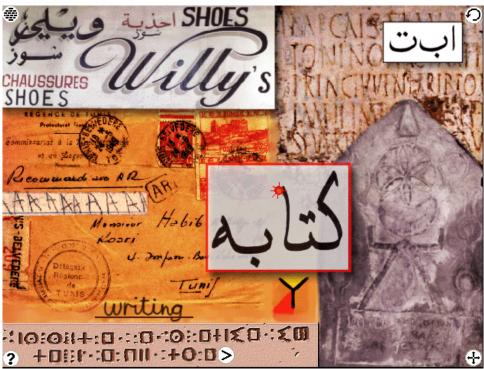# The Artist as Self-Publisher

Still from *Postcard From Tunis*

A Paper given at the AFC's Being Connected conference in 1998 by Sally Pryor

The marketing and distribution plan for my CD-ROM *Postcard From Tunis* dates from its selection in 1997 for the New Talent Pavilion at MILIA (Cannes). After this prestigious acknowledgment, I couldn't help noticing that people were suddenly more interested.

I had made *Postcard From Tunis* to please myself. I made it to express, to share and in fact to understand powerful personal experiences. I made it to explore ideas about writing and the human-computer interface. I made it to improve my ability to read Arabic. I also made it to integrate parts of myself (for example, the programmer who loves writing structured code and the artist who wants to create beautiful expressive images). But when I returned from MILIA I realised something new. From an artistic point of view, the work was finished. But if what I thought of as my "baby" was going to toddle off the hard drive and go out into the world, there was a lot left to do.

The idea of an audience, a target market or making money had been the last thing on my mind. But now that I'd wrestled the work into a shape that I was happy with (which for a long time seemed to be the most massive challenge), I wanted it to be seen. Any net profit that I could make would be a bonus, especially if It could help me to survive as an artist. I decided to seek out festivals and competitions and although I have lost more than I have won, my efforts have been quite successful. I have a publishing contract with a small French publisher and have also started selling the CD-ROM myself through a web site. I am also looking for other non-exclusive distribution contracts. I consider that I am about 60% of the way through the marketing and distribution process.

This paper shares some of what I've learned by trial and error. It is biased towards art/community CD-ROMs and their special challenges.

Entering Competitions and Festivals

Let's not forget that these are a lot of work for the organisers. But for you entering more than one, there is also a lot to do.

1. Finding out about them
Just finding out about them is a challenge. There are lists but as it's such a volatile area they get out of date quickly and you have to fax, email etc to check. Membership of organisations such as ANAT, dLux, Metro etc. is very important as they often let you know about forthcoming events and deadlines. The AFC is active in this area and will be publishing a list of the key festivals soon. There is also the International Directory of Electronic Art.

2. Entry fees for competitions
Through bitter experience, I have derived Sally's *Entry Fee Theorem*. This states that for an art/community CD-ROM, the higher the entry fee, the lower the chance of being successful. My personal ceiling is US $125, the cost of entering the Invision NewMedia awards which proved to be a very good investment. It is important to check whether there is an appropriate category for your work: a vague arts/culture category in combination with a high entry fee now says to me, "for corporates, not for you".

3 The Information they want
Each wants different information and it takes a lot of work to write a custom submission each time. I have gradually built a generic set and I recommend you do it right at the beginning: a 20 word summary of the work, a 50 word summary, an 100 word summary, lists of aims and objectives, main achievements, target audience, running instructions, suggested navigation path for 5 minutes, other festivals its been in, your bio (several word length variations), your videography, a photo of you, a still from the work and so on...

4 Burning CD-ROMs to submit
It's also very time-consuming to be burning up to 5 CD-ROMs per entry, making the front and back covers for the box etc. Rather than waiting for everything to be finished, I decided to treat my work as if it was software and had a batch of the Macintosh version printed and packaged as version 1.0. Now, when I enter something, I can just pull out a few CDs, quickly tailor an application and send it off. Note that you may also need to supply a PAL or NTSC video of the work. If this is how they will be viewing the work (as opposed to interacting with it on a computer) things don't look good.

5. Notification
You may not even be notified if you aren't successful, or you may only hear at the last minute. You almost certainly won't get your CDs back. In recent times entry forms state that you can enclose postage to get them returned, but this is difficult to estimate for foreign mail. Now that I have a batch of CDs, I prefer to just wave them goodbye as I send them off.

6. A success!
After the first flush of pleasure wears off, you may see something like this: "You are a winner/finalist/chosen so we will need a 1" betacam tape/ 1 page description in postscript form etc. by tomorrow". In other words you will have a last-minute, urgent addition to your (already full) To Do list.

7. Surviving award ceremonies
These are quite a challenge. As a finalist, you have to rehearse a speech in case of winning, so it is very hard to stay detached. You can't help feeling immense desire for one of those Perspex pyramids/metal shapes that are sitting on the table. Not winning is a major challenge to your self-talk skills ("my work is not good enough" versus "the judges haven't got very good taste" etc.) But a note of hope: after it's all over, there is not much difference on your list of awards between finalist and winner. See my list [linked at the end] and decide yourself.

Summary

The good events do represent value and help you build an audience/market for your work. They provide opportunities to exhibit the work, to perhaps find future screenings and to get reviews and publicity. They may set up permanent web sites about the awards, give you certificates and also logos for your CD-ROM packaging (this helps a browsing consumer).

Events that aren't so well-organised can be less satisfying. One requested at the last minute that finalists send a betacam tape and text description. These weren't used or ever returned. The awards night showed no image or sound from the finalist works, just the a title and author. There was no booklet (with contact information etc.) produced or record of the event other that a text list (the same title/author) at their web site. In other words very little was done to create interest in or an audience/market for the works.

Still, in the end, whether good or bad you still get to add a line to the list of awards and it does help to have these.

Your Marketing Materials/Descriptions of the Work

It's very hard, if not impossible, for you the artist/creator to be objective about what you have just made. You may also be sick to death of it and have lost any pleasure it once gave you. (This also makes you much more vulnerable to negative responses to it.) In some cases it's hard to even be sure about what you've made. For example, at first I thought that I'd made a cross-cultural work, as it is based around my own experiences with my Tunisian family-in-law. Over time, I have come to understand that it is not a cross-cultural work and I no longer describe it in that way. So you are not the best person to describe your work, or to produce its optimal three-sentence description, most representative still and sample movie etc. I did all this myself, constantly refining and re-writing, but you should talk to a professional like Libby Ellis at the AFC about it.

You will also need to have a range of descriptions (as in no.3 above) and you must also be able to customise these for different events, eg, an art show attached to a technology conference would be interested in different aspects compared to a fine art exhibition or an event focused around the notion of "writing".

I think it's also worth getting a designer to put a brochure/leaflet together. Brian Doherty designed a wonderful folded leaflet for me that could be easily reproduced at copy shops when I needed more (as you certainly will). Rachel Dixon reminds us that people mainly look at the pictures. The colour-photocopied version of my leaflet would walk off my trade show stand if I looked away for a minute.

Surviving Trade Shows

I have attended two. The first was the 97 New Talent Pavilion at MILIA (France), which was the "young" creative space in a huge mainstream multimedia trade/publishing fair. The second was PlayLand, the space set up for all winners of the 97 Invision awards (USA) to demonstrate their work. Both of these events were large and well-organised, with computers, equipment, signage etc provided for participants.

I arrived at MILIA a total novice. I had entered an unfinished work (promising to supply, in Adrian Graves' words, "the mature product" if it was selected) and had only just finished it a day before leaving. I barely understood what I had just made. Immediately after setting it up, I was required to describe and pitch it to all sorts of people, including a competitive situation where works were selected for a special screening. I made some blunders, like mentioning that the title partly alluded to Derrida. On reflection, the listener almost certainly had no idea who Derrida was. I gradually learned how to survive and was starting to almost enjoy it by the

end. We had hoped that publishers would be coming in to find new titles (remember the initial MYST-induced CD-ROM euphoria). However with the collapse of the mass CD-ROM market, they had only come to MILIA to sell what they already had, and mostly took off their badges before entering the pavilion. However in literally the last minute of MILIA, I did meet Marc Jacquin from a small French publisher, Phonurgia Nova. This has led ultimately to a publishing contract for French-speaking regions.

So these events do lead to a lot of good opportunities: future exhibitions, sales, publishers, ideas and contacts for new projects, meetings with kindred souls, etc. But they are physically and mentally gruelling. They take place in large, very noisy spaces full of masses of technology. I have found, semi-scientifically, that you need to expose yourself to a combination of caffeine and negative ions (from evaporating water, such as the sea or a waterfall) at about 3pm to survive.

You will be standing in front of your computer all day, demonstrating your work and talking. People repeatedly come up and ask "What's it about?" and you must be able to answer in three fresh and friendly sentences. You must have marketing materials that they can take away and you must take a card (or details) from them and WRITE ON IT - you will never remember who was who later.

You will also need a thick skin. Aside from innate competitiveness of the event, you will also have people glance at your screen (or worse still, interact for two mouse clicks) and walk away uninterested. Or they will come up and ask "what's your target market?" as their first question. Your attitude must be: put your work out there. If they like it they like it, if not, too bad. (Thanks to Tim Langford).

And lastly, the hardest thing: you're back from the OS trip. You're jet lagged, the excitement is over, the credit card bills are coming in..... You must get up off the sofa and find the drive to follow up all those contacts and ideas!

A market/audience for art CD-ROMs?

It is clear from the number of worldwide festivals and exhibitions that there is an audience for art CD-ROMs. But is there a market for them? This has been a difficult question for a number of reasons. First the MYST syndrome : an art CD-ROM is not MYST so don't even fantasise about being as financially successful. Many publishers were dazzled by its success and wasted a lot of money chasing similar success, badly burning their fingers.

A number of other things have gone wrong for CD-ROMs. There have been many awful CD-ROMs released for no good reason. And CDs' apparent value have been degraded by "bundling" with the purchase of new computers etc.

Are we over CD-ROMs? They are no longer cutting edge technology but maybe, as someone said, this is a good thing as the "sharks" have moved on into the internet. At least CD-ROM drives are now common and relatively fast (compared to the "information goat track"). They are pretty much here to stay as they are used for software distribution and the new DVD technology is backward compatible to CD-ROMs.

There are some wonderful, media-rich art CD-ROMs with something to say, a number of them from Australia. I think there is a market for works like this. It's not a mass market, so mass sales techniques and outlets will not work (eg at Virgin Superstore's CD-ROM section in the USA I only saw teenage boys browsing, likewise in software shops).

Do people actually buy CD-ROMs for pleasure like they buy audio CDs or books? I don't know but I do know that this market is a niche market - my rough estimate is .001%, which is small in Australia but large if you include USA/Europe etc. The challenge is to locate these people.

And I think that there's another overlooked market. Broadly I would call it an education market, that is people who teach and/or make interactive multimedia (including web stuff). Speaking as a teacher and a multimedia producer, I really need a kit of interesting media-rich art/community CD-ROMs and it's been very hard to put one together. This has to be a huge world wide market. Once again, how do you find it?

As for my own CD-ROM, I think that it potentially has the markets I've just discussed. It also has some additional ones. The work has occasionally suffered because of perceptions that it is a documentary or that it can't be art because it teaches you something. However these aspects also create potential markets: those interested in a portrait of Tunis or in learning to read Arabic. My CD-ROM is clear that it only provides a highly personal introduction to these topics but it works for children and adults.

A note about the PC/Mac question

A Mac-version is fine for any exhibition/competition or anyone who is involved in multimedia production. But for the home-based user, you have to make a PC-version. I still haven't finished this part as it is quite boring: reduction of features and checking fonts and palettes etc. Note that Rachel Dixon points out that you need a hotline for your PC version as there are so many hideous combinations of hardware/software that there are sure to be problems.

A note about packaging

I am very happy with the jewel case packaging which Brain Doherty designed for my CD-ROM. I also love the physicality of it after the virtuality of the interactive itself. But my French publisher called this packaging "cheap" (perhaps this became more blunt in the translation!). It appears that putting the CD in one of those bigger boxes is worth $10 in the retail price.

My current strategy is to sell the CD-ROM myself in its jewel case by mail order as well as having exclusive (my Phonurgia Nova contract is for French-speaking countries only) and future non-exclusive distribution deals if possible.

I feel that time on my side as long as I don't give in to "creeping featuritis". My CD-ROM does not depend on its technological novelty and as time goes by, users who used to be mad "mouse jockeys" are accustomed to rollovers and are more ready to accept the role that they play in the work. It is also getting easier to have parallel tracks of sound on the PC version, a feature that I won't relinquish without a fight.

The Role of the Internet

1. Communication Tool
It's been absolutely essential for me to have a stable email address for sending and receiving information and being able to check an event's web site, download entry forms etc. Losing my internet connection is like losing the keys to my mailbox.

2. Access to Audience/Markets
I haven't put Postcard From Tunis on the internet because I'm using every single byte in it and am not willing to compress it further. I also don't want to give it away free. But I am using the internet to find audiences and markets. I have set up a web site for my CD-ROM which includes a shockwave demo screen and I am slowly selling it myself. However it's one thing to set up the web site, it's another to have people know about it and actually visit it. At the very least you have to register with search engines and be part of appropriate web rings (that is, interconnected sites sharing similar themes). I have just started this process, but it is thrilling to receive an email order from someone who has found out about the CD-ROM while you were sleeping.

3 A Publishing Medium
Has the internet killed interest in CD-ROMs? I don't think so, because for a while yet it cannot compete as a media form: you just can't get rich, high quality audiovisual, moving images. Maybe the ideal form, is a hybrid one that combines the immediacy/fluidity/connectivity of the internet and the (relative) media-richness of the CD-ROM/DVD. This will be the technical area that I explore next. After all, "a picture is worth a thousand words", that's why it takes so long to download!

Summary

What I have been describing here is worth doing but is A LOT of work. People ask me what my next project will be, but it is hard to plan that while I'm still learning about marketing and distribution. Perhaps there is a place for an agent here? Certainly I am looking forward to the Digital Media Artstore (see below).

References

*Other Spaces. The Marketing, Distribution and Exhibition of Electronic Ar*t, a report for the AFC by Rachel Dixon

See also the Australian Digital Media Artstore (working title) initiative discussed by Julianne Pierce at this conference

More information about *Postcard From Tunis* (including awards):

- https://www.sallypryor.com/works/tunis.html
- https://www.sallypryor.com/works/tunis/awards.html

Being Connected: the studio in the networked age

Conference program and abstracts are archived at the National Library of Australia, see **https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/1385684**

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