

Technology meets art meets people

EXTREME

COMPUTING

The world of computing has always had its weird side, and at the annual Extreme Computing show this weird side is unleashed on the unsuspecting public. Colin Murphy plucked up the courage to attend

The Camden Centre in London's King's Cross was the home to Extreme Computing 2002 – an event unlike any other. That's what the event's organisers would have had us believe before the event, and after? Well, just maybe they were right.

Extreme Computing was described as “a gigantic village fete for the 21st century, an off-the-radar cyber jumble-sale, an all-day celebration of do-it-yourself technological unusualness”. Geekdom reigning supreme was the order of the day with a whole slew of inappropriate technology, and some appropriate, on display and in use.

The meeting was split into four main parts. The main hall held theatre style seating for the main presentations while around the edges were trestle tables for those with wares to sell or display.

There was the bring and buy sale room to one side which also featured the cafeteria for food *and* the cafeteria for music. For Music? It was here that visitors could choose from a menu of electronic tracks, which would be played to them in a private screening on headphones. For a small extra charge, they could also opt for the doggie bag feature, and have their music meal burned to a CD on the spot.

In the opposite corner you could find the slackers lounge, with its more relaxed atmosphere, away for the tremendous commotion of the main hall. The organisers had the foresight to also make this a family room. Again, the fact that families were there in strength only goes to show you the range and diversity that the organisers hoped to attract.

By this point, it was considered that the venue had run out of suitable corners, so the forth part of the meeting convened in the pub across the road, and so, as an adjunct to the main meeting, we had the Take It Outside event. This did offer people the chance of quieter surroundings, and proved to be an ideal venue for small group discussions.

There was a full programme of talks throughout the day giving the meeting some semblance of a fixed structure, but it was the breadth of these that gave you the best indication of the diversity of the audience: the main ingredients were comedy,

technicality and art. The real challenge was to figure out exactly which category fitted which presentation.

The talks

Some of the presentations took the role of a panel discussion, the first of which was “Salute the 20 Years of the Spectrum”. Rupert Goodwins hosted and chaired this panel, which consisted of four famous developers for the Sinclair ZX81 and Spectrum: Nigel Alderton, John Hollis, Sandy White and Paul Holmes. Much of the history of the Spectrum and ZX81 hardware development was laid bare during this time, as well as what it was about the Sinclair machines and the domestic computer market that led to such enormous growth in such a short time.

After taking part in this panel discussion, John Hollis, who was better known for writing games such as Meteor Storm and Time Gate, then revealed to the massed crowds the delights of “Circuit Bending”. It was here that John took hold of a very cheap child's toy electronic musical instrument, opened it up and ‘fiddled’. Finding the timing circuits, John was able to make the toy take on a brand new appeal by adding a variable resistor. By adding some flying leads and skipping one of the audio output sections, the toy took on a different character. On a wet weekend I can see the appeal of circuit bending. Some might find themselves saying “What's the point?”. The challenge is quite simple, all John was trying to do is make the toy do something it wasn't designed to do – to push the toy to an extreme.

The extreme concept took on new flavours when Paul Granjon for Z Lab (<http://www.zprod.org/zLab/>) took to the stage. Here we have a technological pursuit that is performance art. Granjon shared selections of his video “Two minutes of experimentation and entertainment” with the audience. His introduction as “The man behind the ‘The cybernetic parrot sausage’” gave waiting crowd little to prepare themselves with. Here Paul's video showed us ways of fitting the inner workings of ‘Furbee’ type toy to a sausage so that it could move and talk under its own battery power. As if this wasn't enough, Paul went on to show us how he managed to return a fish steak – the sort of this you would find in a fish

hamburger – to the wild oceans by building it an exoskeleton and giving it a battery powered motor.

From here we had a hard snap back to reality with the talk “When Science Fiction Becomes Science Fact – And Then Becomes Science Fiction Again”. Chaired by cyberpunk author Pat Cadigan, the author Tom Standage told us about the 18th century chess-playing automaton “The Turk”, arguing that *this* marked the beginning of the study of artificial intelligence and not developments like Charles Babbage’s Difference Engine.

Sharing the panel were George and Freeman Dyson. It was here that we were told of the plans of the top-secret 1950s project to find a peaceful use for US nuclear weapons. “Project Orion” was being designed to use the power from nuclear explosions to propel a 40 man spacecraft to the moons of Saturn. George Dyson was one of the main developers of the project. His son Freeman, who has recently written a book about “Project Orion” also fielded questions. Especially interesting was the fact that NASA, which had cleared its archive of this project in the ‘70s, was now trying to buy back as much information about it as possible.

In defence of weblogs was a panel discussion about the uses and abuses of the phenomenon of online diaries. Were these “grassroots content management systems of the future, or just a load of self-obsessed secret diaries of Adrian Mole?” was the question, to which no real consensus was arrived at. What did become apparent was that people don’t write weblogs to express a ‘different viewpoint’ but are written in the hope that their viewpoint might be shared by others and were really searching for confirmation of that by finding out how many other weblogs share the same view.

Having had doses of technology, art and science, we were only left waiting for some politics. Thankfully, this gap was filled by Cory Doctorow from the Electronic Frontier Foundation, who highlighted the widespread concerns about the erosion of consumers’ rights to the fair use of digital media.

Around the hall were many stands to catch the attention of those passing by. Again, the varied miscellany of those with something to show is the important point:

- Alt.Cyberpunk.Chatsubo (<http://www.accanthology.com/>) were showing their compilation of Usenet newsgroup written cyberpunk short stories.
- Bricklane TV – a model for Reality TV, but based on real issues like culture and conflict.
- The British Go Association (<http://www.britgo.org/>) – highlighting the pleasures of simple pursuits with this ancient board game.
- C64Audio.com – CDs of original and remixed Commodore game themes (<http://www.c64audio.com/>).
- The Campaign for Digital Rights



Sounds from a digital past – C64Audio.com

- (<http://uk.eurorights.org/>) – fighting draconian copy-protection measures and legislation in the UK.
- Copenhagen Free University (<http://www.infopool.org.uk/>) – domestic, mutating, autonomous institution asking what an aesthetics for life in the knowledge economy might be.
- Digital Tables (<http://www.digitaltables.co.uk/home.html>) – custom-made table-top MAME arcade machines.
- Linux (for PlayStation 2) (<http://playstation2-linux.com/>) – official Sony port of Linux to the popular next-gen games console.
- The Redundant Technology Initiative (<http://www.lowtech.org/>) – pro-Linux PC recyclers from Sheffield.
- Sinclair Archaeology (<http://www.etedeschi.ndirect.co.uk/book.htm>) – Sir Clive-endorsed guide to “every single Sinclair product ever”.
- Thomson & Craighead (<http://www.thomson-craighead.net/docs/thapf.html>) – commemorative Web browser tea towels from the digital artist duo.
- Wearable computing (<http://the.earth.li/~martin/wearables/>) – head-mounted wireless Internet connectivity that fits in your pocket.

The show has pulled off a remarkable feat – at the end of the day everyone’s expectations of the event seem to have been fulfilled, even though at the start of the day, no-one was quite sure what anyone else’s expectations actually were.

The official figure is that over a 1,000 people attended throughout the day and I understand that the organisers would have been happy to see 500. The buzz factor expressed by everyone who attended would say it was an absolute success and I can’t wait for next year.



Gentle pursuits were in evidence, as well as the frantic

Info

Extreme Computing 2002
<http://www.xcom2002.com/>
 Need to Know
<http://www.ntk.net/>
 Mute Magazine
<http://www.metamute.com/>