

WORLDSAWAY BACKGROUNDER

- Creating Virtual Communities in Cyberspace -

With the introduction of WorldsAway -- an animated on-line community -- Fujitsu Cultural Technologies has put forth a vision for the future of interactive communications. This vision lies in the company's belief that the global information infrastructure, commonly referred to as the information superhighway, is about much more than video on demand, home shopping and video games. It is, most importantly, about people.

The idea of using technology to put people in touch with others who share common interests is not new. Indeed, the concept of "electronic communities" first appeared many years ago and is evolving into what is becoming known as "social computing." With the introduction of WorldsAway, these capabilities will converge to form a new genre of person-to-person interaction.

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What is Social Computing?

Social computing is about people sharing ideas, interests and common experiences through the emerging global information network. Today, millions of Americans are buying home computers and more than six million computer users subscribe to one or more of the commercial on-line services.

Social computing is the latest and fastest growing phenomenon in personal communications and has seen incredible growth over the past 10 years. The rapid growth in on-line connect hours by people using bulletin boards, forums, chat and e-mail services, along with the explosive growth of the Internet, are all indications of the popularity of people communicating with one another through this new medium.

Whereas communities used to have significant geographic limitations, these “electronic communities” are places where people with common interests can gather, independent of their physical location. Much like traditional geographic communities, the inhabitants of electronic communities create deep cultural ties.

The Origins of Electronic Communities

The phenomenon of electronic communities began in the early 1970's with newsgroups on the Internet. These first communities developed around scientists sharing research, information and experiences on topics of common interest. Eventually, these groups expanded the list of topics they shared on the net, and developed recreational and social newsgroups. Today, there are over 2,000 topics in these newsgroups, each with an active community of people sharing their knowledge, perspectives and experiences.

During the same period, the first multi-user dungeon (MUD) appeared in England. A MUD is a virtual world where people use words (text) to create rich environments in which they can play games, make friends, exchange ideas and create and solve problems. However, because MUDs required full Internet access and, in some cases, programming experience to use, their user base remains limited to the technically savvy.

In 1979, the number of on-line users expanded to include the general public when CompuServe began offering a "consumer" on-line service to the growing community of personal computer users. Users joined CompuServe to share information on many subjects and interests in the "forums."

In 1980, CompuServe developed another new communications capability, CB Simulator, which offered - for the first time - real-time, interactive textual communications between people on-line. This capability eventually became known generically as "chat."

Like the early Internet newsgroups, the CompuServe on-line community flourished as users developed new friendships, shared real-life experiences and even held on-line parties. In essence, CompuServe's CB Simulator became the first social club in cyberspace.

The Next Generation

Fujitsu recognized the growing popularity of on-line communications among personal computer users and initiated plans to develop the next generation of person-to-person interaction -- the addition of animated graphics to text-based chat.

The work began six years ago when Fujitsu licensed and eventually purchased LucasFilm's Habitat the first multi-user, on-line graphical environment. Following a successful release of the original Habitat in Japan, Fujitsu began developing a completely redesigned and re-engineered version of the original product.

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WorldsAway

Through character representations of themselves -- called avatars -- users will be able to explore the world and communicate with other avatars through their on-line appearance, textual messages, thought balloons and a variety of facial expressions and body gestures.

Unlike traditional on-line "chat rooms," which are entirely text-based, WorldsAway offers a permanent visual landscape -- a shared environment for social interaction.

The objects encountered by a user's avatar in WorldsAway lend a rich dimension of interaction to the world. For example, a room with a vending machine and accessories will encourage the exchange and purchase of items, while an outdoor setting such as the fountain in the center of town will be a popular gathering spot for chatting and socializing. Other devices in the world such as ATMs, teleporters and pawn machines form the foundation of a virtual economy.

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The Technology

Underlying WorldsAway is a distributed, object-oriented technology developed by Fujitsu Cultural Technologies, which utilizes current client/server design and delivers rich graphical animation at standard modem speeds to Windows and Macintosh clients.

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The World Will Grow

This technology will allow WorldsAway designers to offer users a continually evolving world by downloading new classes of objects with their associated art and behavior code directly to users' computers.

The technology is also scaleable, so the world will grow to accommodate an increasing number of users. As the population grows, the technology will allow new locales -- such as buildings, streets and parks -- to be added "on the fly" and managed across different servers. In this way, WorldsAway designers can expand the world ad infinitum to give the growing population sufficient space in which to interact and explore.

The object-oriented technology also allows for the creation of multiple worlds, or environments within WorldsAway. This capability allows developers to provide interesting new territories which appeal to a wide range of end user interests.

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Fujitsu Background

WorldsAway is introduced through Fujitsu's newly formed Cultural Technologies division launched in August 1994. The division was formed to develop and market technology products that extend, enhance and facilitate interaction between people.

Founded in 1935, Fujitsu Limited is the world's second largest computer manufacturer and international leader in telecommunications, semiconductors and other electronic devices. The company offers a broad line of information processing systems, ranging from the world's fastest supercomputers to the smallest palmtop computers. The Fujitsu group of technology, software and services companies posted global revenues of more than \$36 billion in the fiscal year ending March 1995.

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