Electrifying art
Evolving digital media on display in Vancouver

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Works of art a click away

Media Arts Show celebrates computer-age creations, artists

By MARY ANN ALBRIGHT

In Donna Leishman's latest piece of electronic literature, "Contemplating Flight," viewers help shape the plot depending on where they click a mouse button or move their cursor.

Leishman fans who come to Clark College this weekend to explore the digital narrative will first see an image of a bird sitting on a branch. Using a mouse or other computer device with a touchpad, they can make the bird blink or tweet, or move fruit on the tree. Ultimate management of the computer comes down to the individual who clicks the mouse, Leishman said.

Electronic literature such as Leishman's narrative can't be fully appreciated in print. It's an art form that has expanded in scope along with computer technology, and its entire history spans just a few decades.

This weekend, Washington State University Vancouver, Clark College and North Bank Artists Gallery will team up to trace the evolution of media art. They'll present the art form's pioneering digital fiction from the mid-1980s that used hyperlinks to move readers sequentially through stories. The shows will also include pictorial Web fiction and avant-garde multimedia performance art created on the spot with dynamic combinations of sound and video.

The exhibits are being held in conjunction with the Electronic Literature Organization's 2008 conference, hosted by WSU Vancouver; the event will bring 120 scholars and artists from the United States, Europe, Canada, Asia and South America to Vancouver to share their work and discuss the field. Artists will be on hand at the exhibits in the evenings on May 30 and 31 to talk about their work.

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If you go

- **What:** Media Arts Show.
- **When:** Exhibit hours 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. May 30 and 31 and multimedia performance 9 p.m. to midnight May 31 at North Bank Artists Gallery; artists talk 7 p.m. May 30 and exhibit hours 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. May 31 at Clark College and exhibit hours 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. May 30 and 31 and 9 a.m. to noon June 1 at Washington State University Vancouver.
- **Where:** Fireside Room in the Penguin Union Building at Clark College, 1910 Fort Vancouver Way, Vancouver; North Bank Artists Gallery, 1075 Main St., Vancouver, and Blaine St. Courtyard Common Room at Washington State University Vancouver, 1824 N.E. Salmon Creek Ave., Vancouver.
- **Cost:** Free except for the May 31 evening multimedia show, which costs $10.
- **Information:** 360-546-6487. 360-546-6786. 360-546-6786. wsu.edu. vancouver. state.wa.us. programs. clarkcollege. wsu.edu.

"Afternoon, a Story" by hyper-text fiction pioneer Michael Joyce will be shown on an older computer such as this Macintosh Classic in a display at Washington State University Vancouver. Written in 1987, "Afternoon" is the tale of a technical writer named Peter who thinks he saw his ex-wife's wrecked car.

On the cover: London-based digital fiction author Kate Pullinger's interactive multimedia story "Immaculate Alice" will be among the electronic literature displayed on new Mac computers at North Bank Artists Gallery in Vancouver.
Seeing media art's progression from simple computer text to flashy colors, sounds and games will help drive home how dependent artists working in the genre are on evolving technology, said Dene Grigar, associate professor and program director of digital technology and culture at WSU Vancouver.

The advent of Web browsers and high-speed Internet connections, for example, allows color and sound to be used in ways that weren't possible for early media artists such as Michael Joyce, Grigar said.

Today's media art includes, among other things, Internet radio, story-driven online games and virtual environments such as Second Life.

Venues participating in this weekend's show will emphasize different aspects of media art past and present.

North Bank Artists Gallery will focus on current trends. It will spotlight such work as Kate Pullinger's complex multimedia story "Inanimate Alice" and an improvisational sound and video show, "Exploding Plastic and Inevitable Redux," by Steve Gibson and Stefan Müller. In Gibson and Müller's performance, notes on their instruments are programmed to correspond to certain images. As they play, these visuals will be projected onto overhead screens.

The Clark College exhibit also will showcase work by today's leaders in media art, including Leishman's "Contemplating Flight."

WSU Vancouver will take a step back, tracing the roots of media art. Scholars don't all agree on when the art form emerged. Some argue it was in the 1950s and '60s, when mainframe computers dominated the technology scene. Most say it was 1984, when Apple introduced the Macintosh desktop computer.

WSU Vancouver's exhibit will include examples of early electronic literature by media art pioneers such as Joyce, Judy Malloy and Jim Rosenberg.

Grigar hopes the show will help raise awareness about this relatively new type of art and way of reading.

"We want to introduce people to an art form not prevalent yet," she said.

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