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Info Weapon Contest

One of the current paradigms on 'war' is the solubility of the frontlines and territory in general. Since the Second World War we have been living in the age of 'total war' or 'pure war', as Paul Virilio has called it. Many theorists ever since have pointed at the intrinsic relationship between the invention of the atomic bomb, the computer and the rise of mass media and television in particular. This historical configuration of technologies has dominated the entire post-war/cold war era. Guerilla movements, terrorism and civil uprisings have not been able to change the basic parameters of warfare defined by the world powers. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin wall has changed the political maps of entire continents but has not brought a similar downfall of the technological war paradigm. Quite the opposite, '1989' has only intensified the invisible and 'remote' mode of warfare. This is the background of 'Info War'. We witness the rise of a 'military electronic complex' (miniature tactical weapons), combined with sophisticated forms of propaganda and manipulation, on all sides, of the global media and communication systems (the 'CNN effect').

But this is only one side of the story. It is not 'our' story. The critical and historical analysis of the intertwined relation between war and media technologies also has a civic, non-corporate-state side. This is the part of the 'info war' where artists, activists, programmers and designers are playing a role (though marginal, of course). Ever since the sixties and seventies, hackers and media activists have started to play around with the 'paralyse' of the laboratories and factories of the emerging high tech industry. Sometimes illegally, sometimes supported by universities and research labs, individuals, groups and loose movements have come up, demanding a 'democratization' of technology via 'direct action'. Unlike peace movements and anti-militarist groups, hackers have a genuine, positive attitude towards the machines. It is like a hidden, chained libido that has to be liberated by taking it away from the authorities. Keywords for this are free software, shareware, public access, and decentralized, open systems.

In part, the Internet has become so successful due to this hackers' ideology. But this historical configuration, written down in many software parts and operating systems, has now come to an end, or is at least in a crisis. The premisses of the early Internet, with its usenet, virtual communities and focus on the fight against censorship, are now under constant threat. The consensus myth of an egalitarian, chaotic system, ruled by self-governing users, with the help of artificial life and friendly bots, is now crushed by the take-over of telecom giants, venture capital and banks and a sharp rise in regulatory efforts by governments. The Internet is getting more and more on the defensive. It is therefore time to strike back: Info War.

The fight for public bandwidth, against rating systems and (self) censorship, for access for all and access to all information is not only a defensive one. There is still room for new, open standards and software which is not owned by big companies. The operating system Linux can be seen as an example, but also non-commercial browsers (the 'frames of our minds'). This is our part of the 'info war', related to the 'war on standards' (like in the case of electricity at the beginning of this century). Another part of the defensive could be the construction of 'info weapons'. This could vary from traditional forms of counter propaganda, anti-spam filters, destructive 'push back' media, communication guerilla, to more friendly forms of Info War like public awareness campaigns, databases on future strategies of the military or search engines. In short, civil defense in the age of global surveillance and electronic warfare.

The Info Weapon Contest challenges programmers, hackers, artists, theorists and designers to come up with their own, very personal proposals. An independant jury will make its choice and present the winner at the Ars Electronica Festival 1998.