

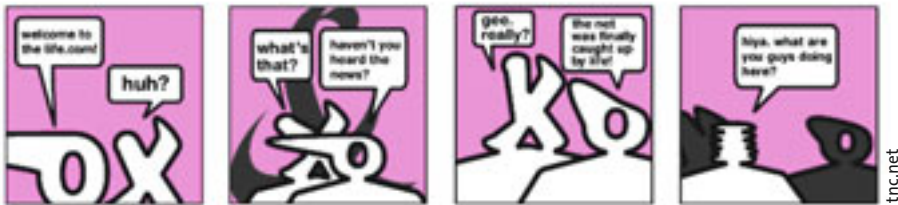
# openX-electrolobby (the top level domain of life)

*openX-electrolobby is the newly conceived Festival area for net-inspired Digital Culture. Beusch/Cassani and the electrolobby residents have limbered up their fingers and greased their neurons for a stimulating email chat.*

WHOOOSH!!! And so, quite suddenly, the Internet itself has been consumed by life. Or is it vice versa? Either way, life now has its own unique domain: “*Bienvenue dans la vie.com*—Welcome to life.com” trumpets the trendy, new, and oh-so-hip marketing campaign from France Telecom. And, without looking, we are thrust into the most exhilarating territory there is: the very top level domain of life ...

What brave new strategic experiments are taking place in the heat of social, economic and cultural change, and spawning into the global computer networks? How will Generations X, Y, and Z deal with the challenges, conflicts, and opportunities of this interwoven domain of activity? What unexpected alliances are forming, what new options are presenting themselves, and what strategies are being developed to negotiate this new terrain? How will the energy released by the collision of competing activities and visions shake out in the net-inspired digital culture of the early '00s?

With these questions looming in our consciousness, we've tracked down the latest mutations of that vital Net spirit that has been so active these last couple of years. Of course, for some it's been a dead issue for a long time. But others are just discovering its deeper potential. And still others are using it to develop new business models and commercial enterprises. And beyond all the hype and all the uncertainty, production is proceeding, and new output is developing, at the dynamic interfaces of subculture, lifestyle, art, design, e- and m-commerce, free software, advanced communities, and experimental entertainment.



A prominent example is Monotonik, one of the hottest Internet labels happening now—one that emerged from the tracker scene, using the Internet to distribute and produce digital music long before MP3 became a buzzword.

**h0l:** The tracker-scene was/is a way of making music using just your computer and some sound samples—no keyboards, fancy sound modules, guitars, or anything else at all. It started back in the mid-1980s on the Commodore 64 with purely mathematically generated sounds, but samples started coming in with the Commodore Amiga in about 1987. Soundtracker was the first tracker, and since then there's been Fasttracker, Protracker, Impulsetracker, and Startrekker, to name but a

few of the clones for the Amiga, Atari ST, and PCs ... The height of the tracker scene was probably on the Amiga in 1990–1992. In the last 2–3 years, MIDI equipment has become a lot cheaper and easier to use and MP3 has become increasingly viable as a format, so MODs are becoming increasingly marginalised. They're still fascinating and great fun to play with, though.



mono211.com

**TNC:** One of the most engaging aspects of the MOD format was/is that anyone can see how the track was programmed.

**hOI:** The cool thing about MODs has always been their small size (early MODs were typically way under 200k in size!) and the fact that they could only be spread electronically. In a lot of ways they were precursors of the MP3 revolution that's taking place today, but the MODs were traded on floppy discs by post, on 300 baud modems, and so on. And yes, another pretty cool thing about MODs is that you can see all the song (MIDI-like) data and the real-time effects the composer was using—you can literally see “how” he made the song and even change it if you should wish.

**TNC:** Some people see that as an analogy to the open source movement, even comparing tracking to coding.

**hOI:** Tracking is very much a music thing, but the very “code-like” interface makes it a little tricky for those who aren't technically inclined. Plus it has historically used hexadecimal for some values, for example, making it a little daunting. But in the end, it's all about making music—you need to be talented! It's definitely true that you need to learn the “tricks” of good production when you only have 4-channels, no real-time echo, distortion, or anything remotely sophisticated, though.

#### MONOTONIK ([www.mono211.com](http://www.mono211.com))

Monotonik is currently one of the hottest Internet music labels in the area of ambient IDM-Techno and Dope Beats—and this is due, in large part, to the fact that label boss hOI, aka Simon Carless, comes out of the tracker scene. Located at the interface of the demo music scene and the software coding community, trackers—also known as hacker-musicians—were using the Internet to produce and distribute digital music long before the MP3 hype.

*With Lackluster (aka Distance), Subi, Vim!, Thug (aka Serkul), Dharma+Dice, Sushi Brother, Jiva, and others.*

**TNC:** There has always been a strong relationship between the gamer and tracker scenes. You've recently moved into designing games.

**hOI:** All that late-night hacking turned out to be the perfect training for the technical disciplines that computer games require. The majority of the talent on the Amiga demo-scene of the early 90s (far more coders and graphics artists, but also plenty of musicians) are now working in the games industry.

**TNC:** Up until last year Monotonik was offering tracker files in the MOD-format. But now you've switched to MP3. Unlike the MP3-



mono211.com

scene, tracking focuses on the creation of original music, not on the distribution of already recorded music. What do you think of Napster, Gnutella, Freenet, and other MP3 distribution schemes?

**h0l:** I have very mixed feelings about it. The main problem I have is that people are, essentially, pirating music. But it does introduce new people to a certain artist's work, and this is certainly good. But in the end, it's not just big faceless companies who are possibly losing money through this, it's smaller independent labels and the artists themselves, too. What I hope, in the future, is for a Napster-style interface, but with the consumer paying an extremely small amount of money (say, 10 cents) for each track they download. The money will go directly to the artist's bank account. The problem, then, of course, is the quality issue. So there's going to be some kind of cypher through which this music can be heard. And it's going to be virtual labels or virtual record stores who actually know good quality music when they hear it. And that's why virtual labels such as Monotonik may actually be important in the future—it's quality regulation by which the Net will flourish :)



### Line-up for the Open Source Society

A couple of years ago, to describe our activities in conjunction with TNC Network, we introduced the term data jockey: “A data jockey deals playfully with data and information in the global communication and media society. He filters information, breaks it down and processes it, and recombines it into new emotions and content. The challenge is programming a line-up that questions the value of entertainment and performance in technical systems too.” The projects that we have filtered down for the electrolobby have the capacity to function as catalysts, to define themselves in the process of exchange, and are milestones or perhaps merely hip, little hacks, aimed to activate our softskills, or, through their links, offer fascinating destinations—like the Free Software Project, a prime example of an approach developed out of an everyday practice on the Internet. It's the attempt to come to grips with the open source phenomenon, and the vision of an open source society through the use of a method directly inspired by the Linux model.

**Leonard:** The basic idea is to cover the free software movement in something similar to the spirit that propels the movement. Writing each chapter in public allows the free software community to criticize it as it is written (an analogue to the peer review process that is at the heart of free software/open source). For years I've been covering free software and benefitting enormously from the instantaneous feedback of thousands of readers—I didn't want to give that up.

**TNC:** Coding a program and writing a book are distinctly different processes. How do you apply open source methodology to the traditional world of paper and cloth?

**Leonard:** Well, like Linus Torvalds, I'm not letting people have access to the “kernel”

whenever they want, by which I mean people can't jump in and start rewriting the main text (which, by the way, is copyrighted by Salon, who is underwriting the whole project.) I've got a vision that I want to put down in words, and I'm going to pursue that vision. So the Free Software Project isn't technically free software, and I am quite open to criticism on that point. I'm seeking some kind of middle ground, on which a superstructure can build around my kernel. The discussion areas, glossaries, resource directories are all areas that encourage participation, and I'm looking for ways to integrate whatever contributions come into the main text. I've been accused of simply attempting to get "free editing" but I'm actually after more than that. I want this to be a shared experience between me and my readers.



lo-ser.org

#### FREE SOFTWARE PROJECT ([www.salon.com/tech/fsp](http://www.salon.com/tech/fsp))

**An ambitious Internet project initiated by Andrew Leonard and Salon.com that's attempting to come to grips with the open source phenomenon and free software through the use of a method directly oriented on the Linux model—a blend of cutting edge online journalism and the Open Source Way of Life, in which peer-to-peer review ensures continual feedback from major protagonists of the digital age.**

**TNC:** How does this online peer review work? What kind of responses have you gotten? How has it changed what you write?

**Leonard:** Reactions are generally favorable, though I've been nicked a few times. People like Richard Stallman and Eric Raymond have pointed out deeper problems and I've worked to accommodate, partially, their points of view.

**TNC:** The Free Software Project is a radical innovation in online-journalism. How has the non-linearity affected your vision of writing?

**Leonard:** I was in Finland recently, and a number of my interview subjects had printed out my first chapter and had it out on the table in front of them. It made the interviewing process much more intimate—they know what my story is about and what I'm trying to do. More intriguingly, though, I've already had to junk my original plan of uploading full chapters once every four weeks or so. That simply isn't using the Web to its full advantage. I'm working on shorter sections, posted more rapidly, and I'm hoping to be able to react to current events in the context of the narrative.

**TNC:** What would a networked open-source society be like? What is an open-source lifestyle?

**Leonard:** I think the possibility that sharing could be the basis of a new kind of capitalism is very exciting. I think participating in a community that cuts across geographic, corporate, and linguistic barriers is thrilling. I think that the culture of the Internet is having a profound effect on the world economy, and I want to be a part of it, if not as a coder, then as a chronicler. An open-source way of life is based on sharing, rather than hoarding—it encourages fruitful collaboration, rather than vicious competition, and it allows the community as a whole, without coercion, to take care of itself.

**TNC:** How will the open-source/free software concept influence the development of a net-inspired digital culture in the near future? How will things shake down?

**Leonard:** Napster, software piracy, all forms of digital entertainment, just about any kind of new media advance is related to the free software movement, for the fundamental unavoidable reason that software is too easy to copy and distribute—and all media has become software. You can either try to ride this wave, like the Linux folks, or you can try to fight it, like the RIAA, and MPAA. We'll see who does best in the end.

### New School Biotech for Kids

Portable communication devices—from MP3 players to cell phones to Gameboys—in their linkage of distance and intimacy exert a tremendous power of attraction, which few electrolobby residents are able to resist. While enterprises like the Pixelporno Project are using these devices to disseminate Internet pulp fiction, for Lo-ser they're the weapon of choice for his hacks. His latest Gameboy project is a biotech primer for kids ...

**Lo-ser:** It's a kind of edutainment series for the Gameboy. It's an adventure/rp sort of game with different arcade warm-up exercises, where you can play an immune system (or shoot bogus IP addresses out of the LAN). The object is to playfully complete tasks, acquire necessary knowledge with the help of a couple of Web pages as reference, and once you've completed the game, you've got more of an understanding of biotechnology and genetic engineering than your parents who've been sitting around reading the tabloids.

#### LO-SER.ORG (lo-ser.org)

The prime time independent media manufacturer and flexexecutive Lo-ser, aka Chris Kummerer, has targeted cheap, portable consumer electronics as a vehicle for communicating within the subculture. His SMS Resistance Gateway makes the wireless network into an efficient tool for coordinating the resistance movement against the Haider Party. And his trendy Gameboy hacks have proved they've got the right stuff to become the new school biotech primer for kids.

**TNC:** During the tumultuous days following the formation of the new coalition government in Austria, you conceived SMS Resistance Gateway.

**Lo-ser:** The idea was to find a way of solving a problem that came up during those first weeks of protest against the Freedom Party/People's Party coalition—finding out where demonstrations were taking place by setting up mobile facilities to enable us to both update and query the meeting place and march direction. Technically, it would be possible via WWW, WAP and SMS to find out the current site of a demonstration, and for a sort of editorial board to update the information on the system via WWW or SMS.

**TNC:** What is so interesting about SMS?

**Lo-ser:** Nothing. We finally decided on SMS since practically everyone either has a cell phone, or has someone next to him who does. And the sound of the phone ringing is hard to hear at demonstrations. So it is very difficult to get an



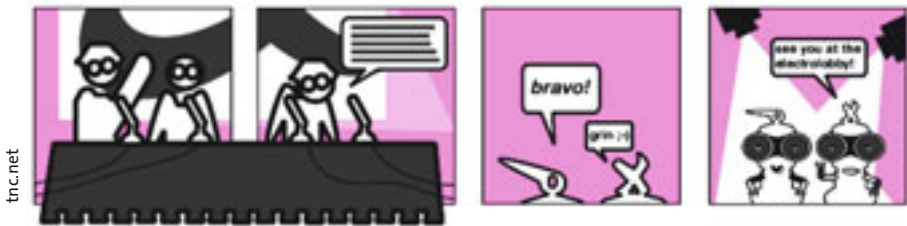
up-to-the-minute location from demonstrators. Right now, I'm toying with the idea of requesting conventional URLs in 160-character bundles via SMS ... we'll see.

**TNC:** What do you consider yourself? A coder, musician, artist, hacker, net-worker?

**Lo-ser:** All of the above more or less, with the possible exception of a coder—my knowledge of programming is rather modest. Hacker sort of depends on how you define it. I have no problem with musician, artist, hacker, smoker, lo(-)ser etc. Gameboy Pocket-noise, another of my projects, consists of different versions and components. There's a sort of gallery variant, which provides considerable excitement in such an unclear user interface. For somewhat more experimental "shock shows," there's a program that makes it possible to directly manipulate any particular register of the Gameboy sound chip. And for the real hipsters among us, there's also a kind of sequencer. So, it functions in an artistic context, it can pretty much be said to work as a hack, and it actually does have a certain (pop) musical aspect to it. So what do you consider me?

**TNC:** We like "prime time independent media manufacturer" just fine, but "cross media flexexecutive" or "SMS bomberman" work also ;-) And to really lay it out: someone who takes a pseudo-scientific approach to dealing with technical systems, hacks consumer electronics, develops software, produces online gadgets and is a creative node in a network.

**Lo-ser:** Sure, I can deal with that ;)



### Initial Public Opening

Media conference, networked dayclubbing, private party, and more ... An intoxicating mix of personalities and information, food and sound, and hacks and chats, providing a convivial ambience for an informal get together of electrolobby residents with the public on the first day of the festival. The electrolobby Initial Public Opening launches a series of project-related game competitions, remix contests, online sitcoms and web jams, and delivers a sneak preview of the daily program modules featured in the electrolobby showroom. The Initial Public Opening is built on top of our extensive experience in designing innovative events (see the Ars Electronica 1997 catalog, pp. 396–409 on TNC Network's net-inspired projects) growing out of the flowering of the many species of digital culture. These spectacles draw sustenance from a variety of sources, but especially fertile is the hot house environment where clubculture and netculture converge. This is also characteristic of BoomBox—a project in which the computer constantly oscillates between its functions as Internet terminal, live encoder, and sound system.

**BOOMBOX:** We are so bored with people sitting in front of machines. Our motto is "inside out." Get down and boogie. At the electrolobby we take you into a voyage round the fiberworld to hear and see what's happening out there. We will kick the soundbytes out of the Box: Micromusic, Stocktown, Dublab are some of the guests, and there will be more ... We are not bound to any specific technology, we are addicted to dope beats. Tomorrow BoomBox will be on your phone, on your watch, in your head.

**TNC:** Hip Hop is such a strong influence on BoomBox. What about the impact of the Net?

**BOOMBOX:** Like a hub, BoomBox connects audio, video and people: Turntablists in Hawaii, Dub freaks in Japan, or B boys and girls in Stockholm. BoomBox is like a big audio/video hub for urban culture. Like the original boomboxes, you take the sound with you and blast it out when you want, where you want. Hip Hop has pioneered a network spirit throughout the world. A global culture, the music and the arts, combined with strong local roots, which is transforming world society. This permeates BoomBox: an experimental platform free of commercial pressure. The know-how we gather—technical, legal and professional—is reinjected into the corporate projects our company, Nomad Online Agents, is initiating, and with the profits we finance BoomBox. The circle is closed. The skills you gather on the street will be used to make a business, whose profits will be reinvested in the streets where it started, seeding new, innovative projects. That's the net spirit: sharing know-how, content, skills and money. It's important to share experience and resources!

#### **BOOMBOX (www.boombox.net)**

The BoomBox label brings together a collective of networkers, designers, promoters, DJs, VJs and food jockeys, and is a prime example of the reciprocal relationship between club culture and Internet culture. The pioneering streaming media venture was founded by Laurence Desarzens and Raoul Cannemeijer, and is tied in with major players in the progressive electronic music and visual media scenes.

*In collaboration with Mouthwatering, Micromusic, Büro Destruct, Stocktown, Dublab and others.*

**TNC:** BoomBox@electrolobby brings together designers, illustrators, coders, DJs, VJs, and even food jockeys.

**BOOMBOX:** Mouthwatering's monthly clubnight was once jokingly called an audiovisual barbeque, and in a way this stuck. Mouthwatering means music, visuals and food in ever changing sequence, and combination of flavors, but always with the same intensity and freshness. Büro Destruct contributes to this collective on a visual level. Büro Destruct are font pimps, funky typocracks, wicked illustrators, design hustlers with style. As BoomBox.net we are injecting the net feed in the process, playing with streaming media as an element in the show, and redefining interfaces. It's about the exchange between real and virtual space, clubbing in another dimension, analog and digital transfer.

#### **Networked Showroom— Islands in the Data Stream**

During the days and nights following the Initial Public Opening, electrolobby will become an archipelago of net-inspired lifestyle. A marketplace of opinions, projects, branded cultural commodities and their pirated bootlegs—a networked showroom where ideas are on display and communication is the coin. A venue where all walks of the digital life can gather and regroup, swap stories, and partake in a wide variety of diversions. Genetic researchers meet



chman.com

experimental entertainers, food jockeys mingle with MP3 mixers, game designers kibbutz with concept engineers ... As the daily program modules are being produced in the electrolobby studio, ad hoc networking will be happening in the bustling halls and shadowy booths, setting the stage for future ventures.

The electrolobby setting provides an operational latitude for projects springing up over the course of the entire Festival—from the Free Software Project to Memepool and Icontown to Pixelporno and Sissy Fight 2000. And featured will be a project put on by a collective of interface designers, who will be given 36 hours to scrounge up samples, cuts, and scratches out of the mediasphere, process them through the designer meat grinder, and program the ultimate Next Sex portal.



**CHMAN:** For cHmAn, the Web jam is both an artistic challenge and a moment of interpersonal exchange centered on a multimedia event; but sometimes it's also a practical demonstration for an uninitiated public that puts the spectacular side of the Internet on display. The principles: content is created spontaneously depending on the atmosphere of the moment; the event is broadcast directly over the Internet; the whole production combines elements taken from the context and from the environment, and is strictly non-commercially oriented; and music assumes an important place in the mix.

**TNC:** Like in BoomBox' work, the net plays an important role in your projects.

**CHMAN:** The original spirit of the Internet gets expressed in the communitarian aspect of the cHmAn team: voluntary participation, mutual help, freedom of opinion—a whole bundle of values that constitute a true alternative ideology, that escape control by a national or economic power. A modern utopia ;)

**TNC:** The theme of one of your previous Web jams (WebDAYsigner, performed during the "Festival International du Film de l'Internet" in Lille, France), was e-commerce.

**YENZ:** For me, the increasing commercialization of the Internet is simply a fact of life—it happens. The thing that interests me about it is the availability of distribution channels that don't necessarily require a large-scale marketing campaign. I think that e-commerce will be able to open up paths for new and unusual products.

**CHMAN:** Even though the point was not to demonize or condemn from the very outset the direction in which this New Economy is going, the choice of the topic "e-commerce" was nevertheless meant to be taken as a bit of a provocation ... The start-ups that are now springing up in the e-commerce sector are trapped in a vicious circle of out-doing each other, continually attracting new investors and launching ad campaigns. In order to appeal to the taste of the public, they are submitting to a model that has purportedly proven itself; but in doing so they're neglecting the originality of their content and design. Without going into more detail about the risk of increasing uniformity that threatens that which is quintessentially unique about the Internet, one notices an increasingly stark contrast between the cleverly designed communication tools that these advertising people have at their disposal and the reductionistic application of them, which is essentially limited to spying on the user by means of cookies ... Here, a subtler, more personalized form of advertising certainly would be within the realm of possibilities, and the major chains most assuredly could come up

with more innovative forms of presentation than simply going with conventional catalogs. As can be seen from the WebDAYsigner website, the interpretations and suggestions with regard to this topic go much further ...

**NEXT SEX WEB JAM (www.chman.com)**

A crack team of international designers (cHmAn, and others) has just 36 hours and a mission: programming the ultimate Next Sex web portal. In a setting whose spontaneity recalls hacker fests and Hip Hop jams, a platform takes shape for outings deep into the abyss

of biotechnological reproductive fantasies.

*With Tony Derbomez, Stefan Logier, Gauthier Malou, Sebastien Kochmann, Olivier Janin, and others. In association with the Japanese online magazine Shift (www.shift.jp.org)*



chman.com

**TNC:** You have worked with numerous designers from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Do you still perceive differences (other than the location of z and y on the keyboard) as cultural references are getting more universal?

**YENZ:** For me, there are definitely very stark contrasts between cultures, as far as different countries' modes of approaching the Internet are concerned. In Italian Web design, there's much less emphasis placed on visuals. It seems to me as if all they're ever interested in here is that it's done fast and doesn't cost much. That's why I really appreciate the French, because they use the Internet to tell stories as well as to transmit cultural values. And they do it with a much a more creative flair in utilizing new technologies. But things are also happening in Germany, which is why I'm now saying "ciao, Italia" and moving to Berlin. German touch, French touch, Italian touch ... What's important for me is blazing new trails in Web design and enabling more direct exchange to occur. For me, the Internet is a giant stage that isn't attached to a particular point in physical space. When you do something cool, it simply has to be world-class—a nearly impossible task, but an exciting challenge.

**CHMAN:** It was amazing how fast the designers came together as a team to create a collective work. They're all working with the same tools and media, and can all summon up experience having to do with the Internet. On a technical level, there were no particular problems—other than difficulties with the keyboards. As far as the concept is concerned—there as well, there were no difficulties in coming to an understanding. But with the organization of the work, a few of the American designers couldn't keep from pointing out certain differences ... they made fun of the French who kept getting involved in long discussions, which is why they weren't getting on with the work as fast ...

**TNC:** :)

### Dirty Ideas with Charm

Next Sex in the Internet: electrolobby presents projects by the protagonists of digital culture who display a high degree of media literacy and who have a sensibility for getting beyond scientific gravity and engaging in cultural irony, with an irreverent take on this year's Festival theme. In addition to cHmAn's Next Sex Web Jam, there is a collection of projects under the title of Pixelporno.

**PIXELPORNO:** The Pixelporno concept is: dirty ideas with charm. The “mot d’ordre” to the artists is to let their imagination run wild within those parameters. Pixelporno will be a platform for people to express that sentiment, in online-specific ways. Passion, voyeurism, lust, desire, and kinkiness are some of topics you will find here, with particular attention to today’s problematics: communication, immateriality, confusion, lies, sex changes, manipulation, etc ...

**TNC:** One of your projects is a net-based pulp fiction featuring the true pop stars of the 21st century—genes, memes & bytes—in full action ...

**PIXELPORNO:** Yes. But don’t forget the pop stars of all the previous centuries: dialogue, characters and plotting. Don’t get us wrong—it’s great to do a story on the net, with flash animations, scanned primary documents and a soundtrack, plus whatever else. But merely being “cyber” isn’t enough to make something cool anymore (thank god). You must use the net to make a good story even more vibrant, not use technology to mask lack of imagination.

#### PIXELPORNO ([www.pixelporno.com](http://www.pixelporno.com))

Pixelporno is an ensemble of projects centered on voyeuristic network technology, sex confusion, and the nagging problem of designer babies. The centerpiece is a work of Internet pulp fiction featuring the true pop stars of the 21st century in full effect: genes, memes & bytes. Extrapolating on the concept “Dirty Ideas With Charm,” email, the Web and SMS will be used to generate a rather unique Festival documentation. *With Stylo, Steeph1, Wale, Lopetz, and others*

**TNC:** This pulp fiction could be seen as another kind of documentation of the festival.

**PIXELPORNO:** The pulp fiction we’re doing for electrolobby will start in August with a few episodes posted on the web and sent via email, setting up characters and a storyline. During the festival itself, the story will hit full speed, meshing with the events and issues of Ars Electronica. It’s hard to predict ahead of time what we’ll include. But I can imagine, say, human DNA as a speculative stock or designer babies fitting right in. So it’s not any systematic documentation, but rather a story set against the physical and intellectual background of the festival. Sort of like a historical romance novel, but with more believable characters, sharper dialogue and, we hope, more interesting bodice-ripping.

**TNC:** What platforms will the pulp fiction use?

**PIXELPORNO:** The web, naturally, will be its primary platform, because that’s where we can do the most complex combinations of text and imagery. But we’ll also be playing with simpler means of distribution, like SMS and email, to make the story permeate its audience’s lives even more. Obviously, to get the full story people will have to register and tell us how to reach them. Please do it, folks. We promise not to be boring. And, hell, if you hate it you can always unsubscribe.



tnc.net

### “Augmented Sex” in the Mainstream Family Film

Besides its residents, the electrolobby will also be receiving a series of special guests. Like Birgit Richard, who, prior to the Festival, went to the movies and saw the mainstream family film “Bicentennial Man” by Chris Columbus ([www.bicentennialman.com](http://www.bicentennialman.com)). A male housekeeping robot comes into a family and, over the course of three generations, slowly evolves into a human being and ultimately falls in love with the granddaughter of his since-deceased owner.

**RICHARD:** In this film, a reversal of the phantasm takes place of the bachelor machine that has been treated frequently in the history of film—the inversion of the motif of the female automaton. The love story involving a male robot and a female representative of the human species has been inserted by the screenwriters. It does not come from the novel on which the film was based, Isaac Asimov’s “Positronic Man.” The film is consciously patterned after a classic Hollywood love story in order to fully



etoyTANK

play out the theme of mutual love between human and machine. The traditional representations of roles and genders remain stabilizing factors in the background. In order to depict the shocking story of the forms of sexuality practiced between human and machine, and to counteract perverse fantasies about the coupling of a woman and a machine, the robot NDR 114 is given a human design over the course of the film.

**TNC:** “Some robots exist only to provide pleasure,” according to the Columbia Tristar website.

**RICHARD:** In this film, the robot symbolizes the desire to be able to enjoy an active, potent sex life at an advanced age. The high-tech-enhanced, immortal and ageless robot has lived through several human generations before falling in love with the granddaughter, Portia. Here, a model of “augmented sex” is played out, and which is portrayed as fulfilling above all for the male robot.

**TNC:** At a certain point, the question of reproduction comes up in the film.

**RICHARD:** The android does not request—as was the case in Frankenstein, for example—the creation of an artificial being of the same type, which is refused him precisely because of the possibility of reproduction and the danger of generating a new species besides man. Rather, he turns directly to human beings, adapts to them, and finds a match among them. He has a mixed machine and human biography, moves into his own house, travels, and is granted permission to marry Portia. But there are no offspring to insure the ongoing existence of the experiment. Indeed, the process of human reproduction is explained to Andrew, but he does not succeed in doing it. The attempt to depict reproduction would violate a taboo. The only possible reproduction via biotechnology or genetic engineering would be a gen-erational sequence of hybrid beings, which would thus imply their continuity and eternity. Thus, the film also makes a statement against genetic engineering and human fantasies of eternal life.

## Experimental Entertainment—Hype out the Hype!

The Toywar Campaign orchestrated with such virtuosity by etoy has been waged within the context of an information economy which increasingly turns on instant info, feedback, rumor, and trends. The winner is the one who catches the right trend and gives it the best spin. electrolobby Rating: Milestone.

**agent.NASDAQ:** The campaign's loudly proclaimed objective of driving eToys' stock price down to zero is—like the Toywar platform and the virtual sit-in—a part of the art of exaggeration with which it was waged. The opponent, who, of course, was only out to maintain its Web address, was overwhelmed with existence-threatening extremist tactics, to which its modest logic could come up with no appropriate response. On the other hand, the falling stock price gave the campaign a powerful impetus because the activists interpreted the plunge as their own doing. Behind this bold stock exchange strategy was a plan calculated with

cool logic. The averages were at their all-time highs; there was certainly not much further to go on the upside. The campaign itself could cause investors to write options to protect their profits in case of a decline, which would in turn exacerbate the downturn. And that's precisely what happened.

**etoy.GRAMAZIO:** Within 2 months, the eToys Inc. stock (NASDAQ: ETYS) dropped from \$67, on the day the battle started, to \$15, on the day eToys Inc. finally dropped the case. TOYWAR was the most expensive performance in art history—more than \$6 billion in damages! A glorious victory for the etoy.CORPORATION which compensated activists with etoy.SHARES. And in March 2000 hundreds of brave TOY.soldiers transformed into etoy.CO-OWNERS with voting rights.

**TNC:** With the etoy.SHARES, you had launched a new participation model even before Toywar broke out. Can you give us some details about the etoy.BUSINESSPLAN?

**etoy.ZAI:** The etoy.CORPORATION will never sell products. etoy sells itself; all available etoy.SHARE-UNITS on the market equal 100% of the etoy.BRAND-VALUE and represent the etoy.GESAMTKUNSTWERK (total shares outstanding: 640,000 etoy.SHARE-UNITS). etoy.SHARE-CERTIFICATES and etoy.SHARE-CARDS guarantee the strict limitation of etoy.SHARES and certify ownership. The art collector becomes an investor and co-owner of an art corporation that generates and increases cultural value.

**etoy.GRAMAZIO:** All etoy.PRODUCTIONS since 1998, like the etoy.CARGO-TANK-CONSTRUCTION, were financed by etoy.SHAREHOLDERS who purchased parts of the etoy.CORPORATION. It was exciting to see how strong the market trust grew during the nasty battle. While lots of old fashioned net.artists suggested to "take eToys' money and donate 50% for a better world" ("don't fight—losing sets a bad example for the next generation"), venture capitalists, activists and avantgarde art collectors recognized the value of the high-risk venture. These people knew that if etoy wins, the impact and the whole story is more valuable than \$ 500,000.



etoy.SHAREHOLDER: dj spooky

That's why they invested more than \$ 50,000 in cash to pay for lawyers, PR and infrastructure and thousands of dollars in man hours during the 3 month campaign. The investors became part of an operation that blurred the boundaries between ART, BRANDING, FINANCIAL INVESTMENT and PUNK. The etoy.CONCEPT of moving away from the physical art object into the field of participation worked very well. etoy was able to redefine the standards again. And the etoy.SHARES became part of ART HISTORY ... nobody invests to lose money!

**TNC:** etoy was charged by eToys not only with "terrorist activity" and "pornographic content" but also with "illegal stock market operation."

**etoy.ZAI:** etoy, specializing in and awarded for surreal incubations, cultural viruses and impact management, decided to strike back and turned the case into a toy harbor of e-commerce: 1,798 activists, artists, lawyers, celebrities and journalists were selected and recruited between November 1999 and February 2000 to establish a playful toy army. TOYWAR worked like a swarm of bees. Hundreds of well-informed people and media experts contested the aggressor on every level (filing counter court cases, infiltrating customer service, PR departments, the press, investor news groups and also on the level of the Federal Trade Commission, etc.). More than 300 articles (New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Le Monde, CNN) reported the story and 250 resistance sites and net-shelters were established.

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**etoy** ([www.toywar.com](http://www.toywar.com), [www.etoys.com](http://www.etoys.com))

The toy harbor of e-commerce orchestrated by etoy in its Toywar against eToys, has led to the successful collaboration of some of the most important factions which have emerged on the Internet during the 90s. etoy establishes bridges between business culture and consumer culture, between power and subversion, beyond good and evil, and shows that experimental entertainment can be not only irreverent and witty, but it also represents a solid investment for speculators.

*With etoy.ZAI (CEO), etoy.GRAMAZIO (President), agent.NASDAQ aka Reinhold Grether.*

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**TNC:** In looking for a term to describe etoy's activities, one that popped up was "experimental entertainment." What's interesting, in this context, was the question posed by a perplexed user on just how Toywar was meant to be played. To what extent was this seeming unplayability intentional?

**Agent.NASDAQ:** Where is a conflict played out? In the head of the opponent. Everything that contributes to infiltrating, occupying and putting stress on the imagination of the opponent—upsetting in whatever way possible its self-assurance, rationality, and composure and forcing it into a position of feeling anxious, getting the creeps, and losing control—indicates an increase in the power to act decisively, and shifts the balance of power in favor of one's own superiority. The eToys management was confronted by such a plethora of incompatible logics that its imagination was driven to distraction and it lost more and more time waging this conflict. The Toywar platform was optimal in this respect. Over the course of a few days, a giant line of avatar warriors formed, from which you could certainly see that they were capable of doing something but you couldn't tell what. Then they spread out onto 12 worldwide battlefields, where they came upon weapons that they employed and developed further. There were three Toywar warriors for each eToys employee. What was all this supposed to lead to? Toywar's functional task was to conduct positional warfare, which proved itself in magnificent fashion. We

simply do not know what it would have accomplished had it assumed the offensive. To this extent, the unplayability of Toywar is a myth. Whoever speaks of unplayability is basically referring to etoy's refusal to make the grand sacrifice of a traditional political scenario. Toywar was the virtual portrayal of the conflict in all its absurdity and surreality.

**TNC:** In the final analysis, what was really at stake in this conflict?

**agent.NASDAQ:** First, a shift of the Internet code in the direction of flat virtuality. The addresses of e-commerce would have precedence over the address domain of the Internet. They would have arrayed any number of semantic fields around their company and brought all the Internet addresses lying within them under their subjugation. The Internet would have been brought into line with e-commerce, and the complex logics of personal, alternative, artistic, political and social networking, cultural formation, and globalization that didn't fit into neat boxes would have been marginalized with no prospect of intervening in the symbolic reproduction process of global society and would thus be deprived of the option of world cultural capital formation.

**TNC:** What conclusions can be drawn from this Toywar experience? To what extent can the strategies that were employed in Toywar also be used in other contexts? What about Leonardo?

**agent.NASDAQ:** The campaign's fundamental concept was "to hype out the hype." An overblown website was made to burst by an even more overblown campaign. And now everybody knows that it worked. Nevertheless, there's no reason to get all fired up. Mobilizations on such a scale are rare, and in many cases the opposition will be able to prevail by choosing a more intelligent strategy. The case of Leonardo is quite a different matter. Practically no element of the etoy campaign can be deployed there.

(see also: Reinhold Grether:

"How the etoy campaign was won,"

<http://www.heise.de/tp/english/inhalt/te/5843/1.html>)



etoy.TOYWAR..soldier

### My Name Is Leonardo: Sue Me

**LEONARDO:** Our case appears to differ significantly from the etoy/eToys case and the confrontations surrounding domain names, since it primarily has to do with charges of trademark piracy. Our case is basically a war having to do with the development of the Internet, the net.economy, and its effects not only us but rather the whole of the artistic and not-for-profit community. Here we have a commercial firm attempting to secure for itself the exclusive rights to a word that is to be found in every dictionary. Imagine, for example, if amazon.com would try to prevent everyone else from using the expression "Amazon" in the Internet! This is exactly what our case is all about. In physical space, companies and organizations can use the same names as long as they are operating in different fields. The lawsuit that Transasia has filed against us seeks to establish that this right does not apply to the Internet. While we argue that the Internet is simply another domain, albeit a semantic one, with different regions and fields.

**TNC:** Is the Leonardo case a clash of two cultures?

sissyfight.com



**LEONARDO:** If a net.economy is able to develop now, then this is due to the fact that the Internet, the Web, exists! Those who invented it, who developed the tools, the realm, the modes of communication, are scientists and artists who have always worked in a non-commercial, not-for-profit environment. Going about things in ways such as those pursued in this case negates everything that the “aborigines” of the Internet created and makes a joke out of it. Sudden-

ly, the colonialists are showing up and the natives no longer have the right of free expression. I mean, they don't even have the right to exist unless they acquiesce to the conditions imposed by the conquerors. The Internet was originally based upon a culture of sharing, exchange, and mutual respect, upon rights that were not strictly established but rather emerged through consensus. Everything possible is being done to push forward the development of a commercial economy in the Internet because the potential rewards appear to be so attractive. Those who succeed in laying claim to the best spots can assure getting the biggest piece of the pie—the gold rush is an analogy that actually applies in this context. Companies do not cultivate an Internet culture—that doesn't interest them in the least. They transfer the brutal, aggressive methods of the physical world into cyberspace without understanding—or without wanting to understand—that for this domain other rules will have to be invented. Everything that stands in the way of economic conquest is being swept aside. In such an encounter, something like Leonardo is a mere fly that can be swatted without having to ask any questions. And what makes it even easier is that in the physical world we're nothing but a small, not-for-profit cultural association, even though, in reality, we're integrated within an international network that can be mobilized within a matter of a few hours.

**LEONARDO** (<http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-journals/Leonardo/>)

Leonardo, an artistic and scientific network that has existed for over 30 years (and whose activities include publishing an academic magazine put out by MIT), has been slapped with a lawsuit seeking over \$1 million in damages by a French financial firm (Transasia) claiming violation of its trademark rights. In contrast to the etoy/eToys dispute, this case doesn't have to do with a domain name, but rather with a general ban on using the name Leonardo in a publication or on a website. Here as well, the community has mobilized—though not by deploying a brand of Internet actionism à la Toywar.

**TNC:** What's your defense? What kind of community support are you getting?

**LEONARDO:** From the very first press release, both the community surrounding Leonardo as well as the Internet at large spontaneously offered to help. It has always been a great concern of ours to remain within the purview of legality in all of our undertakings. Actions that we've initiated include making information available at the website of Leonardo On Line and starting a petition drive in the Leonardo community. A support committee under the leadership of artist Karen O'Rourke is collecting expressions of support. There's also been support from

RTMark and IRIS (*Imaginons un Internet Solidaire*, <http://www.iris.sgdg.org/actions/leonardo>), who have composed a petition, a copy of which is mailed to the responsible individuals at Transasia each time there's a new signature. There's the "banner of support" contest organized by Miklos Legrady (<http://www.c3.hu/~itmiklos/leonardo/nav.html>), a Web ring, and a competition to reference those websites in the search engines that contain the word "Leonardo," as well as cloning the website of Leonardo Finance.

**TNC:** You have also received some rather surprising support ...

**LEONARDO:** We sure have. A sheep breeder in the US decided to name a newborn lamb Leonardo and to report about the case on his website ([www.rockhouse-farm.com/rockleon.htm](http://www.rockhouse-farm.com/rockleon.htm)). The lawsuit is pending at the moment (summer 2000). The problem that confronts us now is the duration of the conflict and the extent of the actions that we must undertake. On one hand, it seems impossible to maintain this high level of intensity over the long term among the denizens of the Internet and the Leonardo community. On the other hand, this can be totally counterproductive, and we don't plan on sending daily emails to Transasia. Therefore, we have to be inventive and constantly come up with new actions.

### Rules, what Rules?

A somewhat unorthodox test environment for the brave new strategic experiments and alliances mentioned earlier is provided by the online multiuser game Sissy Fight 2000. Do Sissy Fighters play with or against each other? What is the prime requisite—cooperation or competition? Or both?

**ZIMMERMAN:** Very good question. One way to look at games is that they are models of conflict. Usually, the conflicts that games model are military (chess, Quake) or economic (poker, Sim City). SissyFight 2000 is a reflection of my interest in modeling social and cultural conflict. Now while it is true that games are inherently about conflict and competition, they are also inherently about cooperation. The players of a game all agree to play with each other and to follow the rules of the game. Successful games create productive conflict. We have designed SissyFight so that players have to work with each other and against each other simultaneously. You can't really do very much on your own in the game: you need the help of other players to eliminate your opponents. On the other hand, you can't really trust the other players, because they might turn on you at any time. Yet if you can make a friend in the game, the two of you can win together, because two girls together can win the game. In general, we have tried to construct a system that results in

perverse and unexpected social relationships.

**TNC:** Why is Sissy Fight set in such a sinister, bizarre childhood world?

**ZIMMERMAN:** The content and gameplay of SissyFight for me are driven by a desire to innovate in the field of gaming. I also have an interest in the violence and perver-



sity of children's play. There are many ways to frame play, and contemporary society tends to think of play as a children's activity that makes kids into better citizens of the state by repressing their sexual and violent tendencies and educating them socially, cognitively, and morally. However, there are other models for play as well: I like to think of play as mischief, transgression, or subversion. I think this comes through in *SiSSYFiGHT*.

**TNC:** Is *Sissy Fight 2000* about gender surfing, or is it a unisex game?

**ZIMMERMAN:** I like the fact that *SiSSYFiGHT 2000* genders all of the players female, in contrast to most digital games, in which the player is gendered male. In any case, the ugly, bratty little girls of *SiSSYFiGHT* are a far cry from the oversexualized Lara Crofts of the game industry. However, gender does play a role in the gameplay—often when girls are “outed” as boys, other players will wipe them out of a game. The avatar creation tools that we have created for the game also allow for the selection of a skin tone for the game—and occasionally racial politics as well can erupt in a game. As far as I am concerned, all of this is fuel for creating meaningful game conflict among players.

**TNC:** How did the net influence the concept and design of *Sissy Fight*?

**ZIMMERMAN:** Design is problem-solving, and technology is one of the parameters that defines a game design problem. *SiSSYFiGHT* capitalized on the net's capacity for communication to deliver a game in which the purely strategic elements cannot ultimately be distinguished from the social strategy, because the two are so intertwined. We have activated chat by applying social gameplay. In addition to the experience of each individual game, we have also used the net to create a strong community around the game.

**TNC:** And quite successfully ...

**ZIMMERMAN:** Yes. We have seen an unbelievable community rise up around the game. There are several fan sites, and the biggest is *sissyfightnews.com*. The site includes in-depth strategic analyses, gossip columns, fan art, and extended interviews with top players. The interviews actually take place inside the game, and the *sissyfightnews* reporters take screen grabs of the avatars' conversations, publishing them on the site in comic-book form.

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#### **SiSSY FIGHT 2000 ([www.sissyfight.com](http://www.sissyfight.com))**

*Sissy Fight 2000* is an online multiuser game that mixes competition and cooperation, and in an enigmatic and highly entertaining way faces the problem of coming up with promising strategies in the age of evolutionary biology. Eric Zimmerman, designer of the game for *Word.com* and organizer of *RE:PLAY*, a conference on game culture, will be on hand in a *Sissy Fight* contest running over the course of several days and during which he will reveal the tactics with which players can most rapidly attain total social dominance.

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**TNC:** *Sissy Fight* draws on a variety of aesthetic references, including Japanese Anime, early 16 bit console games, and outsider artist Henry Darger's appropriations of turn-of-the-century little girls.

**ZIMMERMAN:** I am interested in making the field of games a more sophisticated pop cultural medium—not necessarily in a “high art” way, but in the way that electronic music, for example, is a sophisticated and vibrant form of cultural production.

**TNC:** You are the director of *RE:PLAY*, a multi-part event that brings together the theorists and practitioners of the gaming world to talk about the design and culture of gaming.

**ZIMMERMAN:** Unlike other design fields like architecture and graphic design, game design lacks a critical discourse that bridges theory and practice to help designers better understand games as cultural objects and to help critics and scholars better understand how developers conceptualize the creation of their games. On the academic side, too much writing about games takes place “over the shoulder” of game players. On the industry side, the medium as a whole is culturally stunted. RE:PLAY is intended to address all of these challenges.

### Human Genome goes Napster



One of the central concerns that we have pursued with TNC Network since its inception in 1995 has been to generate settings in which the Internet is used to its maximal potential as a catalyst acting upon unconventional influences to transcend discrete disciplines. The concept—and, of course, the name—of electrolobby has been designed correspondingly. An instructive example of such influences is the project

by Lincoln Stein, who works as a bioinformatics specialist on the Human Genome Project. He too is interested in Napster, Gnutella and Freenet ...

**STEIN:** The Genome project is a vast distributed research project in which tens of thousands of individual research labs take part. Each lab generates biological assertions called “annotations” that provide clues to the structure and function of the 100,000 or so genes that make up the roughly 3,000,000,000 base pairs of human DNA. Unfortunately the annotations the labs generate feed into a handful of centralized databases, and these are feeling scalability strains. Much of the data is not published electronically because there is no outlet for it. It winds up in paper journals, and is, for all intents and purposes, lost to electronic search and retrieval. I am interested in Napster’s peer-to-peer architecture because it seems to offer a way of offloading some of the burden of this information transfer onto a distributed network.

**TNC:** And then the potential of Gnutella or Freenet would seem to be even greater for your work.

**STEIN:** Well, Napster still relies on a central directory service, causing a choke point. Gnutella and Freenet both offer a way of distributing the directory information across many machines. The disadvantage of all three, Napster, Gnutella, and Freenet, is that they have given little thought to indexing the meta data associated with the information. Genomic data is highly structured yet highly self-similar. Ad-hoc approaches such as title searches and document “keys” are inappropriate for genomic data. Hence it’s the idea of a distributed information system that I find intriguing, and not the specific implementations.

#### DISTRIBUTED ANNOTATION SYSTEM

(<http://stein.cshl.org/das>, <http://www.wormbase.org>)

Lincoln Stein, a bioinformatics specialist who is working on the Human Genome Project, has taken the controversial Napster software (as well as its follow-up products Gnutella and Freenet) as a point of departure to develop a program for the publication of genome data, the Distributed Annotation System. The system currently contains 50,000 human genes, 19,000 worm genes and 40,000 corn mutants. This is a fine example of the role of the Internet acting as a catalyst to create unconventional alliances.

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**TNC:** You've already created your own software based on the Napster/Gnutella technology, called "Distributed annotation system."

**STEIN:** Yes. It provides a way of publishing genomic data from multiple servers, searching over the data, and integrating the data into a single graphical or text-based view. Although it is not completely peer-to-peer, it uses an unconventional single client/multiple server architecture. We have used it to publish 100,000 nucleotide variants in the human genome, 50,000 human genes, 19,000 worm genes, and 40,000 mutants in maize (corn). So far the system seems to be holding out pretty well, but we'll see how it does when it has to hold the entire human genome.

**TNC:** Napster/Gnutella/Freenet are quite controversial, because they allow for a many-to-many architecture that is almost impossible to control. What are the implications for an endeavor like the Human Genome Project?

**STEIN:** For scientific data ownership, accountability, and integrity are absolute requirements. In a distributed genome annotation project, each assertion would have to be signed and dated using a public key or similar mechanism.

#### The Sherpas of the Internet

One result of commercial portalizing of the Web is uniformity and standardization—not only of the form of the graphical interfaces but of the content offered as well. Memepool, initiated by Joshua Schachter, lays claim to making the guarantee of diversity the central aspect of a Web-specific information technology.

**SCHACHTER:** We're the Sherpas of the Internet. We know how to find specific destinations that you didn't even know you wanted to go to yet. Remember that one definition of an "idiot" is someone who goes to an encyclopedia to look up a subject, and having read the entry on that subject, puts it away.

**TNC:** Why rely on humans to collect and organize information, when there are so many powerful search-tools out there?

**SCHACHTER:** Memepool's goal isn't to be a search engine. Instead, it wants to expose its readership to something new and interesting every day. A search engine, on the other hand, is intended to directly take you to some website based on a set of search terms. It chooses which links to present first by some scoring method which hardly ever correlates with "interesting-ness" at all. Furthermore, there are almost no pure search engines anymore—they all want to sell you something, perhaps related to your search but probably only tangentially so. I mean, look at Yahoo—who knows if they even update their links anymore? They have a thousand businesses to run.

**TNC:** A project like Memepool, then, becomes a much more elegant way to explore the Net outside the beaten tracks of the corporate world.

**SCHACHTER:** It's a matter of evolution. Corporations have found an environment to which to adapt, and as the web gets bigger, more of it is dominated by this sort of content. These "beaten tracks" are rapidly becoming sixteen-lane superhighways which are surrounded by mini-malls, franchise restaurants, and billboards. Because the community has been crowded out by financial interests, the public at large has become the other end of a transaction and not a participant in a conversation that it once was.



memepool.com

**TNC:** Yet there are some signs indicating that this situation may evolve.

**SCHACHTER:** Currently, the big change that is overtaking everything is the personification and personalization of every site—community to enhance stickiness. I think we will begin to see the reverse occur—communities generating websites that genuinely serve their interest, with commerce as a secondary goal, as opposed to the current model in which some company constructs a community in order to advertise to them and sell them things. I think that with the rise of wireless technology, we will begin to see computers as repositories of information in a connected web, going from tools to full endpoints and mediators of communication. As we see the rise of cellular phones providing the technological equivalent of mental telepathy—talk to anyone, anywhere anytime, we will see information handled by computers as another participant in this conversation.

**TNC:** Memepool is a collaborative, distributed filtering tool. It is updated by approved contributors. Who are these people? How are they chosen?

**SCHACHTER:** There are currently approximately one hundred contributors of varying levels of activity. The contributors are a hugely varied lot—writers, lawyers, programmers, journalists, housewives, sex workers, and so on. Because I generally don't solicit and instead let them come and apply, it is a fairly self-selecting group.

#### MEMEPOOL ([www.memepool.com](http://www.memepool.com))

As a refreshing niche strategy in light of the commercial portalizing and uniformity of the Web, a primordial form of online publishing—Weblogging—is undergoing an astounding revival. Memepool, initiated by Joshua Schachter, is one of the most prominent examples of this new generation of collaborative data filtering in which the guarantee of diversity has become a central aspect of a Web-specific information ecology.

**TNC:** Is there something like a Memepool-effect, boosting the traffic to sites that appear on your pages?

**SCHACHTER:** That sounds more like the Slashdot effect. The memepool effect is quite a bit different. Sometimes after we link to something, especially something racy or otherwise taboo, the administrators of said site notice the influx of traffic and yank the site. So similarly, the site gets killed, but from within (the administration) rather than from without (the traffic.)

**TNC:** Many journalists working for offline mainstream media accuse sites like Memepool of simply collecting links. At the same time, many of them make a good

living from picking up links provided by you, and writing about them—without crediting the source where they found them.

**SCHACHTER:** Like any highly propagated piece of information, good URLs travel by any number of vectors. Memepool is both a destination and a source, and because people will tend to climb the landscape to find the earliest sources of information, we both have access to links earlier and distribute them earlier. Sometimes when I see other sites only copy memepool, it makes me sad, but I guess with a name like “memepool” and all that implies, I can’t really complain too much about it. Dawkins’ memepool is every idea that is possibly transmissible and holds mindshare. Ours is the interesting subset of memes that can be succinctly represented in the form of a URL.

## Donation-Ware

Domain names, trademarks, logos, and icons are the sacred cows in attracting eyeballs and achieving immediate recognition in the top-level domain of life. For over four years, pixel addicts from all over the world have been working on a network project all about icons. What’s going on?

**BE:** To put it in a nutshell, the point is to build a city. And actually, that’s about it. ;-) Everything else arises from the process of communication having to do with the house, the lot, the building regulations, the neighbors, etc.

**TNC:** During the mid-’90s, digital cities were popping up throughout (what was then called) cyberspace, but today they are as scarce as Internet cafes. But Icontown is a community project that’s been growing continuously for four years. What’s the source of Icontown’s longevity?

**BE:** Icontown is able to deliver what it promises. Here, you’re the star of the show; you build the city.

**TNC:** Icontown is jam packed with pixel-perfect architectural masterpieces ...

**BE:** One interesting building that’s gone up recently is the Icontown synagogue. Its name is “B’NAI ARYEH Y’HUDAH.” Rabbi Mosheh Ben Ya’aqov originally wanted to put up a readymade house. I was naturally amazed to meet a surfing rabbi. ;-) Following a brief exchange of emails, we agreed that I would prepare an icon of a synagogue. The icon was then designed—with input from me—by my intern Riff Khan. Riff is originally Muslim. And so, presumably, the synagogue in Icontown is the only one ever to be “built” by a Muslim :-)



icontown.de

### ICONTOWN ([www.icontown.de](http://www.icontown.de))

Whereas most of the once-flourishing virtual cities have long since turned into ghost towns, an unusual network community project based on the concept of the pixel as building material has been enjoying radiant health for years. Mayor Be, aka Bernd Holzhausen, and over 5,000 pixel addicts are at work on a virtual icon city in which no parcel may exceed 32x32 pixels in size ... with still enough room for offshore biotech start-ups.

**TNC:** With Donation Ware, you've developed a highly original sharing principle for Icontown.

**BE:** In order to be able to protect the rights of the citizens—many of whom spend days designing a structure—Icontown is a “ware,” which may be used in exchange for something. Everyone who

uses an icon is called upon to make a donation in the form of labor or money to an organization that works with the homeless in their area.

**TNC:** Currently, there's even a rumor going around that an illegal cloning start-up has bought into Icontown ...

**BE:** I've heard about the rumor. A new citizen has told of some peculiar goings-on in his immediate neighborhood. But maybe, as a new citizen, he's just trying to come across as interesting. Who knows? In any case, I'll have it checked out.



tnc.net

### Launch the Probe

This email exchange has given a refreshing spin to latest mutations of net-inspired digital cultural coming from highly divergent perspectives. With his own unique perspective, Kodwo Eshun, and his Giant Connection Machine, will be offering a spin on the wild side. His micro-DJ lectures constitute temporary constructions permeating the electrolobby program modules.

**TNC:** Kodwo, your thoughts are so refreshing—what drives you?

**ESHUN:** Discontent with existing theoretical approaches which actively disintensify their field. The scolding, instinctively moralising style of mainstream critics. The proudly anti-theoretical attitude of dance music media. The bureaucratic, police report vibe of art criticism. The pompous top-down tedium of wackademics everywhere. Adding to the boredom of the world is a criminal activity. I am compelled to follow the migration paths of mutations wherever they occur—in a music video or an old manifesto, a CD cover or a Bezier curve. I am obliged to play and work in the overlaps between electronic music, media theory and science fiction. I am unable to keep these worlds distinct from each other. My joys: destroying high-low hierarchies wherever they reassert themselves. Precisely naming unspoken assumptions. The indulgence of the intellect. The irresponsible adventure of concepts.

**TNC:** At electrolobby you will present a set of MP3-tracks, and practice your favourite game—sonic fiction/science fiction.

**ESHUN:** Yes, sonic fiction, the interface between science fiction and organized sound is a game in which you extract effects, thought patterns, conceptual technologies or concepttechnics from the music you love in order to assemble imaginal worlds. It is both immanent and transmedial. Many critics work very hard to contextualize, historicise and demystify music—this frees me to move on another vector entirely—the life of forms, the sonology of society, the creation of electronic mythologies, of digital myths of the near future (Ballard) of participation mystique (McLuhan). Only those imbued with a real respect and admiration for all kinds of dance music can assemble sonic fictions.

**TNC:** In the context of digital culture, what aspects of recent developments most intrigue you?

**ESHUN:** It's the audio-social obsessiveness of Napster software that fascinates me. What MP3s people want to download, how many hours they give over to this—you can hear and see audiosocial desire self-assembling itself into networks of fascination. This updating of Bakunin's 19th century ideas that property is theft into 21st century dotcommunism (John Perry Barlow) also reveals the cartography of desire, a planetary audio-geography. In 1990/91, I used to think about a sci-fi novel based on a planet where the sample was a natural resource. Recorded media is terrestrial deposits. The more intensive the sampling, the more intensive the landscape—so you had Brownian urbanism, Kraftwerk-esque mountains etc. Napster is the first stage in a scenario where you could click on and hear/see/alter the terraformation of desire, the planetary turbulence of oceans of sound.

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#### GIANT CONNECTION MACHINE

Within the framework of his "Sonic Fiction," concept engineer Kodwo Eshun, author of the now classic "More Brilliant Than The Sun," takes a selection of MP3s as his point of departure for a series of micro-DJ lectures about mutations in electronic music, media theory and science fiction. But proceed with caution: some of his refreshingly original lines of thought prove to be slyly concealed snares to trap the hapless denizens of lazy thinking, stale ideas and jaded theories.

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**TNC:** You call yourself a "concept engineer"—probably for reasons similar to why we came up with the term data-jockey, signifying the profound changes in traditional concepts of producer/writer/author/critic etc. What is it that we are trying to describe with these neologisms that has so dramatically changed?

**ESHUN:** Digital reality opens a continuum between the gene and the electron (Matthew Fuller). The plane of consistency demands a reformatting of language. I don't consider myself a cultural critic, a cultural historian or a cultural commentator because these roles are redundant now. I can't think of anything more disintensifying or delibidinising. I identify myself with the tradition of McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and *D & G's Thousand Plateaux* where you assemble a toolkit, a thoughtware machine for plugging into other machines. As McLuhan said in his 1968 *Hot and Cool* interview: "The problem is to invent tools -probes—rather than to make continuous connected statements. You take a statement and you turn it around, using it as a probe into the environment instead of using it descriptively as a means of packaging information already picked up." The concept engineer approaches ideas as a samplefinder, not as a critic. I assemble my database. I extract my samples for the thoughtware that I want to build. Then I launch the probe.

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