

Ethology of Z

by Roc Parés

A digital fly called Z is propagated in the web, parasiting computers around the world with their users' consent. We are talking about the computer program known as "z.exe", which intervenes in the operating system and the user interface of all types of personal computers.

Z.exe and the user interface

Z.exe is a program that manifests itself visually and acoustically as a fly. Z.exe is an agent infiltrated into the user interface. The user interface is the audiovisual system that permits a person and a computer to communicate with each other. The images and sounds that make up the interface tend to have associated functions that unleash certain processes. The results of these processes are also made manifest on the screen and through the speakers; they too make up part of the interface.

Z.exe and the metaphor of the desktop

Z.exe lives in the desktop when the computer is connected to the web. The desktop is the visual metaphor that structures the information on the screen, a metaphor that speaks to us of order and productivity, with its iconic display of documents, files and the wastebasket. The desktop is the visual environment of experience. The fly flicks about the screen (covering distances that are measurable in pixels), up and down, right and left, "negating" the illusion of image depth in perspective (as would occur with a fly moving over the lens of a camera), constantly shifting over the surface of the screen, competing with the cursor for this spatial limit.

Z.exe is a fly that dialogues with the cursor

The cursor is the standard icon for resolving the presence of the user at the desktop; it acts as the virtual subject of experience. As is known, the user cannot interact directly (with his or her body) in the virtual environment, which is why a peripheral apparatus like the mouse is needed to control the cursor. The movements of the user's hand pushing the mouse forward and backward, right and left, over the flat plane of the table, are mapped on the icon of the virtual subject (the cursor), which in this way may move over the vertical plane of the screen. This relation of identity between the user (brain/eyes/hand) and the system (screen/mouse/cursor), learnt almost intuitively and assimilated by practice to an almost unconscious degree, is the mechanism the relation of the user with the z.exe is based upon. In fact, if we pay attention to the reaction of the user in the moment z.exe is installed in the computer and the fly appears for the first time within the private space of the screen, we come to realize that the user response is a reflexive act, almost as old as the gesture of scaring a fly away with an unthinking swipe of the hand, only here translated to the virtuality of the desktop and the extension of the hand as constituted by the cursor. From this moment and this gesture onwards, we can say that the user has integrated the fly. The fly intervenes in this dynamic in conscious fashion within this logic and thus, with its incursion onto our screen (the most visible part of the system), ends up forcing us, with its insidiously erratic activity, to become conscious of our acts.

Coda

The user interface is thus the immediate context of the fly. It is not however a homogenous context, nor is it (as the fly will remind us) something dehumanised. The fly takes on diverse connotations in function of the context; the fly flitting about the wastebasket, the fly walking over the lines of a text we just cannot seem to finish, the fly on the Windows logo, the fly rubbing its legs over an e-mail bearing bad news, the fly digging away on a

pornographic image, the fly immobile on an accounting sheet that we cannot seem to balance, the fly as an intruder on the “Home” icon of the navigator. Everything we have ever poured into our computer (often without thinking), power, colour, smell and taste, recovers its importance as soon as the fly appears. Z.exe is a program that questions our relation with the computer. Z.exe, as a fly, has the capacity to make our (human) relations with the (digital) environment problematic.

Z.exe and the web

Z.exe, as we have already mentioned, only makes the fly appear on our screen and in our speakers when the computer is connected to the web. Thus z.exe is a piece of software designed and made to specifically intervene in person-computer communication processes, though only in those moments when there is distributed communication. This fact places z.exe in the realm of net.art or art online. Yet it is not a piece of web-art (being more like a series of HTML documents placed in a server,) nor is it an e-mail art proposal (though it can propagate like a document attached to an e-mail). Z.exe resembles more the logic of viruses (though its entirely lacking in destructive capacity), or more precisely like so-called bots or agents. Basically, z.exe is a parasite program that receives and sends information to and from a server. Everyone who has installed z.exe in the computer and is connected to Internet will come to make up part of a community.

Z.exe and community

The Z community is a swarm of flies: the growing sum of all the flies installed in the computers of Internet users throughout the world via multiplication of the mother fly. The community is in constant communication through a server that manages the traffic of information. The continually updated information on each fly is saved in a registry where a complete statistical task is carried out, beginning on May 13, 2001, the launching date of the first Beta version of z.exe. In this dynamic memory, fed by all the information on the activity of

each individual, there is a registry of the births (installations) and deaths (uninstallations), with the data of the distance travelled by each fly constantly updated, as if it were a measure of flight time. Meanwhile, a detailed follow-up of the evolution of the swarm over the world is maintained by keeping track of its distribution over different time zones, not to forget the genealogy of each individual fly: a tree that has its roots in the mother fly.

Z.exe and the genetic code

The genetic code of the z.exe mother fly is 00000000000000000000000000000000, a chain of thirty-two zeros. The characteristics of the mother fly, along with all of her descendents, are thus codified according to the same binary code that might permit individualised control, maintain the statistical registry of the swarm or even, if so required, clone a concrete individual in the moment the artist decides to do so. Yet this is not all; the code of Z is made up of two differentiated segments that its programmers have foreseen both as the basis for the fly's appearance and as a basis for its behaviour. This unusual creative strategy, which goes further into the concept of the program as especially present in the field of art theory in the second half of the 20th century, allows us to anticipate new formulas of seriality related to the metaphor of the gene. In z.exe the overly abused notion of the code is used directly by its computer condition, and metaphorically in relation to genetics. Thus on the one hand the code is the very essence of z.exe, inasmuch as it is a computer program, while on the other it is a metaphor where the allegory making up the discourse -if we are to call it that- of the proposal is grounded.

Z.exe and the world

This is not the first time that Antoni Abad has used the world as a support. Already in his first net.art piece, Sísifo (Sisyphus), the artist centred on taking full advantage of the specific properties of the Internet to refer to what could

not be grasped, the incapacity of the human being in confrontation with the world. The myth of Sisyphus there became the guiding force behind a tale about incapacity, set across the diameter of the Earth, where using just two antipodal servers (one in Barcelona and the other in Wellington, New Zealand), the axiom whereby the web overcomes the limits of space and time could be questioned.

With z.exe Abad once again returns to the world as the support for a work where the multiplication of the mother fly leads to a certain saturation of the map, the darkening of the mental image with which (with all our human limitations) we attempt to encompass all worlds hidden in this world.

Globalised and deglobalising, Antoni Abad's fly is reproduced in its condition as a computer program and its condition as an artistic program. It is globalised inasmuch as it is a computer program that operates in Windows and is reproduced all over the web, its reproductive nature out of control as part of its inherent condition as freeware. It is in turn deglobalising as an artistic program that begins with the singularity of its creator, and addresses itself to the singularity of its potential hosts, the very ones that for one reason or another wish to house a parasite within and propagate it from their systems.

Z.exe and Canal Z

The reasons leading each individual to install z.exe in his or her computer will always be hidden within the individual folds making up the community as a whole. In any case, these motivations cannot be derived from a commercial generality (.com), nor from one that is military (.mil), governmental (.gov), educational (.edu) nor related to a specific country.

How then might we explain such motivations when they cannot apparently be generalised, when all that we know is that the fly is a useless and unproductive element in the user interface? If it is true that the fly is unproductive, we should keep in mind that currently z.exe is a program

developing certain functions or services in Internet. It is not in vain that z.exe is found in <http://www.zexe.net>, and .net is the extension of the domain for Internet service providers. Yet if we think of the definitions of the term “service” (n. 1. action of serving; 2. task or job done to serve the State or another entity or person), we will find that in z.exe the only action of serving is carried out by the so-called Canal Z (Channel Z), as the service rendered is not useful to anyone in particular, nor is it designed for any other purpose than communication, simply put.

Antoni Abad and his particular Natural History

With this fly that flies to fly, interacting just to interact, serving nobody in particular just to communicate, that is, communicates to communicate, Antoni Abad deepens his research into a particular Natural History.

The paradox locked into a natural history (wordlessly) written by an art historian like Antoni Abad, turns over upon itself even more when, as in this case, it refers to artificial species (like the fly of z.exe) that he has created.

Effectively, Abad invites us to participate in an artistic proposal that we can assume as an experience in the terrain of social communication. The artist offers up a particular and unique way of participating in the web. We can understand it as an extension of his sculptural thought, as an expansion of his audiovisual work, or just as well as an investigation into relational aesthetics and their implication for information and communication technologies.

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