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Data Gardens

Proposal #1: Optic Fiber and Light Based Communication (A narrative with traditional time-based media or a side scrolling game format)

In looking at the concept of the internet and computation in an art context, I feel most strongly drawn to the scientific history of it. Growing up in a world with social media, nearly instant internet search and computers smaller than the size of a human hand; all of which have been polished to near perfection by companies like Apple, Google, Facebook and Twitter (etc.) it is both easy to ignore and nearly impossible to imagine that these devices function because we have managed to build them from scratch. I feel that artists and programmers alike can easily fall into seeing the modern internet and computation as something separate from its creation, and I want my project to draw attention to the fact that underneath a polished exterior the internet is still a human made wonder.

One way I am thinking to approach this subject is through more traditional media and with a narrative storyline. Our trip to CMU's data center led me to do a lot of research on optic fiber history and function, and there is something deeply appealing and romantic about a system that connects people by harnessing light. For this approach I am considering making an analogy between optic fiber and childhood communication in darkness by flashlight using morse code. I would also want to draw a comparison to sending a message into the dark outside your window to posting a message to someone you have never met in real life. In both cases there is a moment after the message has been sent where the sender realizes that there might not be anyone listening

on the other end. One of the common criticisms I hear repeated by people who criticize the internet and social media is that “it is impersonal” and that “they miss when people actually knew one another.” While I cannot be entirely certain on the way other people feel I generally get the sense that this critique comes from the feeling of loneliness and rejection when you say something heartfelt only to have it ignored.

For the actual format of this narrative I am considering either using a graphic novel or stop motion animation style to separate my work from what I am trying to critique by using more traditional media, or to go the opposite route by making a side scrolling game with Unity or p5.js which naturally is designed to live on the computer. In making graphic strip or animation I would go with a more linear narrative and an exact portrayal of optic fiber and flashlights while a side scrolling game would naturally become more about visuals and would allow for more stylization. Going the side scrolling route I would want to try and match a more early version of a video game (arrow keys, enemies, health bar, etc.) because I think the nostalgia of it would appeal more to people who don’t like the current environment of online space.

I’m still not entirely sure about the message I want to send about connections in online space. I am the most introverted person I have ever met, which sometimes makes it difficult to discuss the need for close relationships and loneliness because I sometimes feel the urge to try and imagine why most people form connections and portray that instead of making authentic work based on my own experiences(which is always more moving and powerful than the first.) I want to start with my original idea, flashlights and optic fiber, and let the idea revolve from there by either creating an animation set (or tileset and game assets) and by doing character design.

Through this approach I also want to portray optic fiber as what I think it is, mysterious and other worldly in how it literally runs off contained light, but to also leave the viewer with an accurate understanding of what optic fiber is and how it works.