

clicking in

Robert H. King reflects on the New Visions Interactive Gallery

WITH TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPING around us at a frantic pace it would appear that the future of multimedia is up for grabs. The music industry in particular is all over 'interactive entertainment' like crows hovering over roadside (information superhighway?) carrion. The search or rather battle to develop and market the dominant format gathers speed daily. CD-I, CD-ROM, Enhanced CD: the choice of hardware and of software titles are confusing the public. A recent survey found that 40% of people who own CD-ROM drives don't use them and 54% do not intend to purchase new titles in the near future.

A large amount of major CD-ROMs add very little in the way of interactivity and could easily be mistaken for videos. Enhanced CDs are compact discs that contain both audio and visual material, allowing those without the luxury

of the necessary hardware to be able to listen to the music. The sales pitch is obvious—you buy the CD and the multimedia is a 'bonus'. For a large majority of these Enhanced CDs the 'add-on bonus' is invariably a collection of stuttering Quicktime video clips, some soundbites, back catalogue promotion and usually amount to nothing more than digital sleeve-notes, all that 'cutting edge' (to paraphrase the writer Stewart Brand) is "a knife that's all blade and no handle".

At New Visions we feel that it has become more apparent than ever that there is a real need for more artist led projects that challenge conventional notions of interactive media. With this in mind it was decided to stage a CD-ROM gallery (for one week during the New Visions Festival), Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art was the setting.

As the 'curator' for this event I felt it was important that my personal preferences should not dictate what would be on offer to the general public and as such the various titles that were available for viewing had been submitted in response to a random mailing to companies producing multimedia. As a result the gallery offered an eclectic range of material that proved to be as equally 'popular' with children as with the 'Techies' drawn to the starkly lit and noisy basement 'Fire' Gallery.

What follows is an overview of several of the submissions that (in keeping with the random submission process) appear here as they were amongst the ones that the public returned to time and again over the week long installation.

The more interactive and 'real' a package seems, the more a sense of 'presence' is generated by the medium. However, if this is strayed from then the less likely a user is to return to the CD-ROM. Children in

particular are more willing to suspend disbelief with on-screen 'stories' whilst adults are invariably dissatisfied with the artificiality of it all. An excellent work that engaged everyone's sense of play (regardless of age) is **The Toybox**, commissioned by Moviola/Video Positive (Liverpool), it is an anthology of small scale interactive works by 20 artists on the theme of a dig-

ital toybox. These range from the profound to the frivolous. 'The Perfect Journey' by Nina Pope is a wonderfully put together piece of social commentary: clicking on an item (house, bridge...) turns any one of the many peaceful scenes into some sprawling industrial landscape, whilst 'Sex Toy' from 'F' entices you to pick your vice (group, solo, other...) and to peek behind the curtain and once inside you can never find your way out. Sex Toy was the one most people clicked on (again regardless of age). There is a refreshing amount of contributions from women artists (something of a rarity) and most importantly of all this is fun to use and actively encourages your participation, in

fact nothing works until you do something with it.

Of Monsters and Miracles is an absolute delight to wade through. This CD-ROM is a voyage into the world of weird phenomenon and was originally created as an interactive guide for an exhibition of the same name that explored the worlds of 'Fortean'. It is a thoroughly engaging collection of over two hundred stills, over one hundred navigable objects and over two hours of video commentary and footage. The screens and guiding objects are intuitive (there are no instructions) and you are at once made to feel comfortable in your journey into the realms of: UFOs, sea monsters, poltergeists, psychic questing, crop circles, stigmata, fakes and frauds and a Pandora's box of strangeness. There is so much within 'Of Monsters and Miracles' that I found visitors to the gallery coming back for further exploration.

The enhanced CD that is **Header** fuses the very best of club culture with innovative multimedia. The exclusive music covers drum 'n' bass, rap, techno, hip hop and experimentation from 4 Hero, Carl Craig and Derrick Carter (amongst others) whilst the stunning

visuals include contributions from A Guy Called Gerald, Horace Andy, James Lavelle, King Tubby and a whole host more. The graphics form an intuitive interface that make it pleasing to the eye and easy to use. Header has broken all conventions of on-screen design and it pays off in a big way. People like noise and colour and with this installed on a Power Macintosh in

a dark corner the public were drawn to the sounds of the digital soundtrack scratching its way out through the screen. The standard turntable, mixers and faders have been (thankfully) replaced with a more appealing abstract and heuristic approach, dragging the mouse over any of the elements on display triggers a sound sample in the form of a drum loop, vocal strains or a keyboard drone. Further dragging and clicking allows the user to mix their own tracks, dropping elements in and out at will. Each section features a fresh interface that maintains its useability. Feedback from those dipping into Header showed that even if they were not particularly interested in reggae or techno they still found it entertaining and stimulating.

It's not a videogame, it's not a music CD, it's not MTV, it's not a music video, it is **frEQuency** from Modified. frEQuency comes at you at 100 miles per hour, there are no clear and logical rules, sit back and let it burn or attack it with a vengeance. Billing itself as the 'Fuzzy groove' the logical development of 80s scratch (video and music) and beyond, this barrage of innovative visual design gives you music and video you can alter and enhance. Pliable, approximate, leaving the linear behind as it speeds off into a future where nothing will ever be the same twice. The instruction booklet is deliberately minimal thus forcing you to explore and immerse yourself in a sea of audio visual information that's your's for the taking.



The interface is laid out like a Bladerunner-esque control console allowing you to access the on board sights and sounds or to import your own to be cut and spliced into new fragments of ambient, techno, jungle or trance. Modified have taken all of this one stage further by linking it to their Website where you can download new information bites and upload your own creations to be download by someone else to be uploaded. This has got to be a world first. frEQuency demands your attention, I defy anyone to cruise the

contents and not return to it later. It's like a virus, the snatches of music and video get inside your mind and pretty soon you're thinking of new ways to present it.

Graham Harwood is perhaps best known for his incisive graphics that were an integral part of that most cutting of publications the excellent 'Underground'. Presenting himself here as 'Harwood' he has with produced a disturbing and fascinating work in **Rehearsal of Memory**. The aim of this piece was to work with a group of people from Ashworth a High

Security Mental Hospital to produce an interactive programme embodying the life experience of those involved. This is manifested in the form of an anonymous computer personality made up of the collective experience of the group. Ashworth Hospital is located in the north of England near Liverpool and is home and prison to people who are a danger to themselves or to people outside the hospital. The group of patients he worked with ranged from serial killers to rapists, potential suicides and casualties of the excesses of society. The staff he worked with included psychiatric nurses of twenty years experience and orderlies. To quote Harwood: "This artwork is about the recording of the life experiences of the client group that are a mirror to ourselves ("normal society") and our amnesia when confronted with the excesses of our society. This forgetting is a dark shadow cast by plenty, a nightmare for some that constructs misinformation and fear about insanity, violence and victims. This mental space is occupied by the psycho, the nutter, the mad dog and Bedlam; this is the space where strong fictions lie and invisibly glue together the mirror from which we view our own sanity." This was quite possibly the most challenging work on display. Its stark duotone images of faces, feet, penises and numerous

body parts combined with text and audio material that spoke of poverty, sexual horrors, childhood memories of abuse and watching mothers commit sui-



cide, leave one feeling uneasy, uncomfortable but vicariously drawn to their stories. Indeed this is how it worked for the week it was on display. Visitors would nervously approach the computer with its muffled voices behind the words 'queer scum' click on the mouse and recoil as they were presented with the contorted face of the anonymous offender, only to return minutes later to push themselves just a little bit further. Sadly however I feel that this kind of work will prove too difficult for a mass audience (for sales), but placed within the gallery space it will help to encourage the idea that there is more to the future of interactive media than the truckloads of rock dinosaur titles that pollute the stores.

I am heartened to see that more and more clubs and galleries are fostering the idea of CD-ROM/interactive spaces and actively encouraging the works that occupy the outer (and more relevant) areas of this new medium. Towards the new digital aesthetic!

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