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Digital Broad-Spectrum Antibiotic
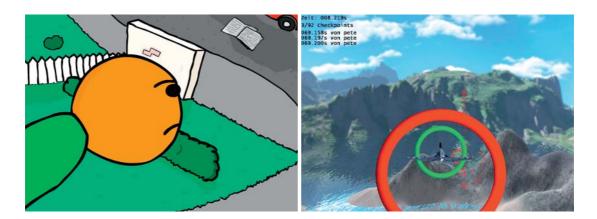## u19 vs. Established Points of View

When the first Golden Nica was awarded in the u19 – freestyle computing category in 1998, this was a logical decision as well as one pointing the way to the future.

The application of new media had already in 1998 become a highly visible factor in the youth scene, a phenomenon displaying the characteristics of an experiment, a claim to artistic validity and nascent commercial use too.

Every so often in the life of a project conceived as a long-term undertaking, there comes a time when it behooves the organizers to pause and reflect upon whether things are on the right track, on whether the correct options were selected at key junctures, where the major milestones were located, whether the scheduled itinerary has been maintained and what course should be set for the future.

Much of what was the exclusive purview of adults only a few years ago is in the hands of kids and teens nowadays, and is being recontextualized to no small extent.

From its very inception, u19 has been deliberately conducted as the Prix Ars Electronica's most wide-open, most freestyle competition. Anything goes; all that's required is that it fit into the context of new media. Not even the slightest thought was ever given to creating some sort of "Aaaah, isn't that cute" category; rather, the idea was to set up a real professional forum for the creative output of young people. This offer addressed to Austrian youngsters has been taken up enthusiastically and met with a high degree of acceptance. Several of the significant trends evident in u19 are thoroughly analogous to those that characterize the "world of grown-ups."

Working structures are undergoing a gradual transformation, whereby the "jack of all trades" is increasingly giving way to specialization of labor and team-oriented collaboration. The dominant form of production is teamwork, both in school projects and leisure-time pursuits. Mastering a particular technology in and of itself is no longer sufficient to bring forth a "wow effect." A crossover, a mix of the familiar and the unexpected, is what it takes to knock an audience's and a jury's socks off.

Nevertheless, u19 – freestyle computing's vision goes much further than merely the—admittedly, increasingly outstanding—way young users handle their implements, or the creativity and design excellence their computer-supported work displays. u19 is more: it's a digital broad-spectrum antibiotic that actively combats established points of view; it makes the unusual seem familiar, and, in numerous respects, it's a mirror of social developments and issues. For example: when the computer became a tool used in elementary schools on an everyday basis, there was a sudden jump in the number of submissions from very young contestants.

Thus, u19 is also a breeding ground, proving ground and playground for offbeat, crude, hip, retrospective and very serious ideas. u19 is the crossover of media, age groups, genders and cultures. The wide range of submissions is indicative of this. One important group is the Retros—entries that take up and reinterpret computer games from days of yore (mostly from the 1980s) such as *Tron, Snake* and *Pacman*. Here, the latest techniques are used to create new effects that update these oldies for the Internet or the cellphone. An example of this is Thomas Winkler's 2004 Golden Nica winner that adapted *Tron* via GPS for cellphones *(GPS::Tron)*. What was new about it was the attempt to blend reality (deployment of the player's own body) and virtuality (GPS) within the framework of the game.

Another scene amongst the u19 community is made up of Tinkerers. A submission that can serve as a proxy for all of these fantastic creations is *Fuse Killer* (conspirat., 1999). This low-tech-look

contraption pieced together out of a discarded hot water immersion heater, a plug and adapted electrical innards really delivered on its title's promise: it knocked our electrical system for a loop. The members of the jury weren't the only ones left in the dark; night fell upon the ORF – Austrian Broadcasting Company's whole Upper Austria Regional Studio.

It's been quiet of late on the Gamers front, that coterie of youngsters who aren't content with off-the-shelf gaming products and prefer to invest their energies in programming their own engines and living out their fantasies to the hilt. Examples are many: in 2007, *Flying Bytes,* a game based on the open source 3D CornerStone engine (140 classes and 90,0000 code symbols) was honored with an Award of Distinction, and in 2008 *RollerCoaster 360,* a 3D game programmed for the XBox 360, garnered an Honorary Mention.

Socials are a very significant group. Every year, we receive submissions that combine new technology and creativity with commitment to a social cause. One early adopter was Paul Pak: in 1998, he developed a prototype of a "virtual cane for the blind" that uses vibrations to warn of a looming obstacle. Years later, Klagenfurt Technical School students worked together with the Carinthian Association of the Blind to implement the *VOIP Wiki,* a wiki-based system for audible information playback. Their efforts earned them the 2007 Golden Nica.

Even as u19 continually spans the entire range of possibilities the computer-supported domain makes available, one line of approach reliably impresses us anew year after year. The CONIs (creatives of non-industries) undertake highly creative encounters—for instance, with the challenges of growing up; critically reflecting on the settings in which everyday life is lived out; launching bizarrely packaged media critiques. They design the digital domains in which they spend their life online in accordance with the challenges they face therein and develop corresponding scenarios: high-tech, low-tech, no-tech. One proponent is Markus Sucher, the mastermind behind 2005 Golden Nica winner *Rennacs Studies.* Here, a scanner is attached to a computer monitor on which a film is being screened. The scan application delivers an image consisting of fragments of the film, whereby each such composition contains a rhythm, a language, a dramaturgy and a color scheme all its own. In 2008 as well, we find an example of such an encounter among the Award of Distinction winners: *uterus=space=universe* by Susanne Legerer. Overlaying an ultrasound image of the artist's own uterus with pictures taken by the Hubble Telescope reveals analogies between the microcosm of the human body and the macrocosm of outer space.

u19 has acquired impressive standing in the canon of the media art elite for the simple reason that outstanding work is being done by u19 artists. And the reason for that is that these works don't lodge a formal claim to being art, even when they—in their multifarious manifestations— are precisely that, and to a very high degree indeed.

Nevertheless, u19's primary mission has never been to single out works of art for recognition. u19 will continue to be what it has always been in the past: a reflection of young members of society who are accustomed to media, who are taking advantage of the chance to construct their own spaces in the interstices between adult worlds to thereby obtain the autonomy and latitude that creative human beings need to develop.

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald.