the resulting frustration and it examines the underlying structures of control and power. It is an artistic approach to revealing our avid commitment to rapidly developing technology and our acceptance of resulting alterations in communication mechanisms, information access and conclusively the rearrangement of social structure. Although the nature of the project is not being unveiled right at the beginning, the different screens in the educational part already appear suspicious simply by the way information is presented.

Marshall McLuhan often referred to technology as "extensions of man" but when we look around us, we often see ourselves becoming the extension of technology: Whether it is the ATM machine or the on-line catalog of the public library, the local phone company or the info-desk on the airport, human interfaces are gradually being replaced with machines and by the time people adapt to the new technology things are about to change again.

There is no doubt that computers and networking technologies have entirely changed our way of communicating and accessing information. And using advanced technologies will always stand for struggling with its teething troubles and going through a process of establishing it in our culture. While some have condemned the World Wide Web to be essentially anarchistic and materialistic, others have labeled it democratic and enabling. Ultimately, everybody's perception will be biased by his perspective and world-view. We should be challenged by this new communication medium but at the same time be considerate of its power, especially of the use of its power.

My intention with this piece is to point to different problematic issues about modern technology in a creative way, using the same medium that I am criticizing. I want to annoy, irritate and provoke the user by slightly taking away his control. I want to play with his emotions and leave him puzzled for a while until at some point he realizes that "it was not real but could have been real". After more than a decade of complacent experimentation in the field of Computer Art, I believe that now the tools and techniques are fully developed to focus on reflection.

artist's biography

Jutta Kirchgeorg, born June 6th 1969 in Frankfurt/Main.

From 1990 to 1995 I studied Communication Design at the Fachhochschule Rheinland Pfalz, majoring in Telecommunications and Editorial Design. 1995 I won a Fulbright Scholarship to study Computer Art at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. My focus was in Interactive Multimedia and Telecommunications. I completed the program this spring with a MFA degree, the submitted work is my thesis project.

technical specifications

title: the information age

format: hybrid CD-ROM/WWW project

platform: macintosh

size: 25 MB

hardware/software requirements:

macintosh PPC or 6804, 640x480 color monitor,

internet connectivity/netscape navigator 3.0

min. 16 MB RAM

video documentation master is VHS NTSC

there is NO copy in broadcast standard.