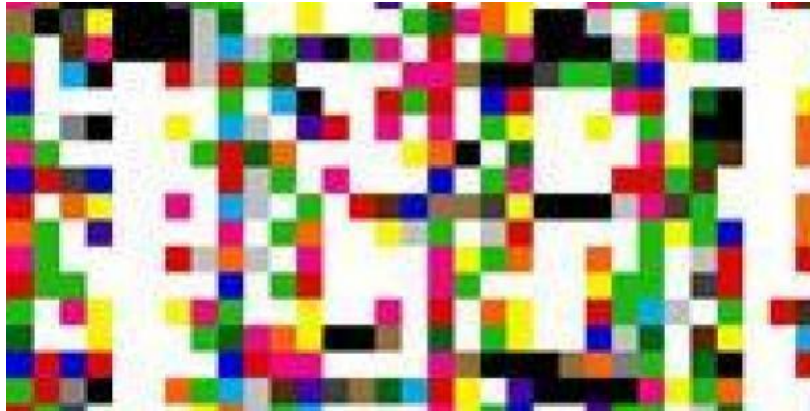


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Data Diaries

By Ilacook - 09/08/2003



Arcangel hacked the QuickTime media player into thinking his computer's random-access memory (the RAM) was a video file.

Seeing the computer as an anthropomorphic entity is nothing new. Hackers have been known to pat their machines affectionately on the case, calling them by familiar names. "Ole Martha;s struggling with some low-RAM issues," they say. I myself have an affectionate name for my machine: I call her Katherine, which is my girlfriend's middle name...

Of course, taking this logic a few steps further is no problem at all. If we can look at the machine as a living entity, then it's only natural that this entity have all the qualities we do. After all, computers operate on memory--which, all too often, is what we operate on as well. And if the machine thinks as we do, and if the machine remembers, it must dream, eh?

This is what comes to mind in viewing Cory Arcangel's Data Diaries, commissioned by turbulence.org. For this piece, Arcangel hacked the QuickTime media player into thinking his computer's random-access memory (the RAM) was a video file. "Lots of artists talk about memory," Alex Galloway writes in his introduction to the project. "But for artists working with computers, memory has a very specific technical definition. If ever computers had a subconscious, this is it. Cory describes it as "watching your computer suffocate and yell at the same time." They look like digital dreams--the pure shapes and tones of real computer memory."

Watching Cory's Data Diaries is, as one Rhizome member put it on that list, like watching your computer defragment itself. Blocks of primary color skip and twitch across the screen to a hissing, popping, exploding soundtrack. It's engaging in the same way staring off into a bonfire is engaging, or gazing at clouds--there's a Zenist absorption when you allow your eyes to skip over it, not really searching for anything recognizable, just enjoying the motion and the color and the sound of phenomena. This is the primarily sensual component to the Data Diaries.

This work, when turbulence announced it, caused quite a spirited discussion on both the Rhizome and Webartery lists. Michael Szpakowski, who runs the web art site somedancersand musicians, seemed appalled by the work: "There's no way the viewer can know that what is on the screen has some connection to Cory's this and that except by way of the artist statement... Take the *concept* away and the poverty of the thing immediately becomes apparent - if the artist simply constructed the images we see we might say, OK that's vaguely interesting and attractive in a kind of wallpaper way for about 2 seconds but 11 hours...please!" Others, like t.whid of <http://www.mtewww.com/>, found the work to be valid and innovative on a conceptual level."there's nothing wrong with having to know a few things to appreciate an artwork," he maintained. "you've been trained from birth to look at media in different ways and there is no reason why you shouldn't learn something that takes 15 seconds to read to appreciate



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Derogatory term in current use in UK music education for a student whose primary means of musical expression is the PC or sequencer rather than a 'conventional' instrument.

another level of this work...the work itself is very interesting to look at without knowing anything about it. what's interesting is it's organic yet machine-like animation. it's full of surprises if you watch it for a little while..."

These comments form the core of the issues raised by a work such as this. Its offline lineage runs through the finest of conceptual art--the Art and Language Group in the seventies and eighties, for instance--though here we do indeed have a sensual object to cling to (some would argue that nothing on the net has a material quality, which is true in a sense; however, in this case, as in many other cases of net and web art, there is something to look at and experience, as opposed to the raw concept). And one can, as I stated earlier, enjoy the work in a zen fashion--it's a show in itself, without the knowledge that Cory used his machine's RAM as the meat of the work. This added knowledge simply heightens one's appreciation of the piece. Does knowing how old Michaelangelo was when he painted the Sistine ceiling have any bearing on how we view the work? For some, yes. But the work can and does stand beyond such literary knowledge.

So are Cory's Data Diaries an act of voyeurism for those with a strong artificial intelligence bent? Watching these stuttering, popping movies, are we in fact peering into the very consciousness of the machine? Would Freud or Jung (or Lacan) find anything useful in the stream of data these visual oddities embody? It depends on how you look at your computer. As for me, I can tell that Katherine like Cory's work; she loads his streams eagerly. And whatever makes Katherine happy often makes life easier for me.

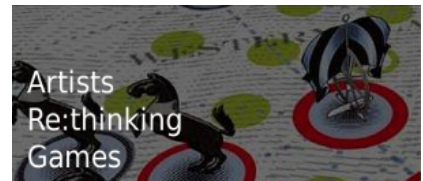
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By **Michael Szpakowski** on 14 Jan 2004 - 1:00am

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