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DAC 2001: A Conference Review

By Anja Rau

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Abstract

The fourth international conference Digital Arts and Culture (see report to DAC 2000) was held at Brown University, Providence, RI, 26-28 April 2001. Since 1998, a community of scholars, developers and artists have met annually (alternating between Europe and the US) to present and discuss new projects. This community has developed over several years and several other conferences, but DAC has turned into a kind of family reunion, almost. People get together, develop continuous discussions, introduce new ideas, push group-projects. Thanks to the mix of presentations and performances and to organized informal get-togethers as well as the student-friendly pricing-policy, newcomers can join in the activities and communities easily. DAC has become a pool in which digital theory and arts may grow. The quality of the contributions over the years goes to show how well this concept works.

The organizers have kept this year's conference small again so that "only" about 160 participants got a little lost between the lecture halls spread across the Brown campus. But due to the long ways between venues and lack of a central meeting place, the intimate yet intense atmosphere of e.g. last year's DAC at the University of Bergen, Norway, could not arise. At a conference with parallel tracks, short ways and a place to meet up between sessions, have a coffee and talk about the presentations attended and those missed are particularly important. Session hopping, too is a crucial parameter. Both the possibility to sample talks from different sessions and to hear others talk about what one hasn't seen prevent participants from feeling they have been able to see only half the conference. Also, continuing discussions from the sessions becomes hard when everybody has to rush off into different directions to catch the next track. Happily, Brown campus offers a large enough selection of cafes and diners so that there was always a place to meet and talk. This way, DAC retained its networking and contacting potential.

DAC 2001 seemed to be missing a center - not only the venue, but the program as well. Ted Nelson's polemically satiric opening keynote not quite set interface and

usability as a leitmotif: The internet and (web-)applications - says Nelson - have been devised by geeks - and geeks don't create useful interfaces. His solution: structured data, loaded dynamically into templates customized for specific users, including e.g. semantic linking. According to Nelson, keeping content in databases and presenting it in different interfaces for different use(r)s will also be a way out of the standard-wars of the interface-multis. Sadly, he did not concede even implicitly that this concept looks quite like XML - or a Nelson-standard based on XML. The theme of "interface" was carried on into the first session: Susana Pajares Tosca talked about common spatial metaphors for navigation and presentation, Terry Harpold talked about the interface as text.

In later sessions, Michael Mateas treated intelligent agents and Frank Shipman introduced Fantasy Sports as border-bending "real" and virtual interfaces. N. Katherine Hayles as well as Madeleine Sorapure addressed text, body and embodiment. All in all, however, there was little news; discussions were uncharacteristically reticent. Topics like "Image", "Body" or "Art" as generic containers received standard treatment. Among the few positive surprises was Jenny Sundén's "The Embodied Computer Code" about gender-attributions in MOOs and the demystification of the web as ungended third space.

It seems to me that digital art and culture are in need of a little innovative big bang. Of course it makes sense - even in the fast-moving field of multimedia - not to dismiss as obsolete texts from the 1990s. Few projects have been studied exhaustively and the fact that *Afternoon* or *Myst* are almost taboo these days is certainly not due to the presumably low quality of the output of the past decade but rather to the fact that only the most prominent specimen have received attention - and then in excess. Still, the recipient of combinatory lyric of historical games on historical consoles is haunted by a strange desire for something brand new. Projects with an attitude - like *Afternoon* or *Myst* in their time.

Perhaps it is time for the academic community to drop their distrust of industry. At DAC 2001, one could indeed see projects with a commercial background, like www.ottoandiris.com (intelligent agents in a playful cartoon-environment). But productions like these are expensive. Single authors today are hardly able to develop multimedia projects on their own. In place of the lonesome genius, teams of specialists are at work now, each contributing their skills in text, image, sound or programming. Such teams are to be found predominantly in commercial contexts, because not alone the technological development from pencil to digital workplace make multimedia expensive. The romantic image of the poor poet is not valid anymore. Maybe the big bang in digital art and culture can come from the mix of scholarship and commerce.

DAC has been and still is an important forum - not least to address the obvious dilemma of digital art and culture. The committed group who met on Friday morning

in the "Town Meeting" to brainstorm about the future of DAC came up with a number of ideas about how one might continue and develop this conference with its own individual character and emphasis on dialog: On the one hand, there was an awareness that spatial proximity and organized informal get-togethers are integral part of this event. But there were also those who supported fewer or shorter presentations and longer periods for discussion, even less keynotes in order to retain a student-friendly pricing or for the relocation from lecture-halls into rooms with acoustics meant for discussions not one-way presentations ... No final decisions were reached - the future's wide open.