

## [- An unfinished interview (or, A story for Amy).



Author: natalie

Topic: so natalie, would you like to start a discussion about some of the issues arising from metapet, genetic engineering, game development, genetically eng

Keywords:

[ ----- ]

Turns out that some of those topics come up in a rough and unfinished interview fran ilich began with me and Jin Lee a year plus ago - never finished or published. It was for Metapet, but he was unable to load the game so it was all rather hypothetical.

I post the rough cut here for your reading pleasure. (If you want more, there is another unfinished interview that mia makela and i worked on more recently.

..

Fran: one of the things that struck me the most about the metapet videogame, even when I have to admit I haven't seen much, apart from the texts you sent me, and a few previews, it's the corporate aura which emanates. was it j.g. ballard who said that one day copy letters, press releases and faxes would make great literature? enter the videogaming environments and you have the whole working space as a playground...

Natalie: Today, the "work sphere," at least as it has been defined since modernization, is steadily creeping into domains formally registered for "play". In Metapet we depict experience as being either "in the office" or "not in the office". There is no binary between work and home. Home = not being in the office. Vacation is what you do to optimize yourself for work. As far as the language, we scavenged bits and pieces from corporate resource all over the net. This language is an example of the culture of work creeping

into our consciousness outside of any specialized physical site set up to work. As valued-added members of society, we set and capitalize on achievable goals.....

Jin: As Metapet developed, we realized how important the narrative is to the content and the tone of the game, and we borrowed freely from corporate speak, which is incredibly "creative" with double talk and ambiguity of meaning, funny in its absurdity and quite revealing. Literature? no - it's empty and self serving.

Fran: when you play the sims, you can notice an enormous gap in the game, the part when your characters go to work and the only thing you can do is watch how the clock speeds and how at the end of thw working shift you character comes home again... for me, the most fun part would be to actually see and do the work of my character at his/her working space.... was this a starting point of metapet? how do you relate to this? and most importantly

Natalie: The sims provided some inspiration for our game. in both games, as a player, you are in a god like position. We try to provoke conflict in this position as god/manager so that one feels themselves in two places at the same time, identifying with the Metapet and competing as a manager. We reverse the simms surface logic, that you are only at work to earn the money you need to provide happiness, which happens through social interaction and through consumption. What you buy and the size of your house are critical elements that bring about happiness. In our game, we focus on the logic of that kind of social and political economy, with the Metapet, specially tailored (or Taylor-ized) to be as productive as possible.

Jin: The Sims is a break from work world, centered on domestic life and social relationships. Work is something that happens outside the screen, something that just happens by itself (which may partially explain the game's popularity). And yet, given the highly consumerist life style (you start the game by shopping to furnish your place), work and income that allow the pleasures of life is never far from the player's mind. Even the hobbies (reading, cooking) are strategies for enhancing job skills, and there are constant opportunities for finding a new/better paying job. Whether the work you do is/should be/can be meaningful doesn't seem to factor into the equation. no, we did not start from the Sims, although we did play it and i was addicted to it for a little while.

Fran: there was a time in the 1990's when most tv serials where based around people working in one way or another with media, which made many people feel alienated from the stories they told. the reason socioligist gave - and I have to agree on this- is that the screenwriters who wrote the stories spent so much time getting to a point where they could make an actual tv show, so that when they did it, they where so apart from real normal life, that they could only write stories of people working with media. should we expect a similar process in videogames? of course nowadays people who spend more time working in front of a computer, are more liable to play videogames and develop a new understanding of life, and in the process will need a different kind of games? what do you make of this? and how would you fit in this story?

Natalie: Metapet is game of work as play. It appears to be a dystopian futuristic environment, but also subtly suggests ways out that may not be apparent on first glance. It is a free game on the Internet that one can start

and stop playing as need be (for example when the boss enters the room). For tight situations where there is little privacy, we have provided the extra feature of a boss button, that will allow you to toggle back and forth from the game to a more appropriate graphic. Players take on the roll of manager whose presumable goal is to get your Metapet to work. However, in order to play, you need to stop working, hopefully at work, and on your company's dime.

Fran: there is something that might seem like an almost impossinble to break conspiracy theory, that is 1984 the novel by george orwell. it is supposed that a totalitarian system like this keeps people producing new goods, meanwhile they do their best to satisfy the new desires which are created by such a system. if we take this to be true, the computer is basically a machine which apart from being a superentertainment system, is a workstation, or sometimes a mobile office, and with internet, something like a global localizer, which will keep people tied up to a new commodified consumer desire, which according to bakhtinian ideology, could also work for freedom, as in the case of the masquerade. if so,what would you make out of videogames... monstrous comsumer drugs, an opportunity for you to create a narrative scenario....?

Natalie: I am hoping that there will be, through the process of game play, an experience that supersedes the interpretation of Metapet as a depiction of an totalitarian structure of work. We don't believe that the capitalist system is inescapable or unchangeable. We have tried to set up an experience that offers options that go against the grain of the Orwellian scenario. They may not be as obvious as the initial dark reading of Metapet as a concretization of technologies of control, but hopefully will be found by curious game players. The Situationists and their interventions into daily life as well as their slogans against work and for play have not escaped me and my game design methods. The Metapet is more of an active agent that one may initially recognize. Players positions in the game are also instable. Winning and losing, the "goals of the game", and the satisfaction attached to each scenario are not as linear or clear-cut as one might assume. Winning may be a rather dull scenario, and it may be more rewarding to subvert the system. How far against the grain of the "rules of the game" a player is willing to go depends on the subject position she chooses to occupy.

Jin: I am curious as to what happens when the miniature work world of Metapet is played inside the real corporate work environment. In playing the game, the computer, an essential tool in pursuit for increased productivity and efficiency, can function as a kind of mirror to the environment in which it is situated.

Fran: this would bring me to the next one.... when you create such a piece, what do you make of drama structures? are we really at the end of the tragedy, and more into an eea of postmodern narrative? and if so, how does your approach fits in this.

Natalie: I do not believe we have arrived at either "the end of tragedy" or for that matter, the end of history. As for postmodern narrative,I have been attracted to using game structures to create generative narratives partially constituted by user chooses. Games are, on the one hand, closed systems that necessarily call for some reduction and abstraction of character and environment. But on the other hand ,the game narratives can not exist

without players, and each player's version is potentially a new iteration.

Fran: if Lawrence Durrell made his 'quartet of Alexandria' inspired and to correspond to an age of quantum physics, have you any plans of working in 4D videogames? would this be completely realistic, real time operas, where people could be constructing in real time, more space, and material objects?

Natalie: As of now, having not even finished Metapet yet, I have no plan except to finish Metapet ;)

Jin: we haven't even gotten to the 3D games yet. Metapet is a simple game in many ways, single player, fixed space, basic animations and design, advancing through written narratives. I've come to appreciate the "limitations" of Metapet, however, especially the sense of collapsed time and the flatness, which I think playfully counters the darkness of the game. 4D Metapet would be scary (and redundant!)

Fran: if technology is so advanced in the context of Metapet, why pursue the direction of genetics, instead of artificial machines? isn't this a very ethical question, which speaks about humanity? why not make machines which are working all day, so people can dedicate their lives and time, to the more meaningful and symbolic matters, like art, sports, and to resolve the existential questions which puzzle humanity...? in other words, the construction and localization of utopia...

Natalie: The Metapet comes out of a twentieth century tradition, beginning with Frederick Taylor, the early and influential twentieth century engineer, and first expert on worker efficiency. Under the guise of science, or "scientific management" Taylor studied workers as they lay bricks, worked on sewing machines, etc, in order to identify and eliminate wasteful movements and "non-productive" time. Enter Henry Ford and his assembly line; workers became a link in the chain of production, no more and no less important than any other. Mid century sees the merging of these concepts with a burgeoning computational society. With Norbert Wiener's cybernetics, the focus moves from the outside of the body and its movements to its internal workings. Humans and machines are seen as functioning through a process of feed back loops, based on the science of systems and information and principles of regulation and control. Under this model there is no differentiating between the human and the machine. With Metapet, as with our last project, a half hour Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, called Biotaylorism, (a project Jin and I made while we were with the group RTMark) we look at the ways that scientists, particularly geneticists, the currently revered knowledge producers under capitalism, regard the workings of the body. More specifically we argue that genetics and biotechnology are being used to continue this trajectory I describe above of optimizing humans (and organic life in general) for the sake of industry and productivity, for the sake of capitalism. The body is still understood as a machine, only now it is a digital machine, with readable, modifiable and upgradeable code. This is fine from the perspective of science, even exciting, given the promises for cures for disease, aging etc. But then again, scientists, often sitting on the board of directors or at least a shareholder in a biotech company, can not reasonably fall back on old claims of objectivity in their choice of research direction. There is pressure to produce, and pressure to make a marketable product. Biotechnology, the practical use of genetics, unites the early engineering principles (Taylorism, Fordism) with organic life to develop products, products with often

unforeseen side effects, as has occurred with the Metapet and its tail.

Fran: what do you think of these real life human beings, which can be compared to the metapets? I'm thinking of human cheap labor on some parts of the third world...

Natalie: The issues I discussed above are a part of a global trend in capitalism, and of course they ultimately effect the poorest (and the darkest and the females) first. The Metapet is a first world creature, living in a swanky ultra modern office and worrying about her promotion and her figure. The optimization of human labor through high tech science in Metapet is of course partly science fiction right now, but the real effects of focusing on "fixing" individuals rather than fixing society, the world we document in Metapet, results from a belief system visible in first world science and its influence on policy. And of course, someone has to make the machines that run in the first world labs. And it most likely isn't the Metapet, but rather cheap labor in sweat shop conditions as you mention.

Jin: Metapets are not specific to third world laborers but can be found in the first world as well, and their labor may or may not be cheap. The game allows players to stand in the shoes of corporate managers, who's goal is to figure out ways to manipulate their workers-cheap or expensive- but reducible to overhead cost expenditure in any case- to produce as effeciently as possible. Production leads to money, and the player with the most money wins. However, we have filled the game with rewards for the losers. Managers who learn the conditions in which their Metapet won't work are treated to a host of surprises, including a series of mini-games which pop up at the most unproductive moments in the life of the Metapet. The game allows people to make their own choices. We invite players to play both sides. On the one hand players perform the role of the manager; at the same time, it is hard not to identify with your Metapets. The game does not give answers, it only raises questions and invites discussion. The Metapet's emails, which managers are encouraged to read, and the game's dialogue are features that help focus the game around issues of work, subversion, and protest.

Fran: observing the videogame for a few moments suggests that the addition of genetics into to the metapet salad makes this simulation go much further than haraways theory of the cyborg. it also speaks about colonization, control, and a fate which is determined by birth.

Natalie: The Metapet is a cyborg, as is the player, or manager controlling the Metapet. Like Haraway, we use irony in creating our "offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism". Unlike Haraway, we do not try to rework this vision into a utopia but rather use it as a mirror. Humor and play are good ways to speak about things that are not funny, without being overly didactic.

Jin: Genetics is used in the game as a method of discipline. Genetic screening tests serve nothing but to encourage Metapets to behave more according to their manager's wishes. They are not any more of a predictor of the future than fortune cookie.

Fran: can the metapet in anyway be compared to a slave?

Natalie: No. The metapet can choose to leave the situation without much

fuss, when the going gets rough.

Jin: No, not at all. The Metapet can not be bought or sold, only hired and fired. The Metapet can not be traded and has quite a bit of agency and self determination.

Fran: your work is questioning very intensely labor on itself, as well as corporations, and the imprisonment they make of minds and humans on intervals of 8 hours, any comments? what's your intention to put work, in a technological society, in the shadow of the doubt...?

Natalie: Yes, both symbolically and literally. As I mentioned above, play the game at work! It's free, on-line and we even have a boss button for your protection!

Jin: Yes. I think that play is a critically important part of life, and I want to encourage it at all moments, and to set up the conditions that make it easy for people at work to play. I believe that productivity is tremendously overrated, and that the rewards of exploited labor are much less exciting than the rewards of creativity and play. The intention was to put work, in a capitalistic society, in jeopardy by encouraging reflective and meaningful play.

Fran: recently I heard that the president of the USA, George W. Bush, said to the senators that he recommended prohibiting all kind of cloning experimentation in USA soil. This can lead to any kind of speculation, and conspiracy theories. Does he want people to support clonation, based on the fact that all oppositions sometimes react blindly? Is he really concerned? What would be the scenario in case he would prohibit this, and would Metapet be more close to reality?

Natalie: The debate is based on religion, mythology, ignorance and science fiction. But who would expect less from the president of the United States. Cloning can not produce a carbon copy of a life form because life is not reducible to a series of DNA particles.

[ ----- ]

Submitted by **nataliebookchin**

Posted on Thu May 22, 2003 at 10:38 PM EURODISCORDIA TIME

 

Stories, articles, images and comments are owned by the Author. The Rest © 2003 The Discordants under the Gnu Public License

[submit story](#) | [create account](#) | [faq](#) | [search](#)