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SITO: THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF COLLABORATIVE ART ON THE INTERNET

Summary:

SITO is one of the biggest Internet-based art cooperatives, with thousands of images, hundreds of artists, and numerous online collaborative projects. Since its birth nearly four years ago, SITO has grown dramatically in both size and complexity. How can one address some of the day-to-day maintenance problems of an online art site while simultaneously making it easier for people to participate as both artists and audience?

Keywords: online art, collaboration, gallery administration, distributed art databases, collaborative programming

HISTORY

At the very beginning of 1993, a directory was created on an obscure ftp site found on a renegade machine in a busy .edu domain. The directory was the beginning of a project called OTIS — “the Operative Term Is Stimulate”.

The dream was simple, and yet, at the time, fairly revolutionary: create a place where artists could distribute their works digitally, via the Internet. Although now the concept of the “online gallery” is an all-too-common one, at the time of its birth, OTIS was one of the first. Even to this day, many of its features are still unique or rare among the net’s galleries — free to anyone, non-digital works scanned for free, highly active mail list, evolving collaborative projects, etc.

Within months, many artists were submitting digital works from all over the world, and still more were having paper-, film-, and canvas-based works scanned and displayed on OTIS.

From the very beginning, a second side of OTIS emerged. It was known as “SYNERGY”, and it was the blanket name for the OTIS collaborative project initiative. OTIS:SYNERGY started out with simple concepts like collaborative tarot card decks (SYNERGY:ARCANA) and free-for-all real-time online get-togethers, SYNERGY:PANIC. To this day, PANICs occur nearly every weekend with a handful of online artists chatting, handing images back and forth, manipulating them, and passing them on.

Soon, the World Wide Web was the tool of choice for informa-

tion perusal on the Internet. OTIS quickly converted its holdings to this new format, and developed further ways to simplify both the OTIS gallery and SYNERGY usage and interaction. With hundreds of artists playing in its spaces, OTIS grew and grew. Due to a tiny legal mix-up, OTIS became SITO. More SYNERGY projects were dreamt up and some even worked. The gallery — newly christened as “Artchives” — fattened with still more works.

PRESENT

This brings us to the current state of SITO. As one of the largest art cooperatives on the net, we feel it is our goal to explore as many ideas in this relatively new world as we can. A large part of SITO (and the biggest cause for its success) is the community of people involved. SITO supports a very active mail list. It offers a very open arena for critique and experimentation. People who never otherwise would consider themselves artists (and who probably still don’t!) are given a chance to show their works to a potentially large audience, risk-free. The SYNERGY projects offer infinite opportunity for explorations into the possibilities of communities and collaboration on the Internet.

But, as one might suspect, this kind of growth, depth, and experimentation comes with a cost. We at SITO also feel it is our duty to share our administrative experiences with those who are undertaking similar projects.

Offering the ability for anyone, anywhere, to display potentially unlimited numbers of works for free is a hefty task to say the least! SITO has been very fortunate not to have had too many negative experiences with this policy. Other than the obvious work overload and rare attempt to exploit our kindness, things have gone fairly smoothly.

How, though, does one address some of the day-to-day maintenance problems of an online art cooperative while simultaneously making it easier and easier for people to participate as both artists and audience?

We will look at this problem from the point of view of each of the two major parts of SITO: the Artchives and the SYNERGY projects. After discussing the current methods employed, new ideas being explored and developed for the future will be covered.

ARTCHIVES

As a hold-over from the early conversion to WWW format, the SITO Artchives are still maintained as a file-hierarchy-based space. Each artist has associated pages providing information like biographical data and listings of works in SITO. Although there is a system of categorization of the artwork (by medium as well as subject), this, too, is maintained by hand, on a strictly straightforward text file basis — e.g., editing the photography.html page to add new works. While this method is thorough, it does not allow for any flexibility in the way the Artchives are browsed. Visitors who want to look at oil-painted portraits are stuck choosing either the “oil painting” page or the “portrait” page.

An obvious choice for improvement would be automation of some or all methods of displaying the contents of the Artchives. However, the problem goes deeper than just browsing. The administrative duties of SITO are becoming increasingly more difficult and backlogged. It is important to stress the need for automation of the maintainers’ jobs as well as the task of simply looking at the works.

The structure and goal of the Archives has changed little since SITO began. You can look at art, and decide what you are going to look at by subject, medium, or artist. However, an automation of the entire SITO Artchives is currently under development and will be discussed in detail in the “FUTURE” section below.

SYNERGY

SITO:SYNERGY, by its very nature, is a changing, dynamic cre-

ature. This makes it slower to develop and more complicated. There have been “failed” attempts at SYNERGY projects (we call them “lessons”). There have also been very successful collaborative ventures.

While the Artchives are basically a digital analogy of a real-world phenomenon, SYNERGY (and indeed most online collaborative projects) is often charting new territories, both logistically and technically.

Most SYNERGY projects start as an idea spewed forth on the mail list: “Hey, why don’t we do something like . . . ?” If there seem to be enough people who like the idea, then the SITO powers-that-be decide to pursue it. But, what does this entail? A great idea can often become a nightmare to the poor souls who have to develop it. On the net, this usually means setting up elaborate programs to do all sorts of magic things — in addition to the very human job of coordinating how groups of people all over the world interact.

Unlike online galleries, net collaborative projects often require entirely new concepts and tools in order to come to life. SITO is fortunate to have volunteers who spend time pounding out Perl code and keeping groups organized. Some SYNERGY projects (like the PANICs) are simple for both administrator and participant — everyone gets on irc, uploads and downloads files from an ftp directory, and plays with the images. Others require both complicated procedures on the server and a delicate balance between ease of use and complexity for the participant.

An example of the latter type is the latest SYNERGY project, HyGRID. This is not only the most successful SITO:SYNERGY undertaking in terms of participation, with nearly 50 artists and 500 pieces; but, it is also SITO’s most successful in terms of praise, interest, and — seemingly — viewer enjoyment.

We believe effectiveness and success in online collaborative ventures can be linked to the two base rules we have seen as a pattern in our past SYNERGY projects:

1. Make it interesting aesthetically and conceptually, and, if possible, dependent upon, or relevant to, the Internet as the medium.
2. Make it incredibly simple to use, contribute to, and administer. The net already confuses enough people — why make it worse?

These are no small tasks indeed!

THE FUTURE – ARTCHIVES

The aforementioned automation of SITO’s Artchives is currently under development. This system is known as EGADS — Electronic Global Arts Database System. It addresses the two important points of flexibility for the viewer and maintainability by automating both as completely as possible. Searching for art by keywords, artist data, subject and so forth is easily performed on the core database of artists and their works. In addition, the curator’s job of moving a submitted work into the system is automated as much as possible — administrators are notified of new submissions, view the works and the corresponding informational data (title, media, etc.), make adjustments and related enhancements (such as automatic thumbnail generation), then approve the submission for inclusion into the system.

In addition to developing this for our own needs, we are also attempting to create a system that can be used by other online art curators. Flexible and reusable software systems have been at the core of the successful operation and growth of the Internet. We hope we can help contribute something to online gallery curators in a manner keeping with this net tradition. Issues such as efficiency and simplicity of EGADS will be constantly under evaluation and improvement. With any luck, a free product will be created that will be useful and simple for both the browsing online art audience and the people who work behind the scenes to organize online galleries.

EGADS will also incorporate several other unique and exciting features, which also will be evaluated for feasibility, useful-

ness, and so on. For example, viewers can modify the way they want their search results displayed (with thumbnails, sorted by date, etc.) and save these preferences for their next visit.

Also — and this is where the “G” in EGADS comes in — EGADS uses a protocol to communicate between one EGADS site and another. This means a visitor can potentially search every EGADS art site from any single one. For example, a user might request “Show me all [STILL LIFE] works by artists from [CANADA]” and get results regardless of where the artwork is stored. This inter-server protocol is developed to be configurable and optimize network resources and search times, and still maintain an acceptable degree of accuracy and scope.

THE FUTURE — SYNERGY

As previously mentioned, collaborative projects are more complicated and vary greatly from one to the next. This makes it very difficult to establish any simple system to ease the development of such projects. However, we have found many existing tools that are useful and promising, and many more are being developed. By sharing tips and success stories, the online community-at-large will benefit greatly. Ultimately, protocols and recyclable building blocks will be created to help aid the process of turning an idea for a multiple-participant project into a working software application.

In its simplest form, net-based collaboration is essentially communication and interaction. Some guidelines that should be remembered are:

1. Follow consistent procedures from project to project, whenever possible. e.g., use a similar ftp uploading practice and filename convention for everything; allow users to “register” or “sign up” once and let that identification be used for any project they partake in.
2. At all costs, put the burden of functionality on: first, the server and its programs; second, the administrators; then, finally, the participants and audience. Simplicity sells the idea and makes it more likely to be used. A collaborative project without anyone participating isn’t very collaborative.
3. Use or re-use tools that exist or you have already developed. If you have found a method or piece of code that seems very conducive to collaborative work, share it. Ask others (like us at SITO!) how they do things and what they think of your idea. Collaborate on the development of collaborative projects!

With regard to item (3), we would like to list some tools we have found to be worth keeping in mind:

- world wide web — For obvious reasons, you should design your collaborative projects interaction around the web as much as possible. That’s where your audience is, and it’s easy to use (and build!) and flexible. Learn the world of the behind-the-scenes magic of the http world. Ask yourself “What would I want to do?” and “How would this be easiest to use?” Familiarize yourself with what is possible with web-based forms and pages that are built automatically by programs running on the server. Ask around and check in on some of the comp.infosystem.www.newsgroups.
- ftp — This is the universally accepted file transfer method. Don’t bother trying to add things such as email-based file submission for collaborative projects; it’s much too complicated and slow, formats can vary, and ultimately it will require more human moderation for the coordinators.
- irc/CU-SeeMe — When you want to add a real-time discussion attribute to your project, the old standby irc can be very useful. CU-SeeMe is becoming increasingly more widely used and more stable. Web-based “chat” systems can often be slow or tedious or just plain overkill. If you just want a way to communicate in a chaotic manner, you can’t beat a channel on irc or a reflector of your own for CU-SeeMe.

- Perl — You can’t go wrong with this do-all slicer/dicer scripting language. Not only are there plenty of pre-built tools available to bridge the gap between the web and Perl, but this language is almost fun to use. Granted it’s still programming, and far from “plug-n-play collaborative projects”, but Perl is very flexible and very portable. Often, once you have trudged your way through your first Perl-based collaborative web script, you end up with dozens of new ideas based on what you just learned. Up until recently, most collaborative tools on the net have been very proprietary — they were built for one collaborative thing and that’s it. However, more people are developing tools that have a broader use and audience. Also, many Internet tools (such as CU-SeeMe) are allowing users to develop “plug-ins” that can add small bits of functionality. Shared “whiteboards” or drawing spaces are being developed by many different parties using the web and Java and other resources, such as the years-old drawing add-on for the Mac irc client, Homer.

An example of one of the more interesting collaborative tools being developed is Potlatch. It is an ongoing project that is attempting to develop protocols and tools that provide very broad and flexible ways to facilitate tasks like exchanging and merging images and sounds in real-time.

Keeping an eye on art or graphic programming newsgroups, the SITO mail list and SITO:SYNERGY, and online technology-art organizations and newsletters will help you learn about new collaborative tools that are available or in development. And finally, don’t hesitate to look for assistance — if you are an artist who likes computers, you just might find a programmer who likes art.

RELATED INFORMATION

This document, including links to many of the concepts and software mentioned, can be found online at <http://www.sito.org/sea96>