

METAPET:

genetic code in the service of the brave new world

An interview with Natalie Bookchin by Mia Makela

Natalie, when and why did you start the Metapet project ?

In the winter of 1999, Creative Time approached me about doing a project. They were beginning a series of commissions addressing the social implications of genetic research, and proposed that I make an on-line game on the subject. I subsequently received a Guggenheim and was given additional support from HAMACA, a net art platform in Barcelona made up of some of the area's art institutions, so I was able to envision a fairly large-scale project.



I spent about two years wading through reams of material on the debates and issues surrounding biotechnology and genetics. The two dominant positions presented respectively utopian or dystopian narratives. The supporters offered an abundance of hyperbolic wishful thinking. There were some pretty impressive predictions being bandied about. For example, cancer, aging, and world hunger were all going to be eliminated. The detractors' prophecies were often as fantastic: wealthy parents were going to design their babies to look like Arian supermodels with Einstein's intelligence. Generally, these futuristic scenarios relied on genetic essentialism and the belief that intelligence and other human-defined attributes are quantifiable and genetically based. The third position, much less spectacular, and therefore less likely to receive the attention of the other two perspectives or to hit the headlines, is that we are not in the midst of a revolution at all. The so-called "genetic revolution" is the same old thing in a shiny new package, an extension of scientific engineering made

popular by Frederick Taylor around the turn of the last century. With Taylorism, the worker is seen as one more gear in the production machine. Taylorism creates a new managerial class to regulate and improve the worker's output, by studying and making more efficient the body's movements. With genetics and biotechnology, the focus shifts from regulating the outside of the body to its inside. The body is no longer analog, but now a digital machine, in need of debugging and optimization. In order to accept this metaphor, you need to consent to the idea that life can be reducible to code. This thesis in its entirety relies on the long standing project of industrialization, which turns everything into an object in the service of production, whether it is adding a gene to increase the speed of the growth of fish or giving soldiers pills to decrease their need for sleep.

Metapet depicts an era in which genetic interventions are no longer reserved for cows and soy beans but are increasingly applied to human beings. The *Metapet* species results from a scientific experiment in which a

gene from a trained dog was inserted into a human in an attempt to create a more obedient worker. As with all transgenic experiments, there was a degree of unpredictability, which, in this case, led to a rather uncooperative worker who has a prominent tail. Players, who role-play as office managers, have at their fingertips a whole set of disciplinary technologies which can be used to encourage greater production out of their *Metapets*.

One of these disciplinary technologies the manager has in his use is the gene test. Why did you choose these areas of testing: gayness and baldness, for example?

Except for very few instances, genetic tests are unreliable. Most traits and diseases are a complex mix of genes and environment -- both inside and outside the body in which they are located. The tests you can run on your *Metapet* are all based on gene sequences that have been the subject of extensive scientific research, often paid for by public funding. They run the range of the superficial and moneymaking search for the "balding gene," to the highly controversial "gay gene," based on the absurd assumption that "gayness" is quantifiable and biologically detectable. In *Metapet*, genetic testing is primarily a disciplinary tool. Testing positive or negative can affect how the *Metapet* is perceived by her or his manager. Messing with the genes can lead to all sorts of unexpected outcomes.

As some players in *Metapet's* Manager Forum put it:

"...DONT TEST THEIR GENETICS!!!!!! They hate that I have lost two drones because I tested them early, didn't realize I shouldn't do that. I have a good pet now and although he is new, he works hard and I am keeping him healthy, and not testing him. Lol."

"...I feel there is NO value in genetic testing -- it takes away money and your pet typically responds by

rebellng. I have never fired a worker, I would work her until she leaves."

I would assume that issues like genetic research and biotechnology are discussed on a different level in America than in Europe? In Europe most of the people are against genetically modified food.

Here, most people have no idea that 60% of the items sold in our supermarkets contain genetically modified ingredients. Why should they, since none of it is labeled? GM food has been on the market since 1994, rushed through Federal regulations without an inkling as to what the long-term effects on the environment might be. For me, the key issue is not whether GM food is good or bad to eat; there has been no substantial proof that this food is any riskier to eat than chemically processed food or food sprayed with old-fashion pesticides, but rather that it is produced by mega-corporations whose expensive proprietary technology squelch small farm production.

What kind of responses have you received from the *Metapet* players ?

Before the beta was first released, the business section of the NY Times did a piece on the game, and I was quoted as saying, "We think of this as a training manual to help managers do their job better." I was bombarded with enthusiastic emails from Human Resource directors. After the game was released, contact generally has

been from people without company signatures at the bottom of their email.

I wanted to set up conditions convenient for people to play at work, and indeed it seems that there are lots of people who are playing quite steadily during work hours. The Situationists and their interventions into daily life as well as their slogans against work and for play have not escaped my game design methods.

The *Metapet* is more of an active agent that one may initially recognize. Players' positions in the game are also meant to be unstable. Winning and losing, the "goals of the game," and the satisfaction attached to each scenario are not as obvious as one might initially assume. Winning is a rather dull scenario, and I tried to make it much more rewarding to subvert the system and give your *Metapet* a break.

In the *Metapet* manager forum the players discuss their problems and progress in the game quite seriously, are you surprised by this?

I have seen the nicest people turn into the most unscrupulous managers, suggesting that the system itself constructs the subject position, disallowing the possibility of a "nice" manager within this system. This pathology is in the system rather than the individual. Ultimately, the only way out is to be a lousy manager and lose the game. Playing according to the rules will lead to the most boring

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of outcomes. Players will earn money, but who cares? Money makes you a "winner" but unlike *The Sims*, you can't do anything with the money, and the game will soon become pretty dull. On the other hand, playing poorly will lead to some of the more interesting game elements. Your *Metapet* will become a lot more colorful and rebellious, artists' mini games (in which I had other artists design simple little games about biotechnology) will show up, and your pet starts sending messages back and forth to other *Metapets*.

You have used game as an artistic form also before like in "The Intruder". Why games ?

"The Intruder" isn't really a game, it just uses the game form as an interface and metaphor, and the user moves through these interfaces, actively performing the text. The game form is a great vehicle through which to speak to aspects of mainstream computer cultures -- their military and political and economic uses. They are the pinnacle of binary logic, closed systems of rationality and technological mastery, and allow for easy abstraction of intelligence, decision-making, and death. When death becomes formalism, you know you are in trouble...

How has your background as one of the pioneering net artists affected the process of *Metapet* ? And how would you define it: net art, online game ... ?

I was attached to aspects of the net art scene in the nineties that made links to DIY culture, to conceptual art, to activism, and to rethinking new forms of public art and distributed collaboration.

The speed in which messages could spread, the viral aspect of the net, and the network itself are unlike any means of communication we have had access to before, and this

is still something that is fairly difficult, though certainly not impossible, for authoritarian forces to regulate.

What has always attracted me to the Internet is the potential to reach audiences who are not limited to self-selected art viewers.

If art has critical intentions and it's assuming a conventional and expected form, then context produces far too limited a reach for my taste. The net is the perfect place for this kind of work to be shown because no matter how hard you try, with online galleries and museums, you can't control the circulation of the work and the demographic of its users.

Defining and labeling work as art can be useful for receiving grants and for bringing together people with similar interests, but it also serves to exclude. For example, instead of calling what I do 'net art,' it could be called 'conceptual art' and attach itself to a different tradition and set of players. My current interests have been leading me to work both with and against the form of on-line games, and so I am indebted to pop culture, but also to a great legacy of twentieth century artists.

Metapet is a cross-over piece in that it actually seems to function pretty well as a game, and many people play it at face value. Yet in other contexts, *Metapet* is an art project about biotechnology.

How do you see the state of net art at the moment in general? With all the net art museums online?

Speaking of net museums, I read that MIT Media labs are working on a major art center. Eyebeam, an independent high-tech arts center in New York City, was planning to build a \$90 million building in NY's new blue chip art center, Chelsea. The danger of this is that it can serve to further ghettoize the already marginalized practice of digital art practice in the art world. As for net art, when it tries to isolate itself from the rest of the cultural practice on the net, and define itself only as Art, I think it is least interesting. It is most exciting, I think, when it can perform more than one role, when it succeeds as art, and simultaneously transgresses its position as art. RTMark has done this, Web Stalker has done this, I am trying to do this with *Metapet*. I think that, for me, this is the direction that art using the net has to take. Or else it runs the risk of functioning as a screen saver, which would suit some of the art world, keeping art 'artful' and the rest of that messy stuff of life away.

