

Cyberspace is not Disneyland

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Twelve-hundred people watched as Peter Gabriel and Laurie Anderson shifted uneasily in their chairs. Director Peter Sellars was oblivious to what was making the others uncomfortable. The event: a panel discussion on "Active Meaning" at the Digital Expression Symposium at the MIT Media Lab in October of 94. The panel moderator, composer Tod Machover, was leading a discussion on viewing your audience as creators of content.

Everyone is becoming a creator. This is a paradigm shift. This is THE paradigm shift. The "information age" and the "information superhighway" are misnamed. People are not flocking to cyberspace because they can download stock quotes, recipes, or travel information. It has little to do with "information" at all. It has everything to do with community and participation. On the net, you no longer have to wait to hear what Larry King or Le Monde think of events — you can express your own opinion. You can keep in touch with old friends, and make new ones. You can express who you are.

Peter Gabriel understands. And that's why he looked the most uncomfortable. He's enthusiastic about his listeners becoming creators, but that leaves an unanswered question: what is the role of the artist in an age where everyone is an artist?

Of course we still need artists in the traditional sense; Peter Gabriel's livelihood is in no danger (though Peter Sellars' might be). But we increasingly need a new kind of artist: someone who sees their role as a facilitator of other people's creativity.

How do you inspire people to create, and empower them to be able to do so? Those are key questions in the design of virtual communities. In my work with virtual communities, I am a meta-designer: designing for designers.

MediaMOO is a text-based virtual reality environment or "MUD" designed to be a professional community for media researchers. It has been open since January 20th, 1993 and currently has 1000 members from 29 countries. As I write, people inhabit places like "The Distraction Factory", "Tari's Very Fashionable Hovel", "Curtis Common", "The Panopticon" and simply "basement." The world of MediaMOO is built by its inhabitants.

In founding the community, I invited a group of people with shared interests — the future of media. I established firm rules about who could become members, and no rules at all about what they were supposed to do once they arrived. The MOO software (by Pavel Curtis of Xerox PARC and Stephen White) gave them an expressive language to build things in. I created a few places for people to build off. I designed a few core public places to set an appropriate mood. I scheduled a few initial events to establish a tone. And after that, I let the community evolve.

Someone once called MediaMOO "a multicultural mess." I was never so flattered. The comment raises a number of important issues: when everyone is a creator, things don't always form a harmonious whole. One person's home on MediaMOO is called "Cottonwood Grove"; another is "The Letter 'U'". These don't go particularly well together. If you have a sufficiently postmodern sensibility, the odd juxtapositions are delightful. But what if you prefer a bit more coherence? One important concept is the notion of private versus public space. In private space, anything goes; public space is regulated by community standards. A community must develop standards and procedures for controlling what is permitted in shared spaces. I

remember the controversy over Richard Serra's sculpture "Tilted Arc". Workers in New York's (nonvirtual) City Hall Plaza said it was oppressive, casting a dark shadow over a previously cheerful square. The sculptor countered that it was a work "about oppression". After a bitter legal battle, it was torn down. Real communities have long needed mechanisms for regulating the form of public spaces. Virtual communities need such mechanisms even more. And they need mechanisms that cause less bitter in-fighting than the controversy over "Tilted Arc".

When everyone is a creator, not everything is always museum quality. But if a work is meaningful to some audience, maybe just to its creator, it has value. Of course everyone can't create without limit — usually there are scarce, shared resources to allocate. On most MUDs, everyone is initially given the ability to create a reasonable number of places and things. If you want to build more, you must justify your request to an administrator or review board of community members. Community standards mediate.

When everyone is a creator, the community's founder can't control what the results will be. You can try to shape it, direct it, urge it towards your vision — but in the end, your users will always surprise and confound you, creating something much different than you expected, both more and less than what you hoped for. For the traditional artist, this may be the hardest point: you have to give up control.

The meta-designer is a new kind of artist. Within the field of meta-design there still very much is a role for the traditional artist. Creativity need not always start from a blank canvas, a blank screen. A Peter Gabriel riff, a Chuck Jones sketch, a Times editorial, a Star Trek episode may serve as a starting point for another person's creation. We need more people devoting time to creating starting points, creating tools, creating contexts.

To help people to be creative, you have to help them to see themselves as creators — to fight against the impulse to say, "I can't." In addition to giving them good tools and good starting points, they need role models and peers with common interests. Sometimes the best person to help is someone who figured the same thing out last week. And the best way to fight the impulse to say, "I can't" is to be surrounded by people — some like yourself (your age, your gender, your ethnic background) — who are participating, creating, and enjoying it.

Cyberspace is not Disneyland. It's not a polished, perfect place built by professional designers for the public to obediently wait on line to passively experience. It's more like a finger-painting party. Everyone is making things, there's paint everywhere, and most work only a parent would love. Here and there, works emerge that most people would agree are achievements of note. The rich variety of work reflects the diversity of participants. And everyone would agree that it's the creative process and the ability for self-expression that matter, not the product.