

flwr pwr -Tending the Walled Garden

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Imagine a garden of dream flowers, powered by duracell, made of abandoned Starbucks coffee cups, styrofoam cubes cut from the latest iMac packing materials, a brain made in Italy, a blossom made by 1/2 Tod 1/2 Bot. The flowers glow with an eerie pulsating glow, sending secret missives across a darkened room. Some flowers horde their individuality, resisting attempts to transform, to change. Others broadcast their distinctive natures broadly, encouraging nearby flowers to go with them, to be like them. Still others promiscuously adopt the patterns of others, reproducing, syncing, connecting. They live they die. The garden flourishes it declines.

In this group, workshop participants will build electronic flowers using some pre-assembled electronic components and craft materials (paper cups, styrofoam, cardboard, etc.) These flowers 'talk' to one another using infrared light patterns and, in doing so, gain and expend energy. They can be programmed in various ways - to be more open or more closed, more aggressive or more sharing - which has an effect on each flower's own individual survival as well as the survival of the garden as a whole. In addition to resulting in what I hope will be an interesting visual display, the project will serve to open and inform discussions relevant to the topic of 'walled garden'. Themes include questions about the porosity of boundaries, the necessity for both inclusion and exclusion as part of community, the power of exchange, and so forth.

From Chapter 21 of The Little Prince:

"Go and look again at the roses. You will understand now that yours is unique in all the world. Then come back to say goodbye to me, and I will make you a present of a secret."

The little prince went away, to look again at the roses.

"You are not at all like my rose," he said. "As yet you are nothing. No one has tamed you, and you have tamed no one. You are like my fox when I first knew him. He was only a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But I have made him my friend, and now he is unique in all the world."

And the roses were very much embarrassed.

"You are beautiful, but you are empty," he went on. "One could not die for you. To be sure, an ordinary passerby would think that my rose looked just like you--the rose that belongs to me. But in herself alone she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen; because it is for her that I have killed the caterpillars (except the two or three that we saved to become butterflies); because it is she that I have listened to, when she grumbled, or boasted, or ever sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is my rose.

And he went back to meet the fox.

"Goodbye," he said.

"Goodbye," said the fox. "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

"What is essential is invisible to the eye," the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

"It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important."

"It is the time I have wasted for my rose--" said the little prince, so that he would be sure to remember.

"Men have forgotten this truth," said the fox. "But you must not forget it. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose . . ."

"I am responsible for my rose," the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

During the building process, we briefly take time out to discuss options and how they relate to the larger questions of the conference. For instance, decisions made during the physical construction will have an impact on how directional the plant is able to communicate:

Do you place the light sensors up high so that it can see many directions and at a distance, or do you place your display lights up high so that it can be seen? Do you focus all of your sensors in one direction for increased sensitivity, or do you spread them out in order to cover more terrain? At this point we might talk about related strategies of social computing/web 2.0 software and the balancing of mass and/or specialized audiences.

A similar intervention can occur during the software configuration where participants will have to choose how their plant behaves:

Do you give it an aggressive communication pattern where it constantly broadcasts its pattern or do you have it spend more of its time listening for others patterns? Do you try to conserve energy in order to last a long time, or do you spend energy in the hopes of attracting other plants? Here, we might talk about the business and funding practices of current web 2.0 companies, issues of venture capital, open source vs. proprietary standards.

It is important to note that the flwrs are not a simulation but a metaphor for the structures and relations of web 2.0 and walled gardens. Building and configuring them to communicate with each other in various ways serves as a mode of engagement with the themes and issues raised in this conference. While the topics remain open, there are three specific mappings we can do between planned flwr configurations and relevant conceptual work:

1. The Gift Economy and Generalized Exchange (Mauss, 1925; Cheal, 1998; Kollock, 1998)
2. Information Commons (Hardin, 1979; Benkler, 2003)
3. Information 'neighborhoods' (Jacobs, 1961)

Each of the sessions involve philosophic investigation, technical discussions, empirical, hand-on work. Here's a working schedule, subject to change:

First session:

Philosophic investigation - The walled garden, what is it, examples, problems, shared issues.

Technical Discussion - Social Networks - how they work, flwr as 'simulated node'.

Empirical - Overview of arduino, IR communication, BlinkM LED. Setting up the environment.

Second Session:

Technical Discussion - FLWR circuits and network plans

Empirical - building FLWR body and circuit

Philosophic investigation - Network Theory, humans as nodes, not as nodes; gifts, commons, neighborhoods.

Third Session:

Empirical - testing flwr configs, running the garden (gifts, commons, neighborhoods)

Philosophic - how does the metaphors function, how do they fail?

rinse, repeat

Fourth Session:

Empirical - testing flwr configs, running the garden (gifts, commons, neighborhoods)

Philosophic - what is success, failure, what makes the garden flourish, decline

rinse, repeat

Technical - Outcomes and report