

Marie Lechner from Paris approached me with a few questions about CD-ROMs. She will use the material for a publication related to the coming exhibition at IMAL in Brussels called **Welcome to the Future! the floppy cd-rom revolution** or the short life of born-digital art (March 19 till April 26, 2015). Welcome to the Future is curated by Yves Bernard (iMAL) and Dirk Paesmans (jodi.org) with the collaboration of Marie Lechner (Libération, Pamal.org), Emmanuel Lorrain (Packed) and Yannick Antoine (iMAL)

Marie Lechner: When and why did you get interested in CD-ROM?

Geert Lovink: I got interested in CD-ROMs in the early 1990s when these discs transformed from boring database storage devices to well-crafted multi-media Gesamtkunstwerk a la the titles from Voyager. I had become an editor of the video art magazine Mediamatic early 1989 and it was just about to open itself up to multi-media and cyberspace. In first instance this was all about hypertext, but soon audio and moving images were possible too and the browsing became much more fun.

ML: Do you consider CD-ROM as a new storage or a new media? Was there something like CD-rom art?

GL: CD-ROMs were and still are high arts. Some of them are very poetic, mysterious, complex. Already at the time they only worked on some hardware, with extra plug-ins, a mouse etc.

What makes CD-ROMs so unique is also its greatest weakness: it is a closed environment, a data monade. The best CD-ROMs are still more complex than the internet today, 20 years later, in particular if you look at it from the average user perspective who is encapsulated into the limited template culture of the dominant social media platforms. Needless to say, CD-ROMs were NOT social. It was all about exploration of data spaces. The scope was psychedelic in nature and geared against traditional media architectures. You can also say they were a bit pedagogical. At best naughty, with a dark side that was simply clumsy. The central desire of CD-ROMs was to blow up traditional forms of navigation. This is experimental, sometimes critical interface design that intended to open up both our minds and bodies. The approach was anti-usability avant la lettre: the idea was not to create smooth user experiences. Of course this later on backfired against the CD-ROM and its devoted class of multi-media designers that the grown in size considerably around 1996-1997, including its own (commercial) degrees

and curriculum for media departments and art schools.

ML: Was there a difference between the European production and let's say the US's production?

GL: This is tempting to think, but I would say, no. Once artists and designers 'understood' Macromedia Director, interesting CD-ROMs could come from everywhere. It was all about narration, and certain people love that. CD-ROMs were fashionable objects for the new media avantgarde of the early-mid 90s. Hardcore IT geeks hated the narrative layer and thought it was all bullshit, fluff. That's a more interesting cultural clash, not Europe vs. the US. We could say that with the final triumph of the Web, the geeks have won. The role of geeks in large CD-ROM productions was minimal. These productions, in the golden era of the CD-ROM, were anyway more structured like film productions, including the structure of the budget, shootings, story boards etc.

ML: What was the specificity of the CD rom for creators and artistes? What new opportunities did it offer?

GL: It put creators aka 'directors' in the drivers' seat. This is no longer the case because of the decline of the homepage and the (personal) website. These days content needs to be centralized, contextualized, metatagged, in order to make it findable and suitable for social media and their advertisement machinery and surveillance partners. The rise of platforms has really killed the creators as central figures, even though many would not experience that in such a way. It is lovely to get the links and likes, no? But artists are paying a high price for this in terms of artistic freedom. Social media are so limiting. Look at the way smart phones are steering the aesthetics of young people, and how conformist their taste has become. There is a dictatorship of the the crowd these days (and the selfie is a good example of this). In some ways it feels like we're back in the dark 1970s. Today's zine culture cannot possibly be part of the hegemonic social media infrastructure.

ML: Was the CD-ROM a real "revolution" or just a way to aggregate previous existing forms (music, art, photo etc)?"

GL: Revolution is not the right term, I fear. The changes of 1989 were revolutionary, yes. The 1990s were dominated by the arrival of neo-liberalism, also in arts and culture, by techno and raves, and a terribly

boring corporate culture that showed off its hegemony through ruthless privatizations. The second part of the decade appeared excessive and worry-free, certainly in comparison to the time after 9-11 and was in many places a period of economic growth. The 'democratization' of PCs and the arrival of these multi-media machines in arts and culture is part of that Zeitgeist.

ML: What CD-ROM made you the strongest impression? What's your favorite one?

GL: Of course the Voyager titles... The ones Willem Velthoven and his crew produced at Mediamatic, including the one from jodi... I have also good memories of the works of the Finnish artist Marita Liulia. I witnessed a few of her productions from nearby. Then there is George Legrady's An Annotated Archive from the Cold War from 1994 and Linda Dement's Cyberflesh Girlmonster from 1995.

ML: What were the main difficulties to diffuse and make this new medium popular?

GL: Excuse me, but CD-ROMs have never been popular. There were certainly wet dreams, of publishers, and tons of New Age future scenarios. But in the end, there were not enough PCs that could read the discs. And, in the end, the medium was killed by the rise and rise of the Web. We all know that... The real quality of CD-ROMs lied in their hybrid

ML: How do you analyse afterwards the 'failure' of the medium?

GL: Tragic for some, but most players moved on and did remarkably well a few years later. The early 2000s were no fun, that's for sure. I have always hoped that 20-50 years the same functionality would be possible inside the Web, on smart phones and tablets but there is no sign yet of a 'renaissance' of the multi-media era. Instead, we're moving a very dull one-way street, defined and designed by Silicon Valley venture capitalists and their (male) geek slaves and their add-driven like economy and their fascist dream of platform conversion into the one, seamless, invisible, omnipresent, hand-held Service, aimed to crush cultural diversity and the multiplicity of peer-to-peer initiatives.

ML: What is the legacy of those experiments for the contemporary creation and for the digital edition? What are its descendants?

GL: For a few years the 'multi-media' expertise disappeared. Macromedia Director was replaced by HTML, CSS and maybe Java, Ajax or PHP, depending on the person. Someone should just walk into the door, take control and blow up the entire template culture that limits or collective imagination at the moment. Start all over, with an empty screen. Only then, the multi-media legacy of the 1990s can truly thrive and be judged according to its innovative and weird qualities. I know it is safe to say that the multi-media knowledge of the time ended up in the games industry, but according to me games are a whole different universe all together. Why I exclude games here is simple: CD-ROMs were information environments. CD-ROMs emerge from this one-off marriage between graphic design and information studies: the aesthetics of databases. The other place where CD-ROM 'knowledge' might have landed is the DVD industry that took off soon after the CD-ROMs themselves faded away but this is, of course, a dark chapter, as DVD mastering is so much more primitive and is connected to Hollywood, the global film distribution mafia and the porn industry. How horrible is it, to navigate a DVD? Will anyone ever do an exhibition about that?

ML: Do you think it is important to preserve the born digital content? And if so, under what form?

GL: Sure, I know there are emulators that translate CD-ROM content to the Web, but to be honest, I have not used so far. I like your idea, to present the CD-ROMs on original hardware. But what's most important to do, is to preserve the design principles and teach them to next generations of designers. Right now, there is an immediate danger that the design discipline altogether leaves the internet context, because it goes 'post-digital' and we all return to our offline analog pastorate, inside our localities. We reject this romanticism! With the CD-ROMs in our hands who once showed us the way: other information architectures are possible! There is nothing wrong with such cyber utopia.. what was painful was its sweet and soft, innocent aesthetics. Info visualization can be so much more than statistics turned into colorful data clouds.

ML: One last question. Would you mind giving a little insight into CD-ROMs in relation to the Mediamatic story?

GL: This can only be strictly auto-biographical. Ever since the early 1990s I had chosen to belong to the 'other side' and figure what the networked environments had to offer. At the time, computer networks were crude and

unreliable, often txt-only, certainly internet. With my squatters and activist background I chose the social, community side, not the fancy stand-alone multi-media universes. CD-ROMs to me were exotic one-off objects, filled with unknowns and packed with digital aesthetics. There is something to be said to read this as 'female other' in comparison to the 'male' side of computer hardware and systems theory. Even though it would be far-fetched to read the CD-ROM scene as a feminist project, it is no doubt true that CD-ROM production gave more space to women, compared to the male-only world of computer science that drove the early internet.

Mediamatic was, and since a good decade again is, a visual arts enterprise. For five years, I was responsible for media theory and books reviews. As an arts magazine it was, and still is, part of the museum and gallery world. This is why it could deal so well with CD-ROMs, which, in the nineties were often 'exhibited' during festivals, conferences and exhibitions (much in the same as do now, retrospectively). It was not presumed that everyone had the right computer at home (if any...). I want not involved in the production of the CD-ROMs, not even on the side. As far as I can tell, six Mediamatic CD-ROMs have been produced in total, not all designed and produced by Willem Velthoven.

The (paper) magazine, that stopped soon after I left, was a distribution vehicle for CD-ROMs. This was, and still is, the real nightmare: how do you market, distribute and sell all these objects? That's why CDs and DVDs are now eventually dying as well. Both have not yet reached the cult status of collectibles, such as vinyl records. I hope audio cassettes will also become hot soon. They deserve it. CD-ROMs are almost there, also thanks to your efforts in Brussels!