

Natalie Bookchin



Net artist Natalie Bookchin shook things up a while back when she suggested that the time-and-space cramps faced by the makers of early digital movies and CD-ROMs were really a source of brilliant new cinematic possibilities. "As digital media replaces film and photography, it is only logical that the computer program's loop should replace photography's frozen moment and cinema's linear narrative," she wrote. "There is no true beginning or end, only a series of the loops with their endless repetitions, halted only by the user's selection or a power shortage."

Bookchin, who teaches at California Institute of the Arts, is responsible for some of the Net's most provocative art, entertainment and activism. She recently spoke with Contributing Writer Marion Long about the evolution of art on the Net.

What's the most interesting new cultural phenomenon you've spotted on the Net?

For me, the most exciting thing happening on the Internet now is work that makes use of the Net to gather people together and create some kind of action which then takes place off the Internet — in real life, so to speak. People are not remaining only in virtual or symbolic space any longer.

For instance, there's an international group of programmers, artists, designers and others who are part of a project called The Border Games. They're creating this game engine in which to discuss the idea of the Border and the kinds of problems involved in crossing borders in First and Third World countries. And they are going to imaginatively re-create on the Net the experience of being transported into an alien environment and having to deal with whole new sets of languages and customs and negotiations. But they're also providing various practical offline networks for the different groups to meet, work together and help each other.

What kinds of art on the Net will most likely pay great commercial, as well as creative, dividends?

Computer games are really the best example of a successful interactive narrative. Structurally, they are very effective, because, as a player, you have some kind of stake, you are inside the game itself. And I believe the metaphor of gaming is increasingly going to be used to discuss love, politics and gender, and for many other forms of storytelling.

For instance, I recently made art with a game called The Intruder, which is a game translation of a short story by Jorge Luis Borges about a love triangle between two men and a woman. In order to receive the story, one has to move through a series of 10 game-like scenarios and play each of them. You shift subject positions within the game, so that at one point you become one of the men, and at another, you become the woman. I'm also making it into a freestanding, full-size video arcade game, and trying to get it installed in places like the lobbies of train stations and in bars. It's a way to sneak art into spaces where art isn't expected to be. ●