A New Electronic Genre: The CD-ROM
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Abstract: This poster session will detail the rather brief historical development of the CD-ROM medium from an artistic point of view and will suggest some possible directions for future developments of the genre. When once this medium was merely used as an information and retrieval system, audio/video artists have begun to redefine its use. Each of the previous works was significant in that it pushed the boundaries—the composers and visual artists involved with the production of each particular CD-ROM push the work toward a state of being art rather than merely discussing it.

Section I Introduction

Until recently, the CD-ROM has served as a tool for storage of information—your system back-up material from your favorite hard drive, large data files, etc. However, with the popularity of the computer games, the medium moved into bigger, better, faster, and more widespread uses such as Myst, Doom, and Marathon. Because these games were not limited to the space of one or two diskettes, but rather had 650 M to fill up, users were related to more and better graphics, as well as expanded sound capabilities.

Within the last few years, university musicians have attempted to use the CD-ROM as a teaching tool as evidenced by Robert Winter's CD-ROM series. Stravinsky, Mozart, and Beethoven have all become digital stars brought to your very classrooms.

In 1992 three CD-ROMs of significant artistic impotence were released. Although there have been disputes about who ACTUALLY released the very first CD-ROM, the three in the running are Peter Gabriel's XPLORA, Morton Subotnick's As My Hummingbirds Have Alibis, and The Residents' Freakshow. The general focus of these works was to: 1) present a previously-written composition in such a way as to make it more interesting to a non-musical audience, 2) enhance an existing album of works with live animation and video, or 3) captivate an audience with marketing tools designed to inversely the sale of other albums, t-shirts, posters, etc. Other visual and audio artists soon followed suit (Laurie Anderson, The Cranberries, Sara MacLaughlin, etc.), introducing more artistic flair into this new genre.

I would like to present portions of three CD-ROMs that were released between 1992 and 1996. All though all of these works are in the artistic vein rather than overtly information, they tend to fall into the clearly-defined sub-areas of enhanced audio CD, educational CD-ROM, and art-based CD-ROM.

Section II All My Hummingbirds Have Alibis

Morton Subotnick's As My Hummingbirds Have Alibis (Voyager 1992) is a work completed entirely in grayscale. This is a presentation of an earlier electroacoustic composition (from 1991) in CD-ROM format, and is somewhat educational in its presentation of the material. Also included on this CD-ROM is a brief work, 5 Scenes from an Imaginary Ballet, which Subotnick calls "the first piece of music composed especially for CD-ROM. Both romantic and cerebral, these five short pieces integrate music with Max Ernst's images and texts, which appear on the screen as the music plays." The CD-ROM is organized into seven major parts—Introduction and Credits, Program Notes, A Composer's View, All My Hummingbirds Have Alibis, 5 Scenes from an Imaginary Ballet, About the Music, and About the Technology. The actually composition All My Hummingbirds Have Alibis is subdivided into seventeen sections (this declaration is taken from the original score). Each section includes links to a still picture from the Ernst Collage books, a section of score, and a narrative about the section. The user has the option of playing a single selection or playing from that section to the end of the piece. The presentation is linear in its organization—elements are placed in a specific order and the user is encouraged to view some sections prior to others. This is not an intimidating environment for someone not accustomed to the CD-ROM.
environment. Although the interactivity of this CD-ROM is somewhat primitive when compared to current technology, the composition is beautifully presented with still images and sound selections.

Section III Freakshow

The second work I would like to examine is The Residents' Freakshow (Voyager 1993), also available through Voyager. This CD-ROM is based on an earlier album from 1973, and is, therefore, really a piece reimagined for CD-ROM environment. The project was directed by The Residents and animated by Jim Lawrie. In this CD-ROM, the user is placed into the world of an imaginary Freakshow. The underground band, The Residents, began in 1970 in San Mateo, CA. They were experimenting with multitrack tape recorders. Since the early 1970s, the group has released nearly twenty album length discs, as well as many singles and EPs. Their icons is an eyeball, and they never appear in person, but rather are literally covered by the esgima of the eyeballs.

Freakshow explores a carnival sideshow. According to the liner note, the group believes that soap operas and television talk shows have replaced the carnival atmosphere. "More than anything else, The Residents Freak Show CD-ROM is a collection of interconnection of stories about the down-and-out inhabitants of a fantasy freak show." Is the "Buy or Die" section of the CD-ROM the user will find Residents' propaganda t-shirts, previous albums, posters, etc. In its organization, the work appears to be non-linear; the user is free to explore various themes at will. However, if one examines the actual format within this imaginary world, s/he discovers that there is, in fact, a beginning, middle, and end to the composition. Although more commercial in design and musical presentation, this is an exquisite work.

Section IV Dido and Aneis

The final work to be presented is Dido and Anais (1995), an interactive CD-ROM composition by this author. The work was specifically designed around the abilities and limitations of the CD-ROM environment. Dido and Anais is divided into six sections, ranging from general information to three video/musical compositions. Background information on the fundamental "how-to's" of navigating the environment are presented in one section; biographical information is provided in section two. Sections three and four introduce the user to the worlds of Henry Miller and Anais Nin, and the Purcell opera Dido and Aeneas. These sections contain bio-bibliographical information, as well as incorporating external sound elements for further investigation. The final section of the CD-ROM contains three music and video compositions. These are two-minute works (given the current limitations of CD-ROM accessibility) based on the play on words and context of the Miller/Nin and the Dido/Aeneas relationships.

Section V Conclusion

The general purpose of this roster session is to present several works in the CD-ROM genre. Where once this medium was merely used as an information and retrieval system, audio/video artists have begun to redefine its use. Each of the previous works was significant in that is pushed the boundaries—the composers and visual artists involved with the production of each particular CD-ROM push the work toward a state of being art rather than merely marketing it.