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Maybe one day all music will look like this?

Q) For most people, music is a passive experience, an enjoyment requiring little more interaction than turning on the hi-fi. Yet frEQuency gives a listener more or less complete control of the music on offer - do you think people want to get this involved?

A) Yes, we think so - because it's fun given the opportunity. frEQuency's no big statement, it's just a good time. You can play it for hours and you'll still see and hear new elements. We're just charting a route into a new mix of sound and visual forms, where the user is the pilot and producer... no longer just the passenger...

Q) How far do you see frEQuency as being representative of interactive music titles in the future?

A) That's a difficult thing to gauge. Sure, we've seen Gabriel's Xplora, Bowie's Jump and the like, but they're what we refer to as 'active' music titles rather than 'interactive' music titles in that the user only has input into the running order of traditional linear tracks. What modified's work is about is non-linear. This is music you can alter and enhance as you interact with it. Music which you can add your own music too, videos which you can edit yourself. Interactive music video.We want to get away from this whole linear thing and show what we believe the future of music will be like. It's a future where nothing will ever be the same twice.

Q) So you're not that impressed with the music CD-ROMs currently on the market then?

A) We liked the Residents' first outing, Freakshow, but for very different reasons - it showed just how well you could take the traditional form and make it involving. But what we're doing is really very different from most music CD-ROMs where you click and watch a QuickTime vid, click for some text on the band or artist and, if you're lucky, mix some sounds or video. For us, the user is centre stage - with few constraints and barriers - it's a much more open approach to the notion of an audience and interface.

Q) Of course that relies on users having sufficient interest to want to get that involved...

A) Sure, that's why we incorporated auto-play elements into frEQuency - the idea being that you can boot it up and not interact at all if you don't want to. We wanted to make something that had a life of its own, in which you were never quite sure what would happen next or whether you had seen everything it had to offer. We wanted to make it entirely autonomous so that user input wasn't necessary. So, if you don't feel like clicking on everything in sight, just sit back and let the code entertain you. There are no clear and logical rules. Your only objective is to burn through the contents whenever and however you want to.

Q) How did modified start up with the idea of the interface? How did you come to implement what you call this 'non-linear' approach?

A) We just figured that this whole CD-ROM publishing industry has already been hijacked by large companies and generally the products look safe and play safe - just a straight port of a book or video to CD-ROM or CD video format. It just seemed to be a waste of a powerful new technology. So I guess frEQuency is a reaction against the bland 'play safe' styles of most CD-ROMs; we wanted to produce a ROM which had its own id, a ROM which addressed the format head on, something which kicked, scratched and spat information at you. But something which the user could in fact tame and then begin to use creatively for themselves.

Q) So it's more about pushing the boundaries than making pots of dosh then?

A) Well hopefully it's both! It's just the logical development of '80s scratch DJs and producers with decks and samplers making new and challenging forms of music. frEQuency is just a 'sketch book' of ideas about playing with the language of multimedia, proving that interactive entertainment needn't just be about videogames, edutainment and some token CD-ROM 'sleevenotes' tacked on to a traditional audio CD.

Q) So there's a real radical beat going on here then?

A) WeI guess so, yeah - we just wanted to get hold of this whole multimedia thing and throw it around a room by the scruff of its neck. Music seems the ideal medium since it represents the easiest means of providing raw power and excitement. We just seized on our computers' multimedia capabilities and taught ourselves how to exploit them. We're keen to approach multimedia by incorporating the pace and production values of TV, the interactivity of videogames, and the emotion of rock 'n roll. Tedious electronic books and recycled videos on CD just don't do it for us. We want to break away from traditional multimedia design - pushing the envelope instead of pushing buttons.

Q) Hence the complete absence of any instructions, menus or icons?

A) Yep, we believe people are familiar enough with design conventions now, they don't need hand-holding. In the same way they don't need deliberately obscurantist interfaces where you haven't got a clue what's going on. We want users to explore the possibilities and when they're happy about what they've found...

Q) You throw in a little more?

A) Yeah, we throw in the hyperlinks, intercuts, trigger events, random sequences and concealed segments...

Q) Can we talk now about what sort of set-up you have and what tools you use?

A) We have a networked Mac system based around three PowerMac 8100s and a couple of Quadra 840AVs with 32Mb of RAM. We also have a couple of Pentiums for the Windows processing. We've got 5 gigabytes of online storage and use magneto-optical drives for offline. These machines are hooked up to Epson 24bit scanners, CD drives and Sony video decks, and are principally used to import video and graphic materials for cutting in Photoshop and Premiere along with a whole bunch of other software - morphing stuff, custom utilities and direct to disk audio samplers.

Q) And what do use for the authoring? Macromedia Director?

A) Yeah, it's the only serious choice really. Director may be a steep learning curve but it provides a complete cross-platform solution. We can pull all the media in, save it out as a straight Director movie and, literally, in minutes it's up and running on a PC with no problem.

Q) Do you use any custom code in there - XObjects and so on?

A) We have a guy who's written some audio handling routines for the PC side of things - Windows isn't really up to scratch when it comes to combining digital audio with digital video sound.

Q) frEQuency uses 2D elements almost exclusively - is 3D beyond you?

A) It's something that Director isn't cut out to handle effectively at present. But with support for QuickTime VR on the way we'll be incorporating it in future releases.

Q) And what of the future for modified? What plans do you have for forthcoming titles?

A) The first release is the full version of frEQuency - which has about ten times more videographics and sound than the frEQuency demo. We're putting it out for $24.99 which we feel is a bargain given its prolonged playability and the amount of work that's gone into it. We're also currently working on a more laid-back 3D title, Exemplar, which will be jazz ambient in style. We're also planning some live shows, with large screen video projectors and live image processing. We're looking into ISDN to make our shows possible as remote events. But, initially, frEQuency lays down the blueprint for kickin' interactive music CD-ROM albums, and we're eager to build on the incredible response we've had from it in Europe and Japan.

Q) How does frEQuency differ from the demo then? It seems to us that you could have quite happily sold frEQout for $24.99 and guaranteed good sales...

A) There's loads of added value. Besides offering ten times the amount of graphics and audio, we've also included facilities for users to import their own video and sound. There's also much more freedom to play around with the onscreen graphics - applying your own filters and painting the screen. Then there's an FX mix - this is a hard drive playback module which enables you to load up your favourite audio CD and treat it to various loops and effects. Combine that with the ability to import your own media and you're looking at a whole new ballgame. We've also developed remix

scripts, which we'll make available for free via our Web site, which will produce a range of special frEQuency remixes. So you'll be able to run the scripts, and the new audio data accompanying them, and sit back and enjoy a variety of different treatments. Finally, both frEQuency and the FX module will allow you to easily save your own videographic and sound sequences to video or tape.

Q) Finally, what advice do you have for anyone wishing to get into interactive art and music?

A) Don't re-invent the wheel! Get in touch with us to collaborate... we have a multimedia art and music label set up and we're looking to work with other artists to broaden this whole area. We can offer technical assistance, publicity and distribution facilities - though we don't supply funding!

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