

# Good Girls go to Heaven, Bad Girls go Everywhere

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*“On the most rudimentary level there is simply terror of feeling like an immigrant in a place where your children are natives, where you’re always going to be behind the 8-ball because they can develop the technology faster than you can learn it. It’s what I call the learning curve of Sisyphus. And the only people who are going to be comfortable with that are people who don’t mind confusion and ambiguity.”*

John Perry Barlow, lyricist for The Grateful Dead und co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

Featured on a postcard for “digitalbrainstorming”, a series of events under the auspices of the percent-for-art program of Migros (Science & Future).

All that is subsumed under “new media” has rapidly been transformed from a highly specialized branch of knowledge into a widespread tool of communication exercising an ironclad grasp on our everyday life and outlook. It happened so quickly that there was no time to develop a universally understandable language to help users become familiar with these media. The proclamations of success from the IT field – which until recently seemed an endless succession – were accompanied by a generalized feeling of frustration and exclusion, combined with an enormous pent-up demand for more information and expertise in the matter.

With an entire issue of “Swiss Art” at its disposal, [plug.in] would like to contribute to the development of a comprehensible language covering media art, and to grant readers of this magazine access to what this entails both ideally and realistically. To that end, this issue takes a three-pronged approach:

- We want to relate the history of [plug.in], and provide a measure of insight into the network to which this recent institution belongs, for the [plug.in] history and network illustrate many vital aspects of the digital and analog electronic culture.
- In a series of interviews und essays, we shall attempt to delve more deeply into several topics of particular importance to [plug.in] presently and for the future. The questions addressed in this issue highlight very special aspects

that are not only specific to the new media, but that have artistic and social implications as well.

- Finally, we have sprinkled the issue with box insets, providing definitions for a handful of of media technology’s inescapable concepts. These insets are not intended as a comprehensive glossary, but merely as a selection of terms that we consider to be essential.

The history of [plug.in]: Sound foresight based on a realization.

It was in the summer of 1999 that [plug.in] – at the time, still named “New Media Forum” – was jointly initiated by the Chistoph Merian Foundation in Basel and the Canton of Basel City. The two partners set up a committee that, under the direction of the Basel video artist Käthe Walser, proposed a very circumspect and clever strategy. Instead of designing an institutional structure themselves, their idea was to create a site with an eye to develop just such a structure in the first place.

I term their strategy “circumspect” because it was based on a realization that is central to the whole issue: the committee came to understand that conventional art institutions – museums and galleries – are not compatible with the requirements of media art. And this for structural reasons. Our experience has exposed all of us to highly frustrating gallery and museum computer display encounters – when we either cannot cope or else butt against restrictive settings that spoil the digital adventure for even the hardest computer art viewers. Not to mention the times we do not even get that far, because the computer is not working at all. Add to this a slew of fellow viewers peeking over one’s shoulder in the hopes of at last catching a glimpse of something – anything – revelatory of the magic of art on the Net, and one can only conclude that the White Cube just does not

lend itself well to this sort of computer experience. The public’s widespread demand to at last learn something about the new media and media art is simply not fulfilled. And there is even more to this incompatibility, inasmuch as the media artists themselves have little interest in what museums and galleries have



to offer them. Museums will put the curator's choice of artists – respectively works – on display to the public, even if it is an elitist art public at that. People who use the Internet as their medium generate their public themselves though, and have no desire to leave that task up to curators or museums. Their artistic strategies often aim to enter into contact with their public through a far more private framework – that is, through each viewer's personal computer.

So much for what the [plug.in] committee came to realize, so much for the experience that so many of us have shared, and so much for a few of the incongruities meant to be spanned by the concept that I began to develop in the summer of the year 2000.

The concept's development turned out to be a five-month, public process. Participating in the discussions over the eventual functions of an additional media institution were theorists (Sadie Plant, Birmingham), representatives of other media institutions (Spela Kucan, Ljudmila, Ljubljana; Martin Wassermair, public netbase, Vienna), and several people with production experience (Muda Mathis, Basel; Mark Tribe, rhizome, New York), together with the audience in Basel. Artists were invited to make online contributions – Internet works expressing their needs, wishes and requirements with respect to such an institution. The whole process is documented on our website.

Thereupon, the result of the debates and discussions were translated into a company concept. Together with the opening of the public forum this concept was presented to the public in December 2000. The new media to be dealt with by [plug.in] was defined as encompassing both the analog and digital electronic realms: the Internet, video, television, radio and new technologies. In the end, it was the least recent among these media that served as the basis for defining the parameters for all of them, including those in the digital realm and their social and artistic implications. The [plug.in] business concept entails two main realms of activity: presentations, tailored to the demands of the viewers; and productions, tailored to those of the artists.

For the presentations, [plug.in] created a public forum in the form of a living room along Federico Cambero's trademark design lines and thus presenting a contradiction to the usual neutrality of an exhibition space. It is a venue that invites viewers less to contemplate than to linger on, to participate.

Featuring a selection of works for viewing (this issue mentions several of them, while our homepage lists them in full), our living room offers visitors a relaxed and informal setting in which to familiarize themselves with media art. An "attendant" is available to help and point out additional works. This venue is also devoted to a variety of events: film and video screenings, lectures, Net art tours, performances, club evenings, live acts with electronic music, and more still. These are intended for various sectors of the public: [plug.in] offers the generation that grew up with digital media an opportunity to show their work for discussion and to become acquainted with other artistic viewpoints. The general "uninitiated" public, on the other hand, will enjoy a view of what is going on today in the media art world.

The program is prepared by a network of curators – "Network agents" who feed in projects, events, online contributions, or works for the public living room from anywhere in the world. With this set up, [plug.in] promotes a curatorial policy that does away with familiar hierarchical and established relationships in favor of a participatory strategy and changing constellations.

[plug.in] takes on two to three production projects a year. The purpose here is to enable artists to tackle a technologically challenging piece. To this end, [plug.in] provides the necessary know-how and network; it also shares in the search for third-party fundraising and the distribution of the works. The "New Media Production-Premises" interview provides insight into this realm of [plug.in] activity.

The name [plug.in] stands for an electricity circuit's analog outlet, and for digital program extensions enabling integration with other software products. Our name states our purpose: to expand the artistic discourse, such as it is stored on society's hard drive, through innovation. The media art projects featured by [plug.in] behave like viruses: They want to expand everywhere, like the Bad Girls in the title. Unlike the viruses we know, though, these here are not about spreading damage. Instead they diffuse insight and new perspectives.

Annette Schindler, [plug.in] Director

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