

HyGrid Site Concept

The HyGrid was born one night at a coffee shop in the city of Omaha, Nebraska, USA as I scribbled in my sketchbook. The basic idea was to create a dynamic growing linear navigateable collaborative artwork with interlocked squares. Each square was to build off of the side of another square and, in turn, three more squares were to be built off of the new square. After only a few generations, the result would be a strange hypertextual path of images that you could navigate.

The process was initially called "tri-linear gridding". "Tri-linear" because it was sequential and semi-linear in sets of three branches and "gridding" because the base-square idea was built off of some of my other collaborative projects, "GRID" and "Infinite Grid". The hope was to make the HyGrid automatic, fun, simple, flexible and web-specific. I believe it's been a success in all areas.

HyGrid's engine is a CGI Perl script. It's soul consists of a growing roster of eager artist participants from around the world(wideweb). I started the script in December of 1996. Once I began to think about the project, I couldn't get the idea out of my head. I would think myself to sleep every night trying to envision the methods and forms the HyGrid could manifest. It was truly exciting. It was important for the HyGrid to be easy to participate in, a pleasure to browse and easy to maintain. These factors, more than anything, shaped the project.

Browsing the HyGrid is fairly simple. Presented with one of the many display patterns available, you will see a set of 5 or more squares. Each square is created by a separate artist and all squares are intended to flow as seamlessly as possible into their neighbors. By clicking on any square, you will be presented with a new pattern of squares, this time with the square you clicked on as your center, or base, square. You will notice that going "up and right" doesn't present you with the same square as going "right and up". This is the hyperdimensionality of the project rearing it's beautiful head. Each square exists on its own "plane", so to speak. It is impossible to easily represent the HyGrid in any other medium. It is built for the World Wide Web.

While browsing, you'll run across a few different types of squares. The art-squares, of course, are the focus of the project. These are squares submitted by participating artists. The "unreserved" marker square indicates that that specific square on the HyGrid has not been reserved and is open for creation. To reserve that square, a participant needs merely click on it and fill out the short reservation form supplied. Once a square is reserved, it will be marked as such and browsers will see a "reserved" square in its place. The final type of square on the HyGrid is the "void" square. A "void" square is used to mark a segment of the HyGrid that, by its location behind an unfinished square, isn't

active. These "void" squares are used only to fill out unrepresented squares on the bigger pattern configurations.

The browsing interface features links to all of the major HyGrid sections, including the "Image/Participant Report", the "Reservation Listing" and "Documentation". The interface also allows the browser to change the base image size (default is 100x100) and choose from one of many different patterns. Each pattern displays a different cross-section of HyGrid pieces radiating from your "center" or "base" square. The default pattern is called "vanilla plus" and is a basic "plus" sign with one square in the middle surrounded by squares linked to each side. The patterns based upon a system that centers around the "base" image and are easy to create and add to the basic CGI. The dilemma of how to create such patterns kept me awake SEVERAL nights until, in a frenzy, I scribbled out the recursive program subroutine that would take care of it for me.

On a purely artistic level, the patterns provide the altered PERSPECTIVE that's needed to appreciate the HyGrid's sprawling chaos (play-os, I like to call it).

Some particular base/pattern configurations are simply beautiful and scary examples of how art can emerge from chaos which emerged from art. Huh?

Participating in the play-os is the real joy of HyGrid. Participants (gridfittists) are required to have a Synergy ID. Synergy is the flag all collaborative art projects on the SITO Artchives/Collab Playspace bear. SITO (as OTIS) won an honorable mention in last year's Prix Ars Electronica. A Synergy ID is a unique three-letter code that participants use to reserve and name their images. A small independent database is kept of the IDs, complete with related names, email addresses and URLs. When an artist wants to contribute to the HyGrid, they merely find an unreserved space, click on it, reserve it with their Synergy ID, create the new grid-piece, upload it, then confirm the upload with the online forms that HyGrid provides. All automatic, no mediation or intervention on my behalf. The HyGrid grows itself.

For the first two months, participants could only ADD a square to an open space on the HyGrid, effectively adding three new sides from which others could build. As the program matured, the ability to create "weirdlinks" or "wumhoels" on the HyGrid was installed. These "weirdlinks" allowed a user to combine any number of their reserved spaces into one, provided the conditions were right. In this way, they could create a new square that acted as a bridge between two, three or FOUR squares. The HyGrid was now MORE impossible to render in any other medium. This also gave the HyGrid mortality. No longer was it destined to go on into infinity, constantly growing. There now exists the possibility that the HyGrid can cinch itself off by using up all available open squares. The HyGrid can become closed, like some

fantastic digital moebius strip. It is my opinion that this will actually ever happen as long as participants are able to create single-link and double-link squares. Single-links create 3 new sides from which to build (they plug-up one and provide three). Double-links don't create any new sides, but they don't take away any either (they plug-up two, but provide two more).

Creating HyGrid squares is easily an artform unto itself. Techniques and styles vary greatly among participants. Some like to be extremely vigilant in their referentiality, they will go back to HyGrid pieces more than five generations back, often to the origin square, and include visual elements from that square into their new piece. Some kind of disjunct unity is formed this way. The constraints of a 100x100 pixel image coupled with the obligation to link at least one (and sometimes four) sides can be challenging. Some participants simply forget to make images flow smoothly together. Others come up with creative ways to alter the apparent intent of an image's overflow. Animated GIF89a images have been a big and interesting part of the evolution of the HyGrid, many being intricate and beautiful as stand-alone pieces. On web-browsers that don't support the animated GIFs, the pieces still fit and facilitate HyGrid browsing. It's very interesting to see how images play off of one-another. Motifs percolate and die-out. Sometimes the only strong correlation between images is in the individual title that each one has. Some participants, including myself, have even created HyGrid sections on PAPER and scanned them in for the HyGrid. This requires creating a linking piece after the fact and the use of uniform rolls of paper, like calculator printout paper, to make it work.

When a particular square is the center/base, you will have the opportunity to see who created that square and hyperlink off to their homepage. This way, you can get to know the people behind the pixels. A sense of community is formed. Personally, I've developed CU-SeeMe relationships with some of the participants and we use each-other's faces and images in our HyGrid squares. Another cool thing about the way the CGI works is that you can copy/paste the URL to a specific location and configuration of the HyGrid... so if you have a new piece that you think looks really nice when seen in a specific pattern, you can copy and paste that URL into an email.

The HyGrid became public in December of 1995. As of April 30, 1996, there are over 30 participants and nearly 400 individual pieces. I'm very proud of HyGrid and what it's become. I return to it daily, even when I have no time to add a piece (my personal goal is to create no less than a three-linker every time I add to it). HyGrid is a growing project and has no intention of stopping anytime soon. Future upgrades include drumloop music linked to every square, allowing new songs and beats to be created by merely cruising through the HyGrid. VRML output is also being looked at, to allow some idea of how a HyGriddish structure would look in three-dimensions.

If nothing else, HyGrid illustrates the mysterious rigors of relation,
evolution and perspective in a way that even an artist can understand.
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YOU HAVE
MY PHOTO
AND BIO
FROM LAST YEAR