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Listen! The Potential of
Shared Hallucinations (1997)

This lecture was first given at Mpath's *Games for the Next Millennium* Conference at Redwood City, California on 5 February 1997.

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This lecture makes some assumptions.

First, it assumes that you are disappointed with the state of the online gaming industry.

Disappointed with the games, which are mostly single-player games with a multi-user option tacked on at the last minute, reluctantly.

Disappointed with many publishers, while they wait.

With the lack of production funding.

With the hype.

Second, it assumes the presence of a vast untapped market for multiplayer entertainment.

It's a fact that the Internet has attracted millions of newcomers to the world of networked computing.

These people all have two things in common.

They all have access to a computer.

They all have a connection to the net.

Every one of them is a potential customer for our games.

But so far, we haven't figured out how to attract these new people.

We're not making any new friends.

It's all we can do to keep the friends we already have: the game hobbyists.

We seem to have a pretty good idea what our existing audience wants.

How do we find out what the rest of the world wants?

How do we get the computer users who aren't playing online games, or any games at all, to give them a try?

Well, we could ask them.

We could try market surveys or focus groups.

But these methods are unlikely to tell us anything we don't already know, or couldn't guess.

We need a breakthrough here!

And questions can't lead us to a breakthrough unless we're willing to break something.

Before we can learn, before we can grow, we have to be prepared to *listen*.

What does it mean, to listen?

The word is commonly understood to mean "attentive hearing."

It has its etymological origin in the archaic verb, *list*.

"List!" they used to say. "Ssh! List! The wild boar is outside!"

But the verb "list" also means to tilt something to one side.

When a sea vessel leans to starboard or port, it is said to be listing.

So how did the word “list” turn into the verb “listen?”

Because when we try to hear something, we sometimes cock our heads in the direction of the sound.

So to listen means more than to hear attentively.

The word also implies a change of inclination.

A new slant.

To listen is to put ourselves into a receptive attitude.

A position to be re-aligned.

To truly listen is to admit the possibility of upset.

Now we have an idea of what real listening means.

So how do we listen to our potential mass market?

Which way do we cock our heads?

And what do we listen for?

We can begin by looking for clues in our own industry.

The first clue is to be found on any bestseller list.

Up near the top, where the moneymakers are.

Up there among the *Quakes* and the *Diablos* and the *Red Alerts* is a title that seemingly refuses to die.

A title that sold 75,000 copies a week last December, three years after it was released.

A title that has moved more than three and half million units through the channel.

The biggest-selling CD-ROM of all time.

What is it about *Myst?*

Many imitators have appeared.

Some of them have better graphics, more interesting puzzles.

None of them have sold anywhere near as well.

You could argue that *Myst* is just an example of luck or good timing.

That it came out just as the CD-ROM explosion happened.

That it's a classic game, which salespeople automatically hand to every sucker who buys a new computer.

Nobody ever lost their job selling somebody *Myst*.

These explanations may offer some comfort to the companies that turned *Myst* down.

But they beg the question, don't they?

If *Myst* sells well because it's a classic, why did it become

one?

Myst succeeds for the same reason the best novels and films succeed.

It invites people into a world that's somehow better than ours.

A gentle yet tantalizing world that starts off small, but gets wider and deeper as you explore.

The images don't look grainy or nervous like other games.

It doesn't make you dizzy to watch *Myst*.

Instead, *Myst* is beautiful.

Let me repeat that: *Myst* is *beautiful*.

The user interface is desperately simple.

The pace is slow and thoughtful.

Death, failure and humiliation do not lurk around every corner.

And, although it has no network component, it is rewarding and fun to play *Myst* with other people.

Listen! Every one of our high-tech games is being mercilessly outsold by a 4-year-old Hypercard stack!

Game hobbyists are not the only people buying this game.

Myst obviously has a lot to teach us about the kinds of interactive experiences real people find attractive.

Now let's look at an example from the world of networked gaming.

So far, networked games have failed to make any lasting inroads into the mass market.

So let's use the best examples we can find in the hobbyist market.

Let's incline our heads towards the most successful network game of all time.

At first glance, this game doesn't seem to have very much going for it.

The first problem is the graphics.

There aren't any. It's all text!

It's not even proportional text. It's monospaced.

It looks like a terminal program on a VT52.

There's no sound or music.

No mouse or joystick control, either.

You have to use the keyboard.

And we're not talking about arrow keys, either.

You have to type in whole words and sentences to do anything.

And you have to spell them right!

Kind of like those old adventure games nobody plays anymore, except the parser isn't as good.

And the manual for this thing is thick.

The learning curve is steep.

It takes hours of play before you can get a feel for it.

Nevertheless, despite all these problems, this game has generated more total revenue than any other online game in history.

It was the number one game on AOL (before they forced it off their service).

It was GEnie's number one game for years before that.

Thousands of paying customers log in every day.

Why, in this age of realtime, do people put up with this primitive relic of a game?

What is it about *Gemstone?*

There are dozens and dozens of other MUDs out there, you know.

Technologically, most of them are far more sophisticated than *Gemstone*.

Some have thousands and thousands of rooms, with many hundreds of monsters and magic spells.

Gemstone doesn't.

Some allow players to freely create their own rooms and objects.

Gemstone doesn't.

Some are based on popular books and movies.

Gemstone isn't.

Nearly all of them are available completely free of charge.

Gemstone isn't.

Well, it's was on AOL, you say.

They had a huge audience to draw from.

But *Gemstone* wasn't the only MUD on AOL.

There were several others, some of them from the same developer, but they never did nearly as well.

So what's going on here?

What's the secret sauce?

It works.

Gemstone gets a lot of basic stuff right.

The world is big enough.

The monsters are numerous enough.

The spell list has sufficient variety.

Nothing feels capricious.

And the pacing is good.

Beginners are quickly rewarded.

Old-timers always have something to look forward to.

The game is also well managed.

It is staffed by paid gamemasters who know how to handle customers.

In fact, *Gemstone* is one of the very few professionally managed MUDs in the world.

It is reasonably stable.

Generally reliable.

It feels substantial, worn-in and time-tested, because *it is*.

Now, *Myst* and *Gemstone* are two very different game experiences.

One has lots of graphics and sound, a wonderfully simple interface and no learning curve.

The other is ugly, primitive, clumsy to play and difficult to learn.

Yet both are the most successful products in their categories.

Why? What are people responding to in these games?

Harmony.

Listen!

[Playing nice chord on instrument] *This* is harmony.

[Playing dissonant chord] *This* is not.

Harmony isn't something you can fake.

You don't need anyone to tell you if it's there or not.

Nobody can sell it to you.

It's not an intellectual exercise.

It's a sensual, intuitive experience.

It's something you *feel.*

How do you achieve this feeling that everything works together?

Where do you get this harmony stuff?

Well, I'm here to tell you that it doesn't come from design committees.

It doesn't come from focus groups or market surveys.

It doesn't come from cool technology or expensive marketing.

And it never happens by accident or by luck.

Games with harmony emerge from a fundamental note of clear intention.

From design decisions based on an ineffable sense of proportion and rightness.

Its presence produces an emotional resonance with its audience.

A sense of inner unity that has nothing to do with "what" you did or "how" you did it.

It has something to do with "why."

Myst and *Gemstone* both achieve harmony.

They achieve it because their makers had a vision of the experience they were trying to achieve and the confidence to attain it.

They laid down a solid ambient groove that players in their

respective markets can relate to emotionally.

They resisted the urge to overbuild.

They didn't pile on a lot of gratuitous features just so they could boast about them.

And they resisted the temptation to employ inappropriate emotional effects.

Effects like shock violence. Bad language. Inside humor.

You know, the illusion of a new world is fragile.

It's hard to achieve, and hard to maintain.

One bit of unnecessary gore, one hip colloquialism, one reference to anything outside the universe you've created is enough to destroy that universe.

These cheap effects are the most common indicators of a lack of vision or confidence.

People who put this stuff into their games are not working hard enough.

The principle of harmony applies to almost any work of art.

Now let's take a look at another principle.

A principle that applies only to interactive art.

A good game designer has to be able to anticipate the behavior of others.

Our job is to establish limits on what players can do, and try to deal all with the things they might try within those limits.

But what about the things you can't anticipate?

You know, computer games are complex systems.

Their responses are based on dozens of operating parameters that interact with each other, often in real time.

Drop a human decision-maker into a complex system and odd stuff can begin to happen.

Drop in two or more human decision-makers and things can get really interesting.

Some of us call these interesting developments "undocumented features."

I call them emergent behaviors.

Excellent articles have been written about emergent behaviors in multi-player game environments.

Dr. Richard Bartle, co-inventor of the original MUD, wrote a fascinating piece called "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs."

The folks at Electric Communities have also published a number of interesting papers on the subject.

Let me describe to you an emergent behavior that appeared on our Mplayer service several months ago.

One of the documented features of the Mplayer system is real-time voice chat.

This feature allows players to hold down a hot key and send a voice message.

Not many of our users are using the voice chat feature yet.

Some of them don't have microphones.

Others don't have their sound cards set up correctly.

So when visiting a game room, it's typical to find only one or two people using voice chat.

Everyone else chats with text.

A couple weeks after we launched Mplayer commercially, something odd began to happen.

Late one afternoon, when entering a game room for *Command and Conquer,* I was surprised to hear Eddie Van Halen coming from my computer speakers.

The person who had created the game room was using

the voice channel to play music for the other people in the room.

Within a week or two, lots of people were piping live music into their game rooms.

All kinds of music.

They do it by jamming their microphone up against a speaker on their stereo.

Listen!

We didn't do anything to initiate this behavior.

We certainly didn't anticipate it.

We thought people would use a microphone to talk.

That's why we called it "voice chat."

If we thought people wanted to play music, we would have added all kinds of additional features.

All we did was give people simple, easy to use channels for text and sound.

They listened.

They heard the opportunity.

They used it to turn themselves into DJs.

They turned our game rooms into personal nightclubs.

This is a modest example of emergent behavior.

Now let's look at something a little more profound.

A personal anecdote.

Recently my wife was given a shoebox filled with old family postcards, cards from all over the world, dating from the turn of the century.

She spent hours deciphering the handwritten messages and tracing the whereabouts of half-forgotten relatives.

One day I casually mentioned that she should get binders for the postcards to protect them.

She asked me where she could find some.

I suggested that she look on the Web.

When I came home that night, my wife was all excited.

She'd found a source for postcard binders.

She'd also found dozens of sites devoted to her new hobby of collecting postcards.

She showed me how individual enthusiasts like herself had scanned their postcards and put them on Web pages for other people to admire.

And then she asked me something I'll never forget.

She asked me to help her put some of her postcards up on the Web.

She had it all figured out already.

She was going to have spaces for two or three favorites, with captions underneath, and change them every week.

Delighted with her enthusiasm, I asked her why.

Why do you want to do this all of a sudden?

And you know what?

She can't explain it.

She only knows that she wants to do it.

My wife is not a demonstrative person.

Those of you who know her would probably agree when I characterize her as modest, unassuming, even shy.

She'd kill me if she knew I was talking about her now.

And yet here she was, for the first time in the twenty-five years I've known her, asking me how to show her stuff to the world.

You could shrug.

You could say she wasn't intimidated by Web publishing because it's anonymous.

And you might be right, but that's not what's interesting.

What's interesting is *the urge*.

The desire to show her postcards to the world.

And I was touched.

Not just by her longing to express herself, but because of my ability to help her do it.

And a little bell went off in my head.

You know, the vast majority of the Web's content is created and maintained by volunteers.

Volunteers who give up their valuable leisure time to collect, format and package information for strangers they will probably never meet.

Who can count the millions of unbillable hours that have been invested into building the World Wide Web?

Where is all this self-expressive energy, this spontaneous creativity, coming from?

And why is it appearing on the Web?

What does this emergent mass behavior signify?

We don't have to look far to find answer.

There's a really good clue only 9,000 miles that way.

All you have to do is Listen.

Like all high-tech societies, Japan is a crowded, fast-moving, competitive place.

I haven't been there myself.

But friends who have seen it tell me that the atmosphere, especially in the big cities, is tense.

Space is tight.

The subways in Tokyo employ professional shovers, whose sole job is to forcibly jam people into the cars so the doors can close.

The rules for interaction between people are strict.

Elaborate social rituals prevent the delicate order from disintergrating into chaos.

The politeness is almost pathological.

It is no exaggeration to characterize urban Japanese as formal and reticent.

And yet every night, these same people voluntarily interact with one another in a social ritual so outrageously demonstrative, so tacky in its total lack of decorum, that

most Americans would rather die have anything to do with it.

Every night, ten million Japanese go out for karaoke.

Listen. Listen to yourselves.

How many people here cannot sing in front of people?

[To hapless respondent] Who told you that?

Why are we Americans so embarrassed by the idea of standing up and singing in front of people?

It's because American culture doesn't encourage gratuitous self-expression.

Our culture does not value creativity for its own sake.

We are taught to be vaguely ashamed of our personal creative impulses.

We put people who insist on expressing themselves that way in a special eccentric category.

We call them Artists.

And we often write them off as marginal members of our society.

To many Americans, art is something created by suspicious characters like Jack Kerouac and Robert Mappelthorpe.

People who live in edgy neighborhoods, dress oddly, and suck off liberal NEA grants funded by hard-working taxpayers like you and me!

The only art most Americans respect is the art some expert has assured them is important.

The only artists most Americans understand are the ones who make it big.

When the Beatles landed in New York for their first Amercian tour, they held a press conference at the airport.

One of the reporters asked them if they would sing.

John Lennon's famous reply was, "We need money first."

John was joking, but his reply was distinctly American.

Sometimes it seems as if we only value self-expression that can be exploited.

We have vocationalized creativity, and reduced art to a commodity.

The only creative urge valued and encouraged by our society is childbearing.

And our neurotic obsession with sex seems as ridiculous to many Europeans as Japan's obsession with karaoke seems to us.

It isn’t like this everywhere, you know.

I have a friend, Caroline, a jewelry designer, who lives on the South Sea island of Bali.

She tells me that the Balinese consider personal creativity to be a natural and obvious part of being alive.

It is rare to find a Balinese who doesn’t make time for art.

In Bali, you are a taxi driver and a wood carver, a farmer and a flower arranger.

These activities aren’t just whimsies to the Balinese.

Not just hobbies or side jobs.

It’s just something everybody does, like talking and laughing.

In Bali, people are understood to be creative beings.

In fact, the Balinese language doesn’t even have words for Art or Artist as we know them.

In Bali, Art is Life. And everybody is alive, right?

There is a modern myth which addresses this issue.

It’s the story of Roger, an American bachelor living in London.

Roger writes music for a living. But he isn’t doing very

well.

Nobody's buying his songs.

Not commercial enough, they tell him.

One day Roger takes his pet dog for a walk.

He meets a pretty lady, walking her dog.

The dogs fall for each other.

So do the humans.

And soon, Roger and his new wife have fifteen puppies to clean up after.

Now another woman enters the story.

A stinking rich and thoroughly perverse monster with a thing for fur coats.

She finds out about Roger's puppies and decides they'd look good in a size 12.

So she steals them, along with 84 other puppies from all over the city, and locks them up in her creepy old mansion.

What is *101 Dalmations* really about?

Why is the owner of these puppies an unsuccessful artist?

Why are there so many puppies?

Who is Cruella DeVil?

Here's my armchair analysis, for what it's worth.

The outrageous wealth of puppies is a fairly obvious symbol of fertility.

The puppies represent Roger's music.

They even look like musical notation, running around the house.

And Cruella is an allegory for the forces of creative repression.

Not just the mercenary publishers who won't buy his music.

That *other* publisher, right in *here*.

The publisher that says, "I can't."

"I can't sing in front of people. I'm too shy. Too old. Not good enough."

The best part of this movie is the way the puppies are saved.

Now, Roger's helpless. He doesn't know what to do or where to begin looking for them.

But the dogs of England have a secret communication system.

They bark and howl throughout the long night to raise the alarm.

Nature itself rises up to save those puppies.

Listen!

The creative impulse is like a Twinkie.

If you squash down on it, the good stuff squirts out the edges.

This is what's happening in Japan's karaoke bars tonight.

And this is what's happening on the World Wide Web.

Its interesting to note that, in the '60s version of *101 Dalmations,* Roger is a songwriter.

Music was a defining popular art form of that generation.

In the 1996 live-action remake, Roger isn't a songwriter anymore.

He's a computer game designer.

Now, we've identified the expressive urge and its power.

We've seen how this urge manifests itself in Mplayer and on the Web.

And we've seen the investment that people are willing to make in channels that allow them to be creative.

What can we do that will help our players explore creativity?

What is this quality that encourages self-expression?

Potency.

The potential for gestation. Fertile soil.

The keys to the convertible.

How do we inject potency into our games and virtual worlds?

One obvious answer is to let our players modify some of the program parameters.

Let them build their own maps, modify their characters, add rooms and objects.

This is hardly a new idea.

Object-oriented MUDs have been doing it for years.

Map and character editors have been around for a long time.

But as currently implemented, these don't seem to add much potency.

For one thing, they tend to be geeky.

To build new objects in a typical MUD, you need to learn a programming language.

You have to look under the hood.

Luckily, our current audience, which consists almost entirely of game hobbyists, doesn't mind looking under the hood.

In fact, many of them love it. That's why they're hobbyists.

But what about the rest of our potential audience?

What about the ordinary people who made *Myst* a hit?

They don't care how it works.

They only care *if* it works.

And they certainly don't have time to learn a programming language.

Another problem with typical game editors is that they only allow you to create variations on the most trivial aspects of the experience.

They're especially weak in giving players ways to control the way they are personally represented.

For example, the editor for *Warcraft* will let you plant the officially approved trees, rocks and rivers anywhere you

want.

But it won't let you add a lava flow or a bottomless pit.

And it won't let you turn the orcs into, say, venture capitalists.

Even though only a very small change in the art would be required.

Most important, the tools we're offering players are solitary tools.

We're only letting them edit things by themselves, before they play.

We're not letting them express themselves during the game.

We're not letting them be creative in real time, while the other players are there to watch, and listen.

What I'm proposing here is conceptually simple.

I'm talking about giving players media pipes.

Pipes that will let them write and talk.

Play sounds and music.

Show pictures and videos.

Define interactions.

Find an audience.

Pipes that are much, much easier to use than Hypercard or HTML or Java or Shockwave or anything having to do with Unix.

Pipes that are as easy to use as a telephone.

Pipes so easy to use, a casual player can produce interesting results.

Pipes so flexible and powerful, serious players can produce experiences others will line up to enjoy.

The dictionary has a word for a channel with lots of pipes.

That word is *Manifold*.

And when we construct this Manifold, when users begin to explore this new world of pure potential, what will we do?

Two things.

First we create lots of examples to show them how it all works.

Then we sit back to watch, and to Listen.

And it won't be long before somebody comes along who isn't encumbered by years of gaming tradition.

Somebody who doesn't know what's already been tried,

or what hasn't.

Somebody who doesn't care what the next quarterly report looks like.

Somebody will figure out what real people want to do online.

There is a precedent for this type of thing.

In the late 1980s, Apple Computer still had a few visionaries on its employee roster.

One of those employees had a vision.

A vision of how ordinary people could use computers to express themselves creatively, with little or no programming.

And so Bill Atkinson created a development system for the rest of us.

He called it Hypercard.

And he talked Apple into giving it away for free.

A lot of people started fooling around with Hypercard.

One of them was a lady named Amanda.

Amanda wasn't a programmer.

Certainly not a game hobbyist.

But Amanda was smart enough to figure out Hypercard.

And she used it to put together a little interactive storybook about her pet cat, Inigo.

The plot was pretty simple. The user interface was even simpler.

You might say, desperately simple.

She drew some pictures with invisible hot spots.

When you clicked on a hot spot with your mouse, something happened.

If you clicked on a door, you went through it.

If you clicked on the cat, it mewed.

This mechanism seems really obvious now.

But at the time, it was a fresh and powerful idea.

A lot of people saw Amanda's simple cat story and thought it was pretty cool.

A couple of brothers named Miller saw it and thought they could do it one better.

So they created a Hypercard stack they called *The Manhole*.

Then another stack called *Cosmic Osmo*.

And then they got really ambitious and created their first color stack.

They called it *Myst*.

A lot of us here would love to build a game as successful as *Myst*.

A lot of us here are aspiring to be like the Miller brothers.

Maybe we're not dreaming hard enough.

Why settle for the Millers when we can be Atkinsons?

I'm not talking about recreating Hypercard on the Internet.

Because there's a fundamental diffference between what Hypercard does and what we can do.

We can offer our customers something nobody else can give them.

Others.

We have a built-in audience.

An audience that's there anytime you want it, but only for as long as you want it.

An audience that you can't really see.

An audience that only sees as much of you as you choose to show it.

The perfect audience for people afraid to sing.

Let's not just build games or virtual worlds.

Let's build stages.

Let's build wardrobes, scenery shops, light boards and sound systems.

Then let's build a box office.

And we'll tear the tickets.

People will pay for a chance to express themselves in front of others.

They'll give us their credit cards numbers.

They'll give us their eyeballs to sell to advertisers.

And they'll give us the most precious thing they possess.

They'll give us their leisure time.

But this isn't just a question of whether or not *we* can make money on this.

This is the Manifold.

The rules are different.

We're not the only content providers anymore.

And if the pipes we build are good enough, it's only a

matter of time before we start paying our customers for the privilege of tearing their tickets.

Imagine a virtual world where players can set up their own performance space.

Each individual performer can decide if and how they want to charge admission.

They make it free if they want.

They may choose to ask visitors to exchange something for a chance to look at their work.

Or they may prefer to be supported by advertising.

We can be their venue, and their agent.

But what's to stop artists from taking their work everywhere?

How do we pipe-layers differentiate ourselves in a market filled with content providers?

By building a better theater.

Because the best performers and audiences will be attracted to the Manifolds with the best plumbing.

We're not just talking about computer games or virtual worlds any more.

We're talking about the enabling technology for a new

kind of entertainment business.

An environment of creative opportunity where anyone with initiative, even an individual dreamer, can get access to the tools of high-tech creativity and, for the first time, a paying audience.

An environment that not only allows experimentation and innovation, but positively encourages it.

An environment flexible enough to discover the vital interactive art forms our timid little industry has so far failed to identify.

This is a chance to plant the seed of a revolutionary idea.

That idea that everyone's thoughts, everyone's opinions, everyone's dreams, have real value.

The idea that creativity isn't something you receive and consume.

That creativity is something you *are*.

We can take the tools of high-tech creativity away from Madison Avenue lawyers and Silicon Valley executives and Hollywood cokeheads, and put them back in the hands of ordinary people where they belong.

We can revive the joy of personal creative fulfillment in a culture that has all but extinguished it.

Writers cannot do this. Film directors cannot do this.

Only we have the power of mass interactivity.

Only we can build the Manifold.

All the novels that have ever been written.

All the LPs ever recorded, every film ever made.

Every work of mass media ever created has been leading up to this awesome possibility.

It is a great joy to enrich oneself.

But it is a greater joy to enrich others.

And the greatest and most awesome thing of all is to help someone rediscover their own voice, to overcome fear and learn to sing.

The dictionary has a word for helping people realize themselves.

That word is compassion.

The Manifold is a *compassion machine*.

Its realization would be a triumph of the creative spirit.

And fate has placed the means of securing this triumph in your hands.

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An astrologer acquaintance of mine, also named Caroline, describes a powerful inspirational imaging technique that I would like to leave with you.

I want each of you to think of the one media artist who has inspired you the most in your life.

The master of some creative medium who has touched you.

Inspired you.

Changed your life, made you laugh or moved you to tears.

Shakespeare. Mozart. John Lennon. Bessie Smith. George Lucas. Stanley Kubrick. Thoreau. Tolkein. Bradbury.

Close your eyes for a moment, and imagine that this master artist is standing directly behind you.

Now, imagine this artist silently putting his or her hand on your shoulder.

. . .