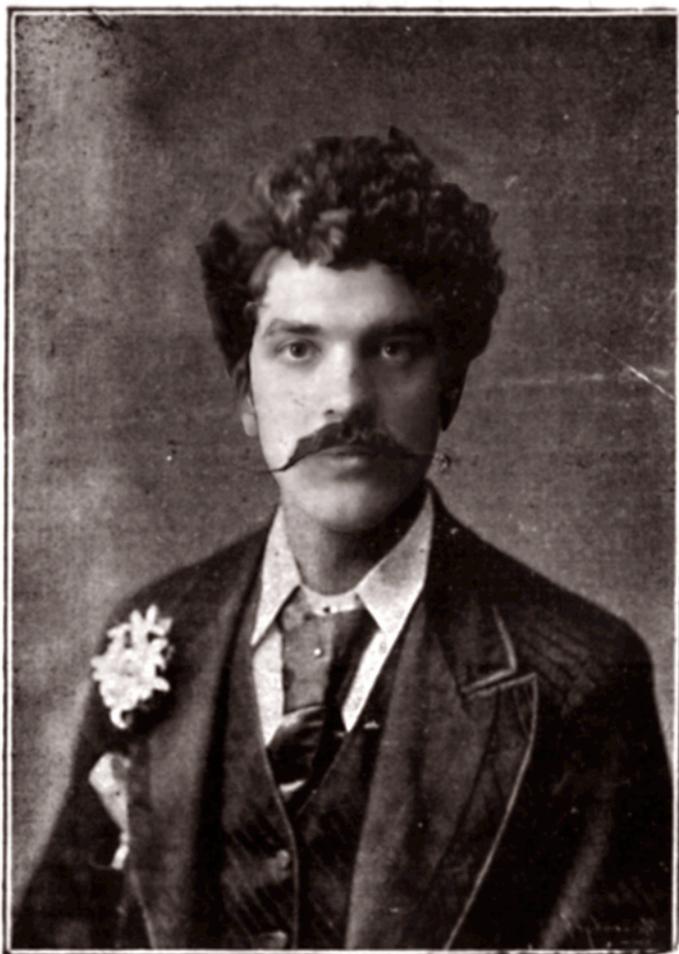


FILES I HAVE KNOWN

Data Reminiscences

Daniel Wilson



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DATA REMINISCENCES

by

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TO THOSE WHO HAVE LOST DATA THIS TEXT IS
RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED...

FOREWORD

The data reminiscences that follow are probably an unrewarding read. Published reminiscences stand as monuments to the ego of their authors. However, the true purpose of this text is to experimentally substitute digital files with written memories of those files, prompted by metadata. Can the original essence of a data file be recreated purely by words?

Many of the files chosen here are obscure and not necessarily available online. It's likely that the files themselves are of little interest if discovered without their context, forming only fragments of nonsensicality in the wider noise of online data. These reminiscences too may appear as yet further noise flung onto an internet already overpopulated with noise vying for visibility. But by intimately analysing one's own files in terms of their emotional impact, the reader may come to appreciate that every file has a story. In our daily dealings with data, we partake in the creation of such stories, and the stories also create us.

CHAPTER I

“dontryathome.zip”

Size: 345KB (345,410 bytes)

Created: 31 December 2004 13:53

Format: ZIP Archive

“dontryathome.zip” was a compressed archive containing images randomly taken from the web. It’s a file I no longer possess, so all that exists of it now is the above scrap of metadata, the text of the email it was attached to, and the memory. This may well be the eventual fate of all data – future generations might only be left with metadata and memories to reminiscence over if either (a) the pace of technology outstrips the means to preserve and open obsolete file formats, or (b) a sudden cataclysmic environmental or economic global disaster annuls electronic technologies. Kind reader, forgive the melodrama. Melodrama is probably the only way to sustain interest in the following reminiscences (and I apologise in advance for any self-indulgence). You see, it’s often the case that things removed from their contexts become intriguing, and conversely, when things are clothed in fuller context they become less intriguing. The file “dontryathome.zip” is a good example of this, as I will describe. Brace yourselves for encroaching uninterestingness, as context follows:

New Year’s Eve 2004 was spent at home. New Year’s Eve often makes me feel miserable, especially so when alone (as is usually the case). To cheer me up, earlier in the day a friend named Toby generously emailed me a special surprise “party pack” ZIP file of random images to be opened in the evening. It was sent to me at lunchtime from Toby’s work email – the Tate Modern gallery – where he worked behind the visitors desk.

Toby had a knack for creating impactful artefacts. To illustrate, when I first met Toby a year previously he was sitting on the floor of his room in a shared flat, scissors in hand, surrounded by bits of newspaper as he carefully amassed a pile of cut-outs of people's eyes. I also saw a weird waxy substance covering an object on a dish – it turned out that he'd sprayed the entire contents of a deodorant can over a moisture sensor. I asked him "why did you do that?" and he replied with a counter-question along the lines of "why do people do anything?" It was interesting. When I left, he handed me a party popper. Some days later I rediscovered the party popper in my coat pocket and carelessly popped it in my back garden, where its confetti blew across the grass. When I looked more closely, I realised Toby had carefully removed the popper's original confetti and replaced it with all the cut-outs of people's eyes.

Fast forward to New Year's Eve 2004: the ZIP file he sent was one of his first "image dumps" where random images utterly divorced from their original contexts were collected together in an email for arresting, baffling or amusing effects. We would go on to regularly exchange many such casual image dumps, which were later re-dubbed "image dunks", as the process of the 'dunk' seemed more dignified than the excretory 'dump'.

I can't remember what exactly was in "dontryathome.zip", but it probably contained between ten and twenty images in GIF and JPG formats randomly grabbed from the internet. In image dunks generally, the images were almost always unfamiliar and intriguing, and this would've certainly been the case for "dontryathome.zip".

A rule seems to emerge when studying the image dunks: when an image is traced back to its source thereby revealing its original context, it loses its intrigue. In the light of this, the interest seems to be sustained by the lack of context. This is rather the exact opposite of these reminiscences here where I attempt to restore full context to metadata summaries. In

theory this means the more I type here, the more uninteresting it becomes. Maybe this task can be made more worthwhile if the reminiscences can delineate our changing relationship with digital data? Whether I can do that or not, I don't know. After all, I'm only as good as the data I've mentally ingested.

CHAPTER II

“fafda.rtf”

Size: 26KB (25,915 bytes) [as of Jan 2016]

Created: 4 May 2012 12:24

Format: Rich Text Format Length: 5,382 words

“fafda.rtf” is an ongoing file that began life as a throwaway jotting originally containing only a single line of text. Its gibberish filename came about as a finger-splurge across the letters F, A and D, that are clustered on the qwerty keyboard on the second row of letters on the far left.

It was created during some research I happened to be engaged in: I was writing something about London's Noise Abatement League, and the text file was a reminder to locate an article entitled “Silencing a Noisy World” from a 1930s issue of *Quiet*: “a magazine devoted to the prevention of avoidable noise”.

This text file soon grew with the inclusion of passwords for library accounts, phone numbers, thoughtful text quotes and citations. It became a self-contained notebook for a multitude of projects. Over a few months, the file expanded. Connections emerged between the notes: reminders to send such-and-such info to so-and-so, etc.

The reason I choose to include this file in these reminiscences is that it rather prepares you, patient reader, for the self-indulgences that may follow. To explain the significance of any particular file on one's hard drive necessarily

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throws up personal resonances (of varying tedium) intractably tied to the data.

“fafda.rtf” became a go-to file whenever motivations were needed. It was a potpourri of usefulnesses packed with pithy inspirational prompts, ideas for unrealised experiments, wistful brainstorm, blueprints, visions and seeds of projects. To anybody else it’d appear simply as incoherent nonsense.

One such project idea noted in “fafda.rtf” is linked to this text you’re reading now. It was a show proposal for a radio station. Bearing the working title of “Explain This, Please,” the idea was a radio interview programme with the gimmick that prior to the interview, the guest would entrust the presenter with their personal computer’s hard drive, allowing unrestricted access. During the live show the presenter browses the guest’s personal files until encountering an ear/eye-catching document, prompting the exclamation: “explain this, please.” At this point, the guest would explain what the file is, its origins, its significance, and any other points of interest. As it was reasoned that no guest would ever submit their personal data to that sort of scrutiny, it didn’t come to light. It was also deemed potentially dull.

Maybe data is inherently dull. After all, it’s just an immaterial collection of ones and zeros. In spite of this, I’ll proceed to recount some formative data experiences in the experimental hope that those emotions tied to the data can be conveyed to you without the actual data itself.

CHAPTER III

“IK”

Size : 235KB (235,300 bytes)

Created : [n/a]

Format : Executable data file

This is my earliest data reminiscence... Pre-internet...

Finding lost media – disks, CD-Rs, etc. – in the street can set off a cascade of emotions. First, there’s the jolt of discovery, then the bravura of pocketing it, followed by keen curiosity as the possible data content is contemplated. In the absence of any external clues, the curiosity heralds a dilemma: should the unknown media be inserted into one’s own home computer to behold its contents? Is the data benign or malign? There’s vague unease at the prospect of cross-immersion of somebody else’s personal data into one’s own computer, at the same time plunging oneself into someone else’s data-world.

One’s first encounter with found media is the starkest in terms of the intensity of these emotions. I can just about remember mine. It was a disk found under a small tree. The experience ultimately boiled down to an agonising decision over whether to execute/run a 235Kb file or not.

It was the early 1990s, and there was a Commodore Amiga 500 in my household. I was nearing the end of infancy. One day my mum took me to some kind of street parade nearby, and I sat on a grass verge watching the cars. It was daytime, and quite sunny. A float drove past with a man in the back – Santa Claus I think (?) – who threw sweets to everyone. A bit of candy landed near me, and that’s when I saw the disk in the shade of a very small, well-pruned tree. I don’t know where it came from. It was a 3.5” floppy disk bearing a label inked with the letters “IK”. I took it home and I seem to recall avoiding mentioning it to my parents who might’ve encouraged me to discard it.

I was aware the disk could've contained something nasty – maybe a fabled “virus”. It also could've been incompatible with the Amiga. In the light of these fears and uncertainties, I didn't boot from the disk. Instead, I used the Amiga ‘Workbench’ shell (akin to MS-DOS) to inspect the files on the disk, which revealed it to be Amiga-compatible. It contained only the startup directory, and one single file called “IK”. It wasn't viewable in the Amiga's native text editor. All I had to do was type “IK” to invoke it – to execute it. But what was it?

At this point I should draw attention to the noteworthy fact that had this found disk been anything else – a toy, a cassette, a book, etc. – this whole episode would probably have been almost forgotten and rendered undateable in greater haze of youth. However, by focussing on the specific memory of this data-angst – the quandary over the file “IK” – other details come to the fore. In the Amiga shell, I would've needed to type “cd df0:” to move to the root directory of the disk, followed by the command “list” to display the details of its contents. These were commands I had learnt previously from an Amiga magazine, which I had only just started buying around this time.

The first Amiga magazine I ever purchased with my pocket money was issue ten of *Amiga Format* – May 1990. It came with a coverdisk – an amazing concept: a magazine to read, *and a disk* full of sights and sounds! The cellophane wrapped disk was cream-coloured – an unusual sight. It contained a playable demo of Hammerfist, a cyberpunk platform game that thrilled me to no end. Hammerfist was notable for being perhaps the earliest video game with a trans[formable]-gender protagonist. Pushing up on the joystick would alternate between the male and female sex. I would often daydream about what it might be like if this feature was available in real life.

But to return to the found disk... This now becomes datable as possibly around Christmas '90 or '91. The fact that recalling the analysis of the “IK” file triggered the above minor

chain of digressions is perhaps testament to the potency of contemplating bygone files.

Curiosity couldn't be quelled, and I typed the letters "I" and "K", placed one cautious finger on the on/off switch of the Amiga's power supply (should anything untoward happen), and hovered over the return key. Then I jabbed the return key. The screen went black. It was indeed an executable file. I definitely recall feeling nervous and fidgety waiting for what must've seemed like aeons. Bulbous red letters suddenly appeared on the screen - "IK+" - and weird bleeping noises were heard. Everything became clear. It was a pirated game... A kung-fu themed beat-'em-up. I.K.+ stood for "International Karate Plus". For the early 90s, it was a somewhat outdated affair. Compared to the wonderful aforementioned Hammerfist, it had very little charm. I very rarely re-played it, if at all. But the vivid memory of the ambivalence over that mysterious 235KB "IK" file remains.

CHAPTER IV

"Anar666.doc"

Size : 1.1MB (1,080,094 bytes)

Created : 22 November 1995 18:02

Format : Microsoft Word document Length : 130,051 words

This file neatly encapsulates the directionless hubris that characterised the 1990s.

At school, an acquaintance nicknamed Smiler (renown for his perma-smile) told me of an extremely controversial document known colloquially as "The Anarchist's Cookbook". I asked if I could have a copy, and he smiled "maybe." My keenness to obtain this document was influenced by this: my parents had given me a book on Nostradamus for Christmas, and I found the 16th century mystic's track record of prophecies convincing enough to prepare myself for his

prediction of a coming conflagration in the year 1999. The Anarchist's Cookbook – “Anar666.doc” – appeared as essential reading matter to survive this imminent apocalypse. Another reason I wanted the file was simply because it sounded cool.

Each schoolday I'd ask Smiler in conspiratorial tones if he'd remembered to bring the cookbook disk. He'd always forget to bring it, to which I'd casually wheeze “nevermind, that's cool” whilst internally swelling with angst. One exciting day – 22nd November 1995 – he *did* bring it with him. At breaktime, under clandestine conditions, he furtively presented the disk to me wrapped in pages ripped from an exercise book.

I was told that a friend of a friend had meticulously filled a tennis ball with matchstick-heads – as specified in “Anar666.doc” – and threw it at a wall, successfully causing an explosion, but unfortunately I wasn't there to see it. Allegedly, it was like something from an action film.

By 1995 I had a PC, and it was on a Gateway 2000 Pentium that “Anar666.doc” was opened in Microsoft Word. It revealed its full title to be “Jolly Roger's Cookbook Version III” and was dated 1990. The file's date of November 22nd 1995 represents the date it was copied onto my computer. The document was replete with American slang and jargon. I didn't fully understand it. References to the “Feds” went over my head, and the ins and outs of phone “phreaking” took awhile to grasp.

I scoured the document for any experiments that were within my means. What stunts would befit the suburbs of a Hertfordshire town? Two were duly noted. Right under my mum's nose, the hallucinogenic banana peel recipe was trialled, but after eating it I only experienced a mildly disappointing nausea. I also attempted to make thermite – a mixture of rust and aluminium that, when ignited, was said to glow white hot and could melt through “anything”. Frustratingly, thermite required very high temperatures to ignite: a fuse made from magnesium was recommended. Myself and a friend obtained a strip of magnesium from the school's science lab, and we tried

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to activate the thermite atop a phone box which I had climbed onto, but after several failed attempts to ignite the magnesium fuse, we abandoned it, absent-mindedly leaving the dish of thermite in situ.

For many years afterwards, on infrequent occasions when I sat on the top deck of a bus that would pass by the phone box, I'd notice the thermite still on its roof. The sight of this always reminded me of "Anar666.doc" along with the acquaintances associated with the file, who I had since lost contact with. Over many years rainwater roused the infectious nature of the rust in the thermite, slowly spreading across the metal roof of the phone box, beginning with a reddish-brown stain around the thermite that gradually grew to corrode the entirety of the side panelling as the iron oxide ate through the galvanised surfaces. Probably as a result of this, the phone box was removed around 2005 and wasn't replaced. On the patch of ground where it once stood, there remains a rusty stain.

"Anar666.doc" was one of those files that had a pronounced aura – a palpable "atmosphere". In practice, it was this much-fetishised essence that made the deepest impression rather than its actual content, from which I derived no meaningful use.

CHAPTER V

“!A19TOP!.S3M”

95KB (94,732 bytes)

Created : 18 March 1996 12:05

Format : ScreamTracker 3 Module Length: 3:46 minutes

Prior to obtaining internet access, magazine coverdisks were the main way to access the ‘outside world’ of data. I was particularly smitten by the contents of a cover CD accompanying *PC Format* issue 58 for July 1996 (*PC Format* CD #29). It wasn’t advertised anywhere on the cover, but hidden in the CD’s subfolders was a DOS-based music program called FastTracker 2. This program was a vertical scrolling step-sequencer where audio samples could be loaded in, triggered at different pitches and arranged into musical patterns. The resulting pieces of music were saved as self-contained ‘modules’, and the file extensions varied according to the sequencer used. FastTracker 2 saved in XM format (but could also open most other formats), ScreamTracker’s format was S3M, and the older trackers such as the Amiga’s OctaMed saved in MOD format. The music created on such programs is often called ‘MOD music’, or sometimes ‘chiptune’.

The interesting thing about module files is that they could be dismantled and examined like pieces of clockwork. Various tricks could be learnt; the constituent audio samples exported or reused, and the *PC Format* CD was very educational in this respect.

The CD contained a directory of slick S3M music files mostly composed by European maestros – masters of the craft – who tended to club together in musical collectives constituting what was called the ‘demoscene’, characterised by demoparties where computer geniuses would embroil themselves in congenial data-based oneupmanships to demonstrate their skill as coders, and ergo, their virility.

Distinct from this cache of polished 'demoscene' MOD music was a low-key directory elsewhere on the *PC Format* CD titled 'Submit', containing submissions from readers. A different sort of MOD music was discovered lurking in there, and amongst these oddities (including a ditty composed entirely from burps) there was a folder called 'ION'.

'ION' contained 24 weirdly named S3M files forming a song cycle named "!Ion Factory!", written in 1995. It was the spawn of two young men in their late teens: Pauly W. and "Simon" (whose name was always in quotes) from an unknown part of England. Their music files, released under the name 'Ionisation', were eminently angular, techno-eccentric, synthpoppy bundles of fun. Curiously, the joyful upbeatness of these tracks seemed at odds with the more refined appetites of their creators, who in an accompanying text file professed a love of goth, industrial, experimental and 20th century classical music (Ionisation took their name from the percussive composition by Edgard Varèse, composed in the 1920s).

The most striking !Ion Factory! module, for my teenage self, was called "!A19TOP!.S3M". Its proper song title was "Top". It was number 19 in the !Ion Factory! cycle, lasting 3:46, with a speed of 126 BPM, a 4/4 time signature, and eight sound channels. The musical content was apparently built around the drumbreak sampled from James Brown's Funky Drummer. This looped 8-bit break retained a tiny stab of guitar over the bassdrum at the start, along with Brown shouting "go ha." Top's instrumental palette was comprised of seven samples, including the drum break and a turntable scratch sound effect amongst the main bouncy synthesiser tones. The repeated melodic hook was formed over a progression with one full bar in D-flat minor, pivoting down to its subdominant G-flat minor for the next split-bar concluding on G-flat minor 7, and this is looped satisfyingly, interspersed with occasional breaks, dropouts and Steve Reich-style manipulations. It was an alchemical triumph – the sonic elements complemented each other, and within the module file's instrument text box

the composers likewise recognised that it possessed a popular appeal, inviting prospective remixers to delve in.

All module file formats provided the opportunity to fill the instrument text lists with messages. Customarily these usually took the form of greetings, contact details, web addresses and credits for sample sources. !Ion Factory!'s message fields were filled with poetic proclamations, existential profundities, half-comprehensible in-jokes, and Easter egg messages secreted away beyond the expanse of blank lines, on the bottommost lines ("Top" contained such a secret message by Pauly W., declaring his love for a "Tess").

There was a spirit of excitement embodied in "!A19TOP!.S3M" that I wanted to engage with, so using FastTracker 2, I attempted a little remix that morphed into a cover version. After adding a recording I'd made of a ticking clock, it seemed appropriate to rename it "Time Machine." This remix sat on my computer for a number of months, until one day I was introduced to the wonders of the internet after a friend lent me a dial-up modem. I decided to email the remix to Ionisation's Pauly W. to see if he'd approve. That remix is now long lost to data oblivion – it might've been a cringeworthy juvenile desecration, but Mr. W. was very gracious and complimentary about it. From his emails, it quickly became apparent that Pauly W. was an extraordinarily clever and interesting individual. He became an enduring cyber-contact, and we collaborated on a MOD file we titled 'Hmmm', then went on to exchange cassettes, CD-Rs and ideas for almost twenty years. I've never met him in real life – we probably wouldn't get on. Any meeting would undoubtedly herald the awkwardness of instantly collapsing cyber-mythologies.

CHAPTER VI

“E-XCENTR.XM”

Size: 673 KB (673,218 bytes)

Created: 21 November 1996 20:39

Format: FastTracker 2 Module Length: 6:00 minutes

This is a reminiscence on the first fully-formed media file I downloaded.

Looking out the window now, there’s a supermarket home-delivery lorry with a website boldly printed on its side. When walking outside, those square smartphone-scannable “Quick Response” barcodes are frequently seen on advertisements. Has 24/7 web connectivity deadened our senses to data exchange and its intimacies? Internet data felt more special in the days when you’d write an itinerary *in advance* of the websites you’d plan to visit, then make sure nobody wanted to use the telephone before logging online via dial-up for short periods (with the phone bill firmly in mind).

As stated in the above data reminiscence, at some point late in 1996, a 14.4 kbps modem was acquired and an internet subscription trialled. The magic of sending messages electronically across continents amazed me so much that I had to print out my first few email correspondences in an attempt to fully grasp the wonder. A German guy called Maz who ran a freeware sound software website was briefly corresponded with. I can’t recall the topics of those early emails – probably stuff to do with the creation of MOD music that was beginning to enthrall me.

Apologies, patient reader, for including yet another MOD-based file in these reminiscences, but the format – with its impressive pattern scrolling and moving waveforms during playback – represents an archetype of hands-on data manipulation; musical successions of triggered sounds and visual

read-outs combine to form an impressive sensory experience of data. In addition, most MOD music was very repetitive, so these file formats had hypnotic potency. I don't know whether it's a quality of childhood memory or whether this hypnotic aspect has something to answer for, but when I try to remember listening to those files, they were all temporally amorphous – minutes seemed to last hours, and I seemed to exist inside the computer. The film *Johnny Mnemonic* springs to mind.

Back then, to find downloadable MOD music online wasn't a simple case of searching in Google. Google did not yet exist. Extant search engines such as Lycos or Altavista only penetrated the very surface of web content. Websites would be obliged to become part of 'webrings', identified with a banner, that would link the webpage into a support chain of similarly themed sites. It may be speculated that the ubiquity of MOD music groups at this time reflected the need for individual artists to congregate together onto a single website to attain visibility in the paucity of effective search engines. To find the more niche websites, you'd need to ask people, scour bulletin board forums, or physically look in magazines. "E-XCENTR.XM" was probably found after following a website link in the same *PC Format* issue mentioned previously.

"E-XCENTR.XM" was the first data file I downloaded that was appreciably an artistic emission. It took five minutes to download. As was the custom in those days, the file was compressed in a ZIP file, mercifully reducing the download time in this case by about three minutes. The 676 KB song was found on a website for the Dutch group 'Explizit' – a collective of about 15 coders and composers of electronic dance music who regularly released free XM, S3M and IT music files on their website. Their output was very professional-sounding. Opening a new module file for the first time was always fun: the file would contain its own audio samples comprising the instrumentation. Discovering how these samples were worked into musical form was a delight.

“E-XCENTR.XM” contained 16 samples (synth based percussion, electronic tones, a radio noise, siren and laser gun FX) and 18 channels. It purported to be “hard-trance” – not necessarily the kind of music I was drawn to, but being youthfully unbiased I was more or less a blank canvas for its impressions: a six-minute relentless floaty stomp with a panic alarm section near the end. It featured a buzzy bass-line predominantly of the single note F, with a sudden portamento blip in each bar. This gave way to a recurring melodic chord progression voiced by a heavily muted synth-choir: F minor, C minor, A-flat major and C-7 suspended 4th. Naturally in 4/4, the nominal tempo was a hectic 160 BPM, but its flow was stuttered by a tempo-change command on every other line, creating an epilepsy-inducing stream of tempo alternations between slow and fast. At first I wondered if there was something wrong with the file, as although it sounded fine, the song speed indicator kept flickering between ‘5’ and ‘3’ due to this. Later I realised this was in fact a way of ‘humanising’ the rhythm, adding a swing.

The music’s title was “Xcentric (Repulse Mix)” and it was skilfully crafted by Thunderbass, a Dutch Explizit member in his late teens. What struck me more than the music itself was a futurological excitement that seemed somehow embedded within the file. In retrospect, the Explizit website itself might’ve coloured my thoughts a little – suffused as it was with a triumphal optimism; singing of the consciousness-expanding virtues of non-addictive substances; articulating a pre-millennial feeling of civilisation’s happy summation and being on the cusp of a radical new epoch where humanity’s destined transition into a hyperspace bliss is soundtracked by empowering electronic rhythms. I would often return to the site in anticipation of more free MOD music downloads.

One part of the website sticks in my mind... There was a sub-section listing some European dance clubs noted for their value for money. At the top of the page, there was a jokey preamble that read something like “Ah, spending the weekend

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watching TV. The shopping channel. Helping dad with the car. Playing card games with the neighbour. Grandma's knitting a sweater." Suddenly the imagery was swept away with the prompt: "Sounds like a nightmare? Then get the hell out before it's too late!" And details for various venues followed. Reading this as a youngster, the starkness of this throwaway blurb threw into sharp relief the asphyxiating perils of suburban life and its oppressive mindsets. However, there was little I could do at that age except dive head-first into data itself: download more MOD music, internally revel in its escapist vibes and correspond with enlightened cyber-contacts.

In 1997 I entered a MOD music competition advertised on Explizit's homepage – the "Symbiosis '97 Compo." I worked tirelessly on a wonky but energetic little ditty. I recall that my shoddy offering came last in the rankings. I don't remember feeling disappointed because I seemed to be in a trance of escapism. I'm thankful that my probably embarrassing submission is now vanished from public view.

As an epilogue to this reminiscence, the growth of MP3 made tracked music an obsolete curio, and many groups fragmented at the turn of the millennium. The utopian techno "free music" ideals of Explizit and indeed most of established the MOD music 'scene' crumbled somewhat at the turn of the millennium when its participants, possibly feeling the pinch of non-profit endeavours, became distracted by the need to economically sustain themselves.

CHAPTER VII

“38_007.S3M”

Size: 554 KB (553,884 bytes)

Created: 1 November 1997 17:21

Format: ScreamTracker 3 Module Length: 5:32 minutes

“38_007.S3M” was emailed to me by somebody I corresponded with. It was composed by the creative Adam Gogul who was of a similar age to me and who’d just started using tracking sequencer software. He’d named himself after a hacker from a Manga film. Gogul later came to be deeply skeptical about gender norms, initiating various researches and explorations into means of transcending gender. A collection of stories featured on Gogul’s website, and I think it was in the context of one of Gogul’s sub-erotic tales that I first encountered the use of Spivak’s gender-neutral pronouns (e / em / eir). Towards the end of the millennium, Adam underwent a transformation and became Zoë. I hope it will not be inappropriate to employ Spivak’s pronouns here to respectfully represent Gogul’s previous incarnation. Without having met, I sensed that the internet played a key role in em redefining emself; the echo chamber of cyberspace fosters the prototyping of super-individualised character-rich avatars that can be empowered and then propelled to flourish into reality.

The true song title of “38_007.S3M” was Overfuzz – stylistically it was impossible to place, other than it was beat driven, yet lacking genuine percussion sounds. At the core was a self-sampled fuzz-guitar chord progression: full bars of E minor, G major, F major, then a split bar C Major to D major. As well as being harshly distorted, the chords were a bit out-of-tune and not easily discernible. Gogul had decided to use eir own home-made samples using a cheap microphone: e recorded a vocal beat-box for a drumloop. The end result was a crude distorted dirge punctuated by em yelling “yeah” and “I wanna see you move it.” There was also another memorable

Gogul production called “Rock Yeah We Rock” that featured distorted vocals proclaiming this. Overfuzz’s charm was in the use of self-sampling to create a unique arrangement of sounds.

From what I remember of our correspondences, Gogul was aiming for a slick beat-heavy techno-industrial sound like that of The Prodigy. In falling short of eir mark somewhat, e had accidentally prefigured the underground noise aesthetic of the 2000s characterised by heavily distorted 8-bit grot. However, in 1997 experimental or amateur files like these – especially of such rustic creation – were mostly privately circulated and not usually hosted or archived anywhere, either by reluctance of the composer to distribute it, or due to falling foul of the quality control of MOD hosting websites. Even today, the MOD Archive website upholds a quality control filter which feels incongruous for a website with pretensions of preserving the history of MOD music.

To record one’s own samples in a MOD file was a bold act of individuation, eschewing reliance on instruments and sounds taken from other extant music files (as was the custom). Bear in mind that recording one’s own voice onto a home computer was not as simple as it is nowadays. Soundcards couldn’t even record and playback at the same time. Placing oneself – one’s own voice – into a MOD file was an interesting grasp toward pure creativity; an attempt to extend the personality into the digital realm. Filtered through a pitiful microphone and 8-bit downsampling, one’s pure creative intent was actualised at the moment the soundwave was stored. Even if it was a wonky beatbox, this data episode remains a memorable data experience for me.

It’s very likely that Gogul would be embarrassed to be associated with eir early teenage digital dabblings (as we all are). Embarrassment similarly drove the James Bond author, Ian Fleming, to round up and destroy all the copies of his first book of juvenile poetry *The Black Daffodil*, which as a result is hopelessly sought after despite nobody knowing anything about its content. “38_007.S3M” is a lost orphaned work: long

vanished abandonware. Even its composer Adam Gogul doesn't register on search engines any more. Digital juvenalia tends to disappear quickly – experiments and creative misfirings are swiftly deleted. As a result, non-existence exalts data into legend, to which myths freely adhere. Today however, the ubiquity of YouTube “cringe compilations” signals a possible future where wonky juvenile emissions are preserved and cruelly rehashed forever; the more embarrassing the emission, the fiercer its existence endures – unable to be memorialised and recuperated in reminiscence! Denying the human capacity to change! Artificial stasis seems horrifying.

CHAPTER VIII

“amb1.wav”

Size: 3.86 MB (3,860,822 bytes)

Created : 10 November 1999 15:33

Format : Audio : WAV : PCM, 44,100Hz, 16 bit, Mono.

Length : 43.772 seconds

In 1999 I was in the habit of walking around recording random audio, desirous of sourcing original sounds to use as instruments in tracked music files. As with Gogul, the recording of one's own material lent a much-desired uniqueness to the finished result. In practice, the stuff I recorded was of such poor quality that the results proved to be a slurry of indistinctness. Initially I used a hand-held tape recorder to capture alleyway clappings, dogs barking, toilets flushing and other miscellany, but I then migrated to a bulky digital sampler called a Boss Dr. Sample SP-202 which boasted a built-in microphone, offering improved sonic clarity.

It was probably on the 9th or 10th of November 1999 that I stood outside the “drum room” at school whilst somebody practiced the drums. I didn't know who was in the room hitting the drums, as I was too shy to enter the room. I

still don't know who was in the room, whether it was a lower-school student, or sixth-former, boy or girl. Creepily (in hindsight), I skulked outside recording the muffled drums on the sampler's limited one-minute memory.

The drum room was on the first floor of a stairwell, and the recording captures the echoey ambience of this stairwell. There's distant talking, lockers can be heard slamming in the far background, and in the foreground is the occasional rustle as I fidgeted with the sampler half-clad in a carrier bag inside a shoebox. The recording gets clearer as the door is approached. At 6 seconds, the drummer breaks into a 2/4 beat at roughly 100BPM, before changing into a rock 4/4 beat at 33 seconds.

This would be just one of many useless recordings I'd made during lonely wanderings around school were it not for one extraordinary anomaly. At 18 seconds into the recording, as the drummer was getting into his 2/4 stride, there occurs an unexplained sound lasting 4 seconds. I recall the noise seemed to emanate from some pipework in a corner near the ceiling, but it was unlike any plumbing noise. It may have originated from some sort of electrical element in the plumbing or heating system. Later analysis revealed it to have a pronounced ~800Hz tone, but there were many harmonics as the tone evolved. 800Hz is a possible harmonic of 50Hz (the frequency of the UK mains supply) which suggests it had an electrical origin. But what a magical electrical sound!

The emergence of this surprising tone was a revelation – it demonstrated that the most fascinating sounds occur off-mic in unexpected places at unexpected times. It highlighted a philosophical truism that can be applied to data, and indeed the study of history itself: that the interest is often concentrated in the background noise – the anecdotal fluff – rather than on the thing being focussed upon.

This strange sound inspired me to seek similar instances. A new Smartmedia card was purchased, and this allowed for several minutes of recording. Every day I'd record random bits and pieces in the hope something unexpected might occur. It

became frustrating when nothing happened, so I'd start trying to catalyse sonic interestingness into being by stomping my feet, slapping various surfaces, bumping into doors in an unusual manner, turning taps on full, setting the dials on radiators to inappropriate settings, switching fluorescent tube lights on and off repeatedly, dragging my feet across shiny floors, hitting railings, and simply yelping various pitches. It seldom produced anything notable except social ostracism.

In an incident embarrassing in hindsight, I overheard a brilliant noise whilst walking through an industrial estate. My recorder didn't capture it, so I switched it on and ran up to the man whose angle grinder had produced the sound. As politely as possible, I asked if he could make that sound again. I didn't realise that he'd actually had a serious accident – something had broken. He looked at me very oddly for a moment, then told me to “fuck off,” giving an angry shove to send me on my way. This experience demonstrated that these interesting sounds almost always happen at a moment of physical transition – when a change is encountered in a dynamic vibratory system. This revelation did little to reverse my increasing social desolation.

CHAPTER IX

“COOLDRON.IFF”

Size: 811 KB (810,134 bytes)

Created : 22 August 2002 23:17

Format : Audio : 8SVX Sample Mono. 8-bit Length : 17 seconds

It may be asked by the more waggish reader that a memoir of formative data experiences must surely be incomplete without a reminiscence of one's earliest dalliances with the internet's sexually explicit offerings. Though I don't doubt that this side of the internet is a development that has significant implications for the human species, I've neglected

exploring it because – for me, at least – such data experiences don't linger in the mind as something valued. My memories of early downloaded imagery instead revolve solely around science fiction fantasy scenes.

This is a data reminiscence of such an artwork – a fantastical scene – albeit lost in a peculiar cross-conversion, thus becoming audio data. It couldn't be converted back to the original image.

“COOLDRON.IFF” is the title of the audio quondam-image. It was saved in the unusual IFF (also known as 8SVX) format. This was one of many audio file formats that FastTracker 2 could import and export.

In FastTracker 2 you could load raw data into the sample banks. For instance, you could take a text file, or an image, or a spreadsheet, and import it as audio. The resulting harsh data noise could often be used as electronic percussion noises, or crunchy pseudo-synth 8-bit tones.

I have always been a bit of a philistine, and am fond of fantasy landscapes that others are inclined to deride as tacky. Many years ago, on the Commodore Amiga there was a program called Vista that could generate user-editable 3D landscapes – you could manipulate the geology, the fauna, the skies... There was a weird sense of awe in Vista's landscapes that, as a youngster, I was very susceptible to. In later years, I'd seek out images that evoked that same sense of awe, and found it in science fiction fantasy landscapes available on the internet. I didn't have any particular favourite artist, but kept an assortment of favourite artworks saved, alternating them as background desktop wallpapers. Some were created digitally, and others were digitised from original encaustic wax artworks. My favourite was titled “MOONVA~1.BMP” but it is now lost. Memory of it is vague (I don't know who the artist was or where it came from): it depicted an alien valley, several moons looming in the purple sky, and a strange variety of minerals in the jagged landscape – a geodesic dome enshrouded by mist on the horizon. This description doesn't do it justice.

In August 2002, I was messing around in FastTracker 2, and loaded in the awestriking “MOONVA~1.BMP” to hear what it sounded like as audio. It was nominally a low G in pitch, but extremely noisy, with occasional blips, flutters and dropouts. This was interesting, and I re-exported it as a proper audio file, retitling it as “COOLDRON.IFF” (literally “cool drone”, truncated by the DOS eight-letter filename convention). Some weeks later I accidentally deleted the original image “MOONVA~1.BMP” – and sadly I was unable to locate it again. All that remains is the harsh, jagged sound of its data in “COOLDRON.IFF”.

CHAPTER X

“Head_9Hs_Sinuses_(Adult) - 1”

Size: 108.66 MB (108,664,506 bytes)

Created : 22 October 2015 09:45

Format : Encapsulated folder of DICOM image layers

“Head_9Hs_Sinuses_(Adult) - 1” is a collation of data I don’t possess. It was shown to me in November 2015 at the offices of a radio station I often visit. There, Peter – co-manager, broadcaster and musician – was at his computer. It was a Mac, with programs visible in the dock (akin to the Windows taskbar). I noticed a peculiar icon in the dock – an illuminati-style green pyramid with an Eye of Horus superimposed. Asking what it was, Peter showed me that it was a piece of medical software called OsiriX, specifically for viewing images of medical scans, such as MRI or CAT scans. In this light of this, the choice of the Eye of Horus for OsiriX’s icon had deeper resonance: a traditional symbol of protection and physical healing, it also savoured of the long-sealed Egyptian sarcophagi which in recent years were CAT scanned in order to respectfully view their contents.

It transpired that Peter was having trouble with his

sinuses and had visited a doctor who referred him for a CAT scan. Having had the sinus scan, Peter was given a CD-R containing the scan data. To view the data, a specialised viewer was required, hence OsiriX.

Peter was in his early twenties, which seemed to me too young to be suffering sinus woes. It immediately reminded me of his predecessor at the radio station – a polymath surrealist named Richard who was perpetually afflicted by ‘headcolds’, polyps, tooth complaints and sinus malfunctions. It was maddeningly unspecific. At a climactic point of high headcold, Richard left. It seemed that Peter had somehow inherited one of Richard’s burdens by mysterious synchronicity. Hopefully the Eye of Horus on the OsiriX app icon in Peter’s Mac’s dock will stand him in good stead.

Peter’s scan data was an encapsulated folder a whisker over 100MB containing hundreds of ‘splices’, on both axes I think. In OsiriX, Peter blithely scrolled through the sectional planes of his skull, animating the scan, pointing out the shadowy areas in the nasal cavity indicating blockages. It seemed morbidly intimate to be privy to these rare views of the inside of Peter’s skull, but he was quite blasé about it, highlighting the attractive patternations and symmetries.

It was interesting to learn that patients are now customarily given CDs of their scan data as mementos – evidently as an acknowledgement of the unique significance of the data to the patient; data that can otherwise not be procured without specialist equipment. Peter’s scans were probably the most personal data I’ve ever beheld, but unlike most personal data, it had wide appeal – it drew in everybody else in the office – probably because it made the viewer reflect on mortality. After some moments of wonder, Peter then minimised OsiriX to get back to Airtime – the radio show scheduling app – to continue his work. I’d noted that minimising the app was distinct from quitting it, and as I left I sensed that Peter hadn’t quite finished contemplating that data...