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Interview with Jean-Jacques Birgé

By Jim Andrews

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Jim Andrews: I know you are friends with the others and do important work with them. So I am curious also about your work with them.

Jean-Jacques Birgé: Friends is the right word, and that might be one good reason for me to go on working in the multimedia in general, a lot of nice young people working in a spirit of collaboration more than emulation or concurrency, even on commercial jobs.

I've been doing multimedia live shows since 1965 (I was 13! Doing light shows with musicians), mixing music, choreography, theater, cinema, etc. with my own group, first under my own name and then under the name of Un Drame Musical Instantané which I've founded in 1976. My first music for a CD-ROM was "At the circus with Seurat" for Hyptique in 1995. Etienne Mineur (now at incandescence.com) was the artistic director and Antoine Schmitt was the lead programmer. Pierre Lavoie, who is still running Hyptique, proposed to me to produce the multimedia part of my own CD-ROM "Carton" with Etienne and Antoine. Both of these works were big successes and, years after years, I became the most wanted sound designer in the business.

But I've never stopped doing my own things and collaborating with other nice inventive people. I've been composing for dozens of CD-ROMs and Internet sites (you can find all biographical informations on <http://www.hyptique.com/drame> which contains an English version or <http://monsite.wanadoo.fr/BIRGE> but this one is in French, still very simple as listing my works).

"Carton" was full of original interactivity we've invented together with my two new friends. My second big personal work was "Machiavel" in 1998, an interactive video scratch Antoine Schmitt and I have signed together, 111 video loops and a strange comportemental object! Both of these CDs were Audio and ROM. Later on, I've been working with Antoine on two games for the Adidas site, but the real thing will happen in the future as we've decided to give a suite to "Machiavel" (code name is "More" as in Thomas More). This time it will be a multi-user game on the Internet. I love working with Antoine because we are both engaged in politics and psychology (that's what "Machiavel" is about), he is a cultured man and an absolutely delicious person, he can speak seven computer languages, he was the first one I've met in multimedia area who was asking himself so many questions, questions which

brought him to become an artist after having been one of the best senior programmers.

In 1999, I met Frédéric Durieu and Murielle Lefèvre for the CD-ROM "Alphabet" which became famous all around the world. We had such fun working together that you can feel it when you play with it. Fred never said no to any proposition I could do. It has always been just a matter of time. You never know how long it will take, from a programmer to another, from an idea to another one. In all the things I'm working on, I compose the music, imagine and realize the sound design, but that's not all, I'm writing the whole thing with the other guys, interactivity, relation between images and sounds, looking for new inventions in all domains, trying to produce sense and emotion.

I must say I'm not only a composer, I'm also a moviemaker, an author (meaning using words) and a producer. Frédéric is another genius in mathematics, and when he founded LeCielEstBleu.com he asked me to put sound on "Flying Giraffes". This was our first work together since the huge "Alphabet". And we went on with the other animals of the "Zoo", etc. Usually Fred sends me a piece whose images and movements are quite advanced. My work consists of giving it its sound and its sense. That might bring him to modify sometimes a bit his initial idea. It might also radically change the meaning of the piece, such as "Week-End" where I suggested a counterpoint to the birds with a terrible atmosphere of car crashes... Moiré did not tell any story before I composed the music only with four little loops, kind of Hitchcock homage I would say.

The last pieces we've signed together are essentially musical, "Big Bang" and "Forever", belonging to "Time", are studies for a CD-ROM on painter Hieronymus Bosch. "Big Bang" is a dream I have had for twenty years, I tried to get this result with large orchestras but never approach as well as with Fred's algorithm, it's a totally interactive piece just with a minimal interface, it completely changes from one interpretation to the other, but it is exactly what I had in mind.

"Forever" is a crazy generative infinite repetitive music, which you can listen to for hours, a kind of homage to Steve Reich and Michael Snow. We're actually working on human puppets that make music while jumping and dancing. Frédéric and Antoine are both sharp mathematicians who are trying to give life to virtual entities. Fred is more interested in nature, animals, flying kites, and Antoine is more intellectual, dealing with artificial life, psychological and social rules. The first one is fascinated by the world, the second one dreams of changing it.

I met Nicolas Clauss through Fred. He had been a fan of my records for years and discovered a new work of mine with "Alphabet". He's fond of new music and he has always been an artist, having been a painter for a long time. His approach to code has nothing to do with Antoine's or Fred's. He's a poet who uses programming to make his pictures move. He's not as sharp as Antoine or Fred as a programmer but

he finds the way to do exactly what he needs. He's the one I'm actually working with the most, probably because he only does interactive creative modules for his site, FlyingPuppet.com.

Like Antoine and Fred, he's one of my best friends, and he's the person I see the most, actually. We watch films together in my home cinema and discuss everything, about our lives, about art, etc. He's fast too, we exchange mails and phone-calls, a module gets born very fast that way. He sends me the idea of the piece, sometimes it's finished but still silent, so once again I try to find and give its meaning, and I send back my sounds and the way they should play, sometimes Nicolas imposes the interactivity and I compose the media which could fit. I love to work with him because we have the same approach in story telling: we leave space for your own interpretation. The atmospheres are often dark and romantic (the contrary of Fred who loves light things). They often deal with dreams.

We've done more than 20 pieces together and are actually preparing a series of pieces with choreographer Didier Silhol. You can see that I have projects with the three of them, Antoine, Fred and Nicolas. Jean-Luc Lamarque offered Nicolas and I to compose a [pianographique](#) and it has been great to imagine something radically different from the other contributions to the site. I thought we should do a pianographique you had to play slowly, like taking your time for a good meal, time to taste, time to chew! So we made something that had more to deal with a movie soundtrack than music in rhythm. I always try to do something that has never been done, I do not want to add one more piece to our noisy world, there are too many fashionable things which all look and sound alike, it's a bore. It was nice working with Jean-Luc, another nice guy. I only work with nice people.

I know very well [servovalve](#) who works a lot with my good friend and neighbor [Olivier Koechlin](#), but I do not remember having worked with him. Olivier is the third fantastic programmer I know, and he's a musician too. I actually work with him for the International Photo Festival in Arles, he's in charge of all the evenings at the Theatre Antique, and I'm the musical director. He's done a beautiful work with the CD-ROM on electroacoustic music, and he's about to release one with choreographer Andrea Davidson and one with Gnawa musicians from Morocco.

Like Nicolas, servovalve is doing strange things not being a programmer, his code might get sick and need help from Antoine or Olivier, but the result, such as the multimedia part of his CD "[n-gone](#)", is brilliant and definitive. I mean that in the kind of minimal techno images and sounds *I've never seen such a quintessence of it*. His time schedule is too different from mine: he lives at night, and I wake up very early in the morning and never work in the evening!

How do you find working with these artist-programmers?

They often ask me why I do not program myself with Macromedia Director. I've always been programming my own sounds, but I feel cool to have collaborators who are virtuosos, whom with I can exchange and share ideas and pleasures to create.

You work with a wide range of sound.

Every project needs its own sound, its own way to compose its music. And every music needs its own support. I make music for films, for ballet and theatre, for big art exhibitions, for radio or TV, I make records and films, every work has its own specificity. It's because I understand that that I'm working so much. And I teach too, but not many young people have enough general culture to follow. They are stuck in one musical style, as the style is nothing. The only thing that matter is to be believed. My style is philosophical and has nothing to do with fashion, that's why I could last! I'm improvising a lot, I have my own studio with hundreds of acoustic and electronic instruments, I might ask other musicians to join me for special projects, I might compose for a symphonic orchestra or a jazz band, I might do all the sounds with my mouth... My approach is very intuitive, I'm a self-taught musician (my studies concerned filmmaking), every morning I try not to shave my antennas.

I do what people offer me to do. Freedom is my motor. Resistance is my energy. I could do any kind if you give me the money or the space to express my ideas on life or art, as far as I keep my moral, fighting for peace and freedom. I still think we should change the world. It's running upside down.

How do you conceive of the role of sound in interactive arts, Jean Jacques?

Audio is half of audiovisual.

Images remain in memory, sound is more secret and insidious. You can make a picture mean anything just by changing its soundtrack. Any music fits any picture, but the meaning might radically change, and it's my role to control it and to propose the right one. I use sound as a counterpoint, trying never to be illustrative unless it is needed. I often use it to widen the scene with stereo or to materialize things you don't need to show, with off-screen. It might be cheaper by the way. I've found a few nice things like rising up the volume when you approach to the right place to click on, calling you on one side or another, avoiding repetitive feeling by using three almost similar sounds for the same action, letting you know that the gestures you've made are efficient, and so on. You can discover many of these and others on CD-ROM "Alphabet" which is a good example full of many little inventions. On a technical side, sound gives thickness to the screen, it makes the illusion that the flat objects

shown there are made of different matters. Sound helps to create a more human environment and makes you forget that a computer is a machine, quite ugly I must say (comparing it to a dark room where you forget every thing but what is projected on the screen). For each work I have to find the right ambience, the right sound design, colors, energy... I have to choose the right instruments, shall I do it with acoustic or electronic instruments, with my mouth or ask other musicians to contribute, etc.? And I may also influence and change the meanings of the modules, like I often do with FlyingPuppet or LeCielEstBleu. See Moiré and Week-End for example, Massacre or any of the modules, it's more obvious on these personal interactive things than on my work for industrial or cultural projects. CD-ROM "Machiavel" is all about this, the relation of meanings between sound and images.

How do you conceive of the influence of the sound of interactive arts on music?

It gave me a great opportunity to compose music that would evolve in real time, leaving to the machine or to a human player the role to be my first interpreter. I used to make LPs or CDs with love and precision as if they were art objects. As my own music is quite strange I would not allow one mistake or error in its presentation. On another hand I used to improvise a lot on stage, I can't bear playing live twice the same thing. Multimedia offered me to join both manners, I can do a definitive composition but it might change every time you play with it. It also offers to other people the same joy and excitement I have when I play myself on my instruments, and they do not need to learn anything to do it. That's generous, I love it. The programmer is the real new actor of multimedia. I'm still doing music, nothing really changed. This is just another way for me. Same for graphic designers and artists. But to program is a new profession and it has to be defended and precised, to understand its real role which is so different from a person to another one, from a project to another. On my side, I've done a lot of things so I always need to find new ways of being astonished. Actually, as a composer, generative and interactive music is one of my new stakes, others are to work with several international artists I never met yet, but this is a problem of money. We'll see, or hear.

Tell me more about your piece "Big Bang" with Durieu. What was the process of making that piece? Did you know what he was going to do with the sound? Were you surprised with the result?

Everything was in my brain. I've been trying to do that piece several times with large orchestras but I was never convinced by the results. I could never hear what I had dreamed of. It is hard to make improvise a lot of musicians together, and to compose a definitive score was not what I was intending to do. So I've recorded 4 banks of looped sounds (5 electronic waves, 6 brass, 6 percussion and 13 radio

samples, that's all) and I've explained to Fred how they should play together. At the beginning the idea was to have absolutely no picture, a black screen and that's all, but we found that it was too difficult to control the piece in a blind environment, so Fred invented the two parallelepipeds, the black one pushing out the white one, with the actions on horizontality and verticality. We were looking for a way to represent the beginning of the world when matter and antimatter had rubbed together, expanding the universe. Fred did the programming very fast and easy, and it was amazing, that was the music I had dreamed of, and it changes from one play to another, regarding to who plays and how he or she moves the mouse. Fred programmed a pitch transposition which never stops rising up as long as you play with the module. You can go as far as the pitch becomes so high that you cannot hear anything any more. As for all music I compose I forget all of it after one week, otherwise I can't go on composing new things. I need to be fresh and to reinvent the world every morning! Forever was much harder to build up. I gave Fred 11 instruments of 24 sounds and composition laws, but we had to fight against stupid things in Director, so I remember I've had to record three times the whole orchestra sounds, they were too long or clicking, etc. Then we had to make many improvements in the musical rules to get the music I had in mind. Any way most of our common work is very pragmatismal. Every time "Forever" begins, the system chooses the key, the measure, the tempo, and five instruments among eleven. Then, follow lots of other parameters which evolve regularly, allowing the program to improvise for hours.

It seems that you are the one who introduced many of the artist-programmers to one another. Is that part of what you do also: bring people together?

Yes and no. No, I've not always been the one to introduce them to each other. But I own a big house with gardens where I often invite them for dinner or to watch a movie on a wide screen, or to project our little things too. I've got thousands of books, videos, records, CD-ROMs, etc. and I have the reputation to cook one of the best Chinese soups you might find in Paris, specially because I never cook twice the same, I improvise cooking too! When I go on trip I might propose Antoine or Fred to stay there and take care of the cat and the plants, I spent summer holidays with Nicolas! It is also true that I am the one who navigates the most among all of them, because being a composer I work with all of them, what they do not often do, one with each other. On another hand I am much implicated in politics and I've a long experience as an artist and/or a producer. I was maybe the first one to be recognized as a multimedia artist with CD-ROM "Carton" and all the things I had done before, I've also been fighting a lot for artists rights too. I have other occupations but multimedia that have always made me meet a lot of people, among who some happened to be very famous. Remember I was an artist before multimedia and I'll probably remain one after it too!