Deliberately Distorting the Digital Mechanism

By MATTHEW MIRAPAUL

While tinkering recently with one of the first personal computers from the 1980's, the digital artists Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans took a look at its technical tutorial. As Mr. Paesmans recalled, the on-screen guide delivered a reassuring message: "Remember, don't be scared. You cannot do anything wrong on this computer."

Since 1994 Ms. Heemskerk and Mr. Paesmans, collaborating under the name Jodi, have created a series of Internet-based artworks that deliberately cause computers to do the wrong thing. Viewers of these online works will find their screens filled with meaningless text and needlessly blinking graphics. Web-browser windows spawn smaller windows that race maddeningly around the screen. Links that appear to lead somewhere yield dead ends. Like a sci-fi thriller, this could be delightful, except that the underlying premise is of computers in complete control. A terrifying thought.

Beginning tomorrow Jodi will be the subject of a retrospective exhibition, "install.exe," at Eyebeam, a new-media art center in Manhattan. It was organized at Plug.In, a new-media art center in Basel, Switzerland, where it was shown last fall before it traveled to Berlin. The exhibit, which runs through June 14 at Eyebeam's gallery at 540 West 21st Street, contains nearly two dozen works. Many of them can also be viewed online at www.jodi.org, asdfg.jodi.org, 404.jodi.org, wrongbrowser.com and wwwwwwwww.jodi.org.
Prepare to be disoriented, if not stuck, in a World Wide Web gone awry. The Web is less than a decade old, so it might seem premature to declare that Jodi's works are classics of Internet art. Yet these artists were probably the first to use the Internet's own visual language to create what are in effect paintings of the Internet landscape. They did so by exposing the hidden computer code that makes Web pages do what they do, then altered its odd texts and strange symbols so that they became abstract art. They also took Web features and simulated what would happen if they ran amok. For people who assume that a computer is a benign dictator, these were reminders that the slightest transgression could turn it into a deranged despot.

Like Cezanne's late works in which the raw canvas is often part of the painting, Jodi's sites force viewers to become conscious of the Web's appealing surface and the digital mechanism that lurks below.

Annette Schindler, the director of Plug.In and the co-curator of "install.exe," said, "You think you know your computer, but really all you know is a surface on your screen." This state of affairs is based on the foolish hope that our technology, like our cars, will always operate properly, so that we never have to look at the oily, gritty bits under the hood. But Jodi subverts this notion. Visitors to the duo's Web sites, Ms. Schindler said, "immediately have the experience that Jodi wants to give them, which is, 'What if everything goes wrong?'"

In questioning the Internet's rules, Jodi has had a huge influence on digital artists.

"They are the only Internet-based artists that have created a truly new aesthetic," said the male half of the anonymous digital-art duo known as 0100101110101101.org in a recent phone call. "They have influenced almost everything on the Internet that is related to art," he said. "It's like trying to find a painter who was not influenced by Michelangelo."

Ms. Heemskerk and Mr. Paesmans were resident artists at San Jose State University in the heart of Silicon Valley in 1994, at the start of the dot-com era. One day while working on a Web project they accidentally omitted a bracket from the computer code, and the resulting Web page was a messy jumble of text and characters. They liked what they saw and began to experiment.

Mr. Paesmans said they initially wondered if it was ethical to transmit the "wrong" code to others. "But we found out quite fast that when you make mistakes in this code, it doesn't affect anything other than the image it creates," he said. They began to put their works online, where the results were intensely perplexing to those expecting clear information and helpful links. They became even more interested in the Internet once they realized that they were "disillusioning the beliefs of people," Mr. Paesmans said.

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They called themselves Jodi, a combination of the first two letters of their first names. Each new project attracted greater attention and not just in Internet-art circles. Their dark, impenetrable works contributed to the early Web's spirit of coolness. Ms. Heemskerk, from the Netherlands, and Mr. Paesmans, from Belgium, moved to Barcelona and gave few interviews, making themselves even more mysterious.

Like many digital artists they have started to work with computer games. But while others' projects typically keep a game's realistic setting while making minor modifications to its scenery or characters, Jodi is again making abstract art. For its version of the Wolfenstein game, for instance, the dog becomes a black square and a dwarf the white one. And in their adaption of the first Quake game, the viewer sees only a white screen and must navigate through the 3-D spaces on sound alone. In an art form where excess is the rule, Jodi has stripped games to digital skeletons.

All of these works, along with several recent game and video projects, will be shown in the "install.exe" exhibition. Installing screen-based work, usually viewed in private, in a vast public gallery like Eyebeam's will certainly be a different kind of challenge to Jodi, but it may also attract a larger audience.

Benjamin Weil, Eyebeam's curator, said that for most people the gallery was "an interface that's a lot more accessible than the Internet." But Jodi is still seeking fresh ways to disorient. Visitors who want to view the online works must carry one of the gallery's laptop computers to a foam-cube seat. When they open the computer, its screen shows a view from the seat, as though the computer were functioning as a live camera.

Tilman Baumgaertel, the exhibition's co-curator and the editor of its catalog, said Jodi's vision was "about the deconstruction of technology, the abuse of technology and looking for different opportunities within the technology."

Mr. Paesmans put it this way: He wants people to understand that they "have the freedom to be irresponsible in front of your computer."