

launching xxero

xxero is good. sort of like a ... pregnant xero.
or a xero that's in love.¹



xxero is both a collaborative, moo-based environment and a platform for real life meetings and events. Built up by an international network of women associated with the FACES² mailing list, the project was conceived in a real life Faces meeting as a tool for examining the many different perspectives on new technologies and how they relate to our lives. The different facets of xxero allow for the participants to log in and out of a vital discourse that they are creating as much as criticizing, one that is a project, a context, and a social sphere. The MOO and the real life events are integral parts of the whole—

the MOO provides one realm where participants build up content palaces, dream worlds that imagine the best and worst of what technology has to offer. The real life events are lectures, workshops, a table in the cafe, where information is shared and discussed, in private and in public. Each half complements the other, the content and the medium are intricately woven together as they are shared and exchanged in a marketplace of our own. In 2001, parallel to building up the MOO, a number of xxero “dockings” are planned at Media Arts Festivals throughout Europe. xxero plans to dock in the Americas and Australia in 2002. The “dockings” are intended as a platform to enable women to share knowledge and skills, while bringing xxero “to life”. Docking at upcoming festivals includes a series of workshops that cover MOO building/development and techno skills, lectures on related themes explored in the MOO, acoustic, visual, and performative representations of xxero, parties where collaborators meet face to face, and public presentations. As a MOO-based project, xxero calls for workshops and knowledge that cover not only the latest applications and techniques but also serve to “fill in the gaps”, and focus on important aspects of using the technology. Given the speed of new developments, up-to-date knowledge and skills can be difficult to maintain alone. By going back to the basics, and using this pre-web technology, xxero offers a innovative platform for exploring the foundations of the tools we all take for granted.

thing urgently in need of a name

Following an intensive FACES list discussion in December 2000 of an obvious absence of women as speakers and/or presenters at various festivals, conferences and events, the idea of a text-based, collaborative working environment immediately seized the imaginations of the Faces present at a meeting in Berlin in February 2001. The “naming discussion” that subsequently erupted on the list, and grew to almost alarming proportions in the weeks that followed, may be read as a sign of a deeper and more widespread concern with fundamental questions of what feminism is or could be today. A multitude of images from organic forms to digital references to science fiction figures were suggested as names for “the floating thing”, quickly and warmly embraced, then heatedly or reluctantly rejected. What kinds of images can women identify with today? The complexity of this question

corresponds to the complexity of the larger question of “female identity” in general, a question that has exploded over the last decade in conjunction with queer theory and, in many cases, a rejection of the dichotomous categories of “female/male”³ altogether.

The “floating thing docking at festivals”, the new text-based, collaborative virtual working environment was finally christened “xxero” in March 2001. The name obviously reflects a close association to “zero”, with all the implications of “zeros and ones” in the digital world, and more subtle associations of connotations of women throughout the ages, but the double xx is equally significant: according to Nancy Buchanan, who originally proposed the name, “Part of my inspiration comes from a group of women artists that I helped form in the 1970s—Faith [Wilding] will of course remember Double X, because we published her book. At that time, we were thinking of the chromosome and the double axe of the amazons. Adding it to “zero” seems to make it more contemporary...”⁴

connect user password

Hosted by the Linz, Austria, art server <servus.at>, xxero went online on March 10, 2001. With Ushi Reiter responsible for coordinating the technical setup and administrative matters, an initial small group of named MOO programmers, including Florence Ormezzo, Tamiko Thiel, Marlena Corcoran, Vali Djordjevic, some with background experience, others embarking on a new learning experience, immediately started “building.” This building and planning work soon took on the character of an investigation into the discrepancies between theory and practice and different ways of dealing with media tools. MOOs/MUDs are far from being new uses of the Internet, belonging instead to the earliest⁵ and most extensively studied Internet tools, especially in relation to gender issues.⁶ Yet this is a tool that has, in many cases, fallen somewhat into disuse. Some Faces are digging deep into old memories to remember the commands, others are starting from scratch. Using a MOO is more complicated than the point-and-click user-friendliness of the WWW that has been continuously refined to make consumer entertainment more and more simple. While this means that xxero has a higher level entry threshold, it also means that the fact that it is running and developing is an indication of a higher level of commitment to this project. This technical aspect of xxero has had an unexpected side-effect: it has started to focus more attention on concrete working conditions. The question of when, where and how women are online has taken on another significance, because this affects their opportunities for participation. At the initial meeting in Berlin, Tamiko Thiel made a strong case for using a strictly text-based MOO based on her experience with the limited accessibility of high bandwidth 3D graphics environments. Nevertheless, due to the constraints of firewalls and other barriers, as well as the working hours and obligations of women who are mainly online through their employment situations, the distractions of small and larger co-residents in some home environments, interruptions in shared working spaces, the expense of modem connections, the time factor involved, and for many other reasons, the original idea of a virtual collaborative working environment has become more firmly embedded in a real life context, and xxero has come to include a wider variety of modes of communication, but also a greater critical awareness of how we use these modes of communication.

@go Open FACES

The international mailing list FACES forms the backbone of a community of women working in media around the world. This is the most prominent network of women working in new media internationally—it includes anthropologists, educators, theoreticians, historians, programmers, artists, performers, writers, journalists, musicians and scientists. It is a cross-

disciplinary, multi-national, generationally inclusive collective of voices that bring women's issues and opportunities into focus. It was initiated by Valentina Djordjevic, Kathy Rae Huffman and Diana McCarty after a FACE SETTING dinner in Vienna.

FACES grew so quickly because there was a real need for a female media artists' forum online. There was a need to discuss the growing field of net_art, as well as the real need to celebrate the contributions of women to new media and communication arts. The mailing list has become an important focal point for women in the media, not only as a site for exchanging relevant information about opportunities for women working in new media, but also as a site of critical discourse in relation to content and strategies. xxero is a way of taking this another step further by enabling different forms of collaboration and cooperation among a very heterogeneous group of women, who have certain concerns and goals in common, but often take very different approaches to realize them.

xxero is a space, xxero is a figure, an identity to be used collectively. xxero is a strategy for empowerment and for self-reflection. MOOs are an ideal environment for a collaborative development of ideas, projects and art works. The character xxero is an experiment to explore these opportunities and create a space where, through the combination of individual ideas, something new can emerge that is more than just the sum of its parts. xxero is a framework within which knowledgeable, experienced, critically thinking women can gather, in order to make the best possible use of their collective strengths.

Endnotes

1. Shelly Silver, posted to FACES on Feb. 28, 2001
2. <http://faces.vis-med.ac.at/>
3. cf. "Gendertechnologien—Juggling Sex", a symposium by the fakultaet, March 2001: www.servus.at/fakultaet, with texts from Verena Kuni, Elisabeth Holzleithner and others.
4. Nancy Buchanan, posted to FACES on Mar. 1, 2001
5. "Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) were created in around 1980 as a network accessible version of the Dungeons and Dragons adventure game. (...) They've changed a lot since then: there are still the original adventure-style games, but there are also MUDs that are more oriented towards conversations, towards teaching, and even some oriented towards various kinds of experimentation ... There are perhaps a half dozen basic categories (MUD, MUSH, tinyMUD, MUSE, MOO, etc.) and many variations within each category." Krol, Ed: *The Whole Internet User's Guide & Catalog* (Second Edition), O'Reilly & Associates, Inc., 1994, p. 347
6. The second edition of *The Whole Internet User's Guide & Catalog* by Ed Krol, published by O'Reilly & Associates, Inc. in 1994 described the World Wide Web as "the newest information service to arrive on the Internet (p. 287). In comparison, two articles, for example, both published in 1996, at the beginning of the World Wide Web boom, include extensive literature references for studies on the construction of gender identity in MUDs dating back to the early nineties: cf. Turkle, Sherry, "Parallel Lives: Working on Identity in Virtual Space", from *Constructing the Self in a Mediated World*, Debra Grodin, Thomas R. Lindlof (ed.), Sage Publications, 1996; Bromberg, Heather, "Are MUDs Communities? Identity, Belonging and Consciousness in Virtual Worlds", from *Cultures of Internet*, Rob Shields (ed.), Sage Publications, 1996

