

Surfing Clubs: organized notes and comments.

Halifax, May 27, 2008

By Marcin Ramocki

1. The circumstances

1.1. Group blogging as a form of artistic practice appeared around 2002/03, shortly before a shift toward Web 2.0. The new concept of the internet: the user friendly, largely free, input and interactivity based, high speed and bandwidth, altogether redefined the idea of dissemination of information.

1.2. User activities shifted toward readily accessible blogs and Google searches. Suddenly practically any kind of knowledge, image or code could be instantaneously found and used. Google and Yahoo became enormous flea markets of images and discourses and effectively the first investigative frames of reference.

2. The medium.

2.1. The medium we are discussing here is a blog post. It is a piece of information including texts, various media and hyperlinks published on the internet and available as RSS feed to the general public. Blog posts, unlike institutional journalism are by definition subjective, informal and open to comments and criticism. In reality, blogs represent individuals and institutions, and their authority fluctuates accordingly. Describing blogs as open/democratic media is as cloudy and meaningless as the very definition of contemporary democracy.

2.1.1. Perversely, the “open” platform of blogs becomes the most powerful and influential tool in the hands of those publishers who seek the rapid exposure of their content. They are unmatched vehicles of empowerment for THOSE who want to be empowered.

2.2. From the art practice point of view a post is a hybrid act involving both curatorial research and conceptual art gesture.

2.3. While a more traditional blog is a journal of an individual artist, who posts images of his/her work, research and thoughts, a surf club imposes certain practice dynamics, which is conducive to a very fast-paced conceptual exchange based on treatment and analysis of online material, or using the online material as a base of any kind of investigation.

2.4. The presence of “such” material, which can be “infinitely” accessed and searched, is a given here. This database is a universe of signs, capable of representing a universe of thought.

2.5. A singular post is an act of exhibition/exposition, pointing to a specific statement and claiming it's importance, effectively making a case for extracting it from the formless matrix of information. It is authoritative yet playful; conceptual in nature yet unafraid of beauty. Its inherent immateriality, lightness and transparency lend blog posts into a perfect arena of cultural semiotic games, a "Zen mondo" based in the discourses of modern art history, computing/internet knowledge and a loosely defined generational pop-geekhood.

2.5.1. Semiotics, semiotic studies, or semiology is the study of sign processes (semiosis), or signification and communication, signs and symbols, both individually and grouped into sign systems. It includes the study of how meaning is constructed and understood. (Wikipedia)

3. The practice

3.1. Ever since Nasty Nets began posting in 2006, I (and pretty much everybody else interested in the subject) realized that something interesting was brewing in the online art community. As the community was (and is) relatively small, most involved parties were artists, curators and activists/bloggers deeply involved in shaping things to come, any internal attempts of definition were largely futile. After all it is hard to describe phenomena which one is an integral part of. At the same time the art community at large lacked conceptual tools and vocabulary to approach and critique this kind of work. In fact even the posting artists themselves were not sure whether to describe their activities as artistic. In my opinion the problems with self-definition came from natural fetishization of one aspect of the process: the surfing. It seems that if something is called a "surfing club", it should have the purposeful web browsing and searching as its main defining agent. Interestingly, it isn't so at all. The posts on Nasty Nets and other blogs were captivating because of a balanced and unique combination of 3 factors:

3.1.1. The immateriality and conceptual potential of the blog/post medium.

3.1.2. The communal character of the activity, which generated a dialectical logic and a narrative flow. It also eliminated the question of audience by building it into its own infrastructure.

3.1.3. The activity of surfing the internet and finding material via a plethora of searches within the seemingly infinite information database.

3.2. For all practical reasons the operation appears rather simple: a group of artists post together as a group on one blog, they surf the web for material which stimulates their imagination, and then re-post it with a

varied amount of post-production treatment and manipulation. The whole group follows the postings and occasionally comments. Formally, this scenario isn't much different from popular posting sites, where participants browse for weird, "cult" images and videos and collect them as a form of past time.

3.2.1. The art surfing club posts I will be referring to in this text include Nasty Nets, Loshadka, Spirit Surfers and Double Happiness. I am a posting member of Spirit Surfers and a large part of the research was done through several months of daily web surfing and posting.

3.3. The most common posting strategies include, but are not limited, to:

3.3.1. A single found image/video re-posting, where the title re-contextualizes the image and comments define the value of the post.

3.3.2. A collection of images arranged according to a certain principle and found through conceptually significant web searches.

3.3.3. Media pieces which have been altered (collaged jpgs, remixed animated GIFs, altered flash files and videos, mash-ups and size/ratio alternations) and combinations of these elements.

3.3.4. A capture, or captures, of online environments and events.

3.3.5. Found texts (including hypertexts) and their manipulated versions.

3.3.6 Custom, artist produced media (images, animation, video, sound, text), which comment or expand on online/pop-cultural themes.

3.3.7 Any combination of the above elements, their conceptual consequences, and the signs and manifestations of their codes, including aesthetic codes (meta-operations) and comments.

3.4. It is absolutely crucial to understand that the listing of strategies above is largely historical, and due to the semiotic and dialectical nature of surfing clubs, will be mutating and evolving extremely fast. I have put together this list simply to archive the first steps in development of this art form.

3.5. A successful post has to engage the group through its conceptual coherency. It is this clarity, definition and focus (very often subconscious), which will produce a conceptually cathartic post. A successful post strives to:

3.5.1. Clearly announce its own origin codes and the cultural context which has to be referenced in decoding the language of the post. Examples of such cultural codes can be (and often are) "Minimalism", "slacker art", "rock music", "programming language", "Pop Art", "hacking", "cute, extremely ugly eighties colors", "beauty

for beauty's sake", "porn", "video games", etc. These origin codes can be added and re-invented during the practice of the club.

3.5.2. Create a statement which will promote the understanding of a certain cultural code, disclose an undiscovered aspect of it, subvert it, open it up to a new discourse or simply generate a powerful aesthetic situation. In this context, beauty is also on the menu of conceptual choices. In fact, anything can be added to the menu of conceptual choices.

3.5.3. Contribute to the group effort of developing a powerful narrative flow. This means being responsive to the strategies of other club members, continuing engaging post chains, and thoughtfully commenting on interesting posts.

4. The Logic

4.1. The practice of conceptual art in the context of a surfing club is based on games played between the participants and audience. In some cases participants and audience are synonymous. The nature of these games is purely semiotic, i.e. concerned with arrangement of signs, their belonging to certain cultural codes/discourses, and a capacity to generate meaningful statements.

4.2. This unique game-play consists of challenges and responses, through which responders prove their understanding of the codes used by the challenger. The most impressive posts set a chain of conceptual reactions leading to in-depth analysis of a discourse introduced by the challenger. Sometimes a surfer prefers to concentrate on one strain of concepts and doesn't engage in challenges or responses.

4.3. The basic building blocks of a post such as title, image, text, video, internal structures, organizational principles or hyperlink; from the point of view of classical semiotics, are signifiers. "Signifier" is the form, which the sign takes representing a "signified", the actual concept that is represented. The arrangement of signifiers within constraints of a particular syntax will generate meaningful statements.

4.3.1. It is important to observe that in the case of internet "signs", the traditional rules of representation do not apply. The images and texts are often so entangled in various cultural contexts that they tend to represent them more than anything else ("hello kitty" stands for Japanese girly pop culture, not for a cat greeting). The play based on which "level" of significance you decide to pick for your post (the cartoon, pop-culture, or a cat) is very common and important for surf clubs.

4.4. According to Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, the meaning in any semiotic system arises from the differences between signifiers of two kinds: syntagmatic (concerning positioning) and paradigmatic (concerning substitution). This mysteriously sounding distinction refers to something very familiar in our daily life.

Let's take an example of Photoshop. When we start a new file, we are faced with a dialogue box asking us to pick a name, width and height, resolution, color mode, and a background color. We make our choices and end up with an empty file named "Hello World", 640X480 pixels, 72 dpi, RGB color with a white background. Now, the specific items we picked for the chain of options are in a syntagmatic relation with each other. They, together, form a statement through an orderly combination. They are a sequential statement. Paradigms, on the other hand, are the mutually exclusive options we can pick in every sub-menu: for example, RGB, CMYK, Grayscale and Bitmap. These items will never appear together, they are the options available, potential candidates for spots in a syntagmatic chain.

4.5. Posts on a surfing club are statements of organized signifiers, which increase in complexity as the surfing club's game continues. The older the club the more convoluted the semiotics of communication between surfers becomes. This communication entails posting organized content by a challenger, and a decoding it by other participants, who respond with a posting where both syntagms and paradigms of the challenge post are identified and playfully manipulated.

4.6. Common paradigm sets:

- 4.6.1. the number of the elements of the same kind
- 4.6.2. spatial organization of the elements
- 4.6.3. art historical/cultural reference
- 4.6.4. dominant logical principle
- 4.6.5. items specific to the logical principle
- 4.6.6. the amount/kind of manipulation performed on found material

4.7. Common syntagms:

- 4.7.1. grouping
- 4.7.2. collection
- 4.7.3. arrangement
- 4.7.4. list
- 4.7.5. table/comparison
- 4.7.6. exposition of a found item
- 4.7.7. structurally imposed syntax (title and the body, boon and wake)

4.8. In most cases a new post is a continuation of certain semiotic thread. Most began from a single image, gif or video and went through a very complicated path of communal processing. Just the way a scanner parses an image and re-creates it as a binary, a surfing club goes through a concept and breaks it down to the basic units, making its' way through all possible logical implications of such a break down. It is done through invention of new paradigms or syntagms for existing statements, reduction or replacement, and finally altogether new statements that bring a whole new logic structure to the table.

4.9. The rules of logical progression driving surf club work are the same rules which affect the studio practice of an individual artist: the difference here, that the rules themselves become the subject of the project. Another difference is the unmatched speed of the process as a result of team effort and free access to internet material. The concepts and methodology developed by surfing clubs will pave the way for the new generation of artists, both on and off line.

"Surfing Clubs: organized notes and comments" is a talk/paper presented during "Obsolescence and Culture of Human Invention" conference at Nova Scotia College of Arts and Crafts, Halifax, May 26-30, 2008.

[it's called karma, bitch](#)



— [olia](#) 8/17/07 1:32 am

[Comments \(4\)](#)

*Olia Lalina, Nasty Nets

[penis](#)



— [javier](#) 12/26/07 10:55 pm

[Comments \(9\)](#)

[I don't care](#)



— [Travis](#) 4/10/07 2:43 pm

[Comments \(5\)](#)

[The post where we share awesome gradients](#)



— [mbs](#) 5/20/07 10:40 am

[Comments \(12\)](#)

*Javier Morales, Travis Holebeck, Michael Bell Smith
(stages of single image as challenge, Nasty Nets)

[mark napier steven dutch rmx](#)



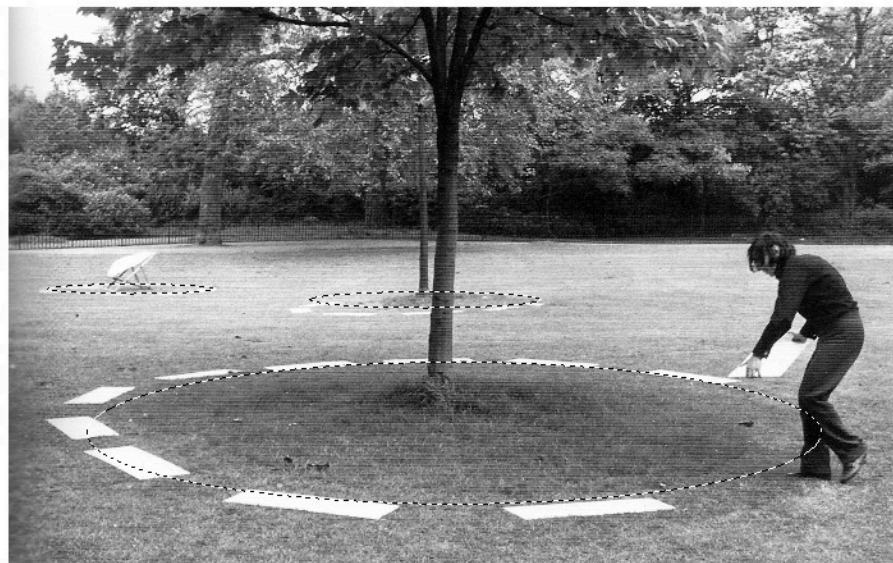
— [tom moody](#) 8/8/07 9:32 am

[Comments \(2\)](#)

[David Lamelas](#)

[Demarcating three objects, 1968](#)

[\(Installation view, Hyde Park, London\)](#)



— [joel](#) 11/17/07 12:47 pm

[Comments \(12\)](#)

*Tom Moody, Joel Holmberg(stages of remix of another artist, NN)

DEATH METAL PROMO



by Travess / (5)

*Travess Smalley, Loshadka (remix-continuation)

[youtube warning](#)

You may not subscribe to yourself.

— [guthrie](#) 4/16/07 11:45 pm

[Comments \(2\)](#)

*Gutrie Lonergan, NN (text capture)

Captcha from Google



undies!!! From Google's otherwise humorless automatically-generated [robot stoppers](#) (which only accidentally make English words..)

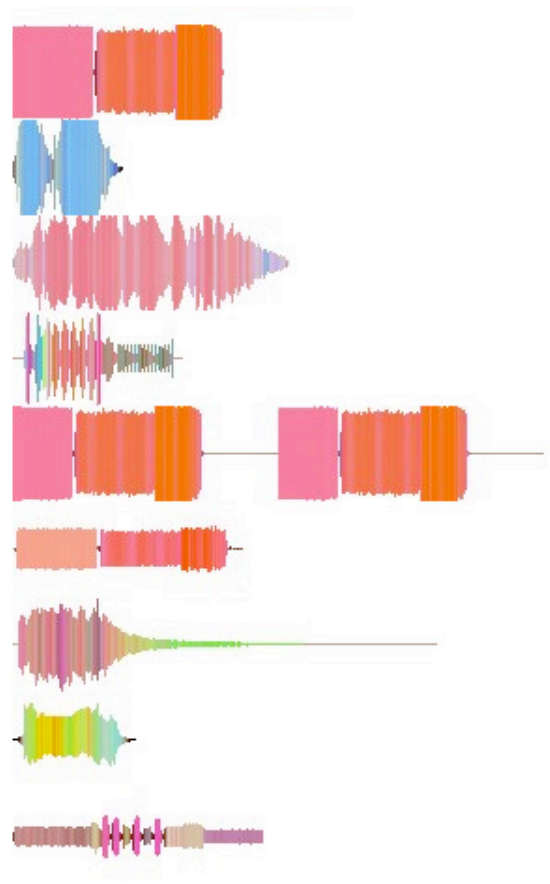
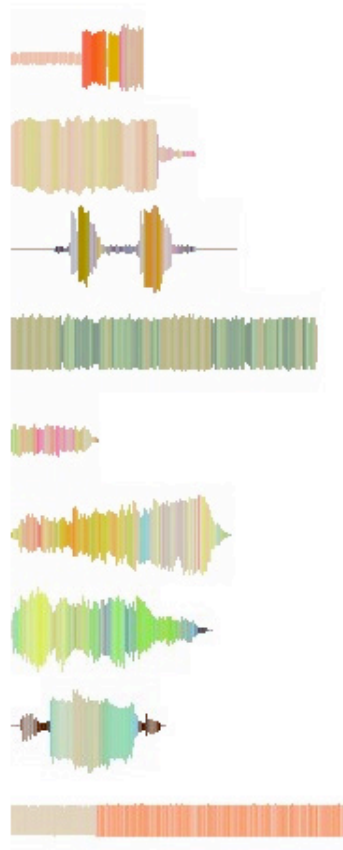
— [guthrie](#) 11/17/06 12:14 am

[Comments \(8\)](#)

*Gutrie Lonergan, NN (text + image capture)

some good-looking sound files

I've always loved these...



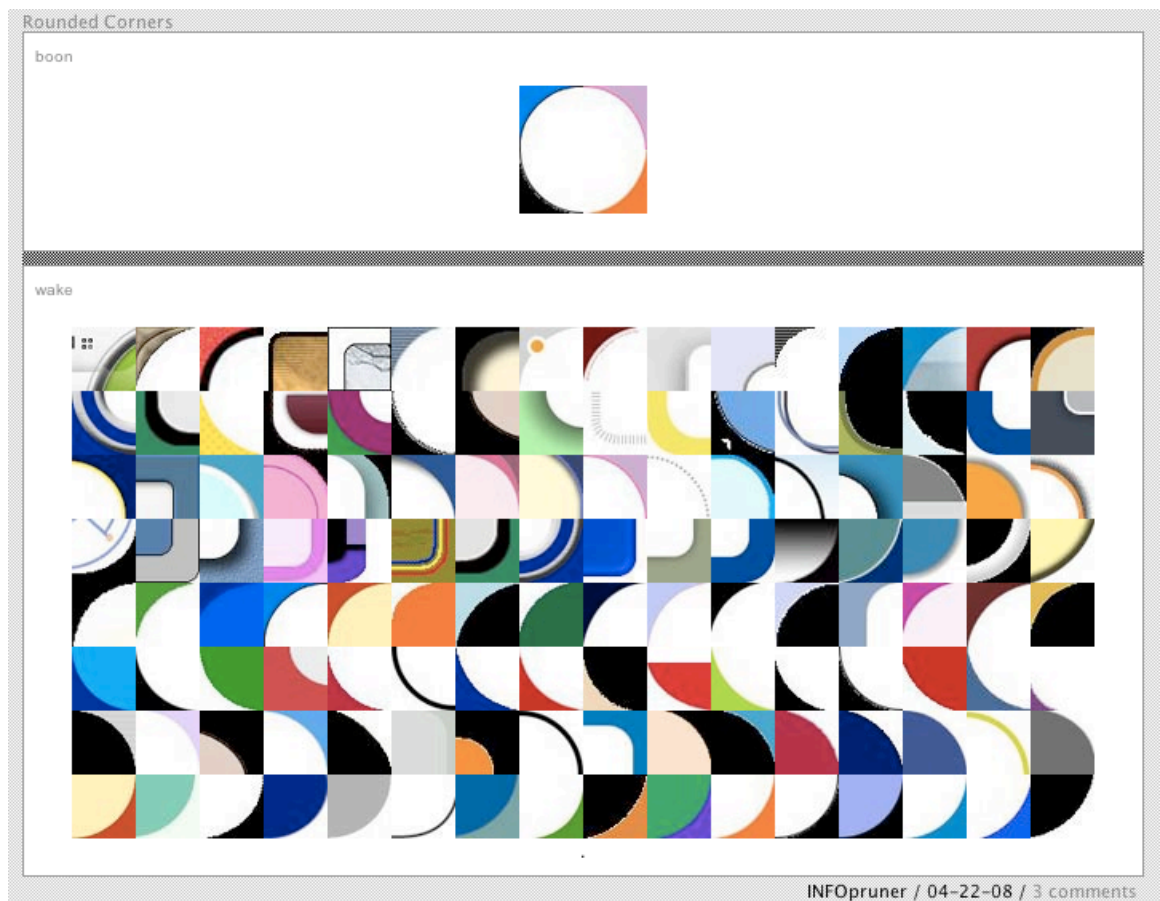
Can you guess which ones are for modems??? :)

And then there's this guy....

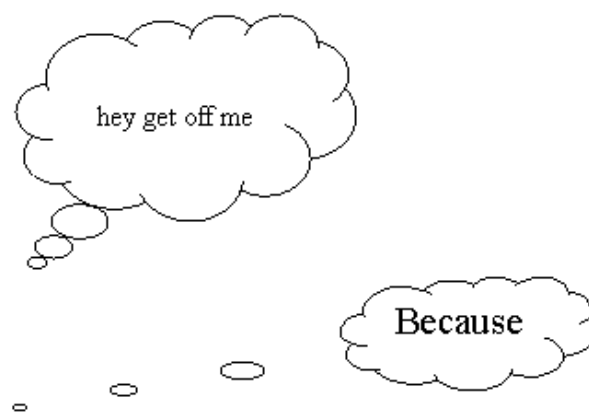


— [marisa](#) 5/26/07 6:28 pm

*Marisa Olson, NN, (collection)



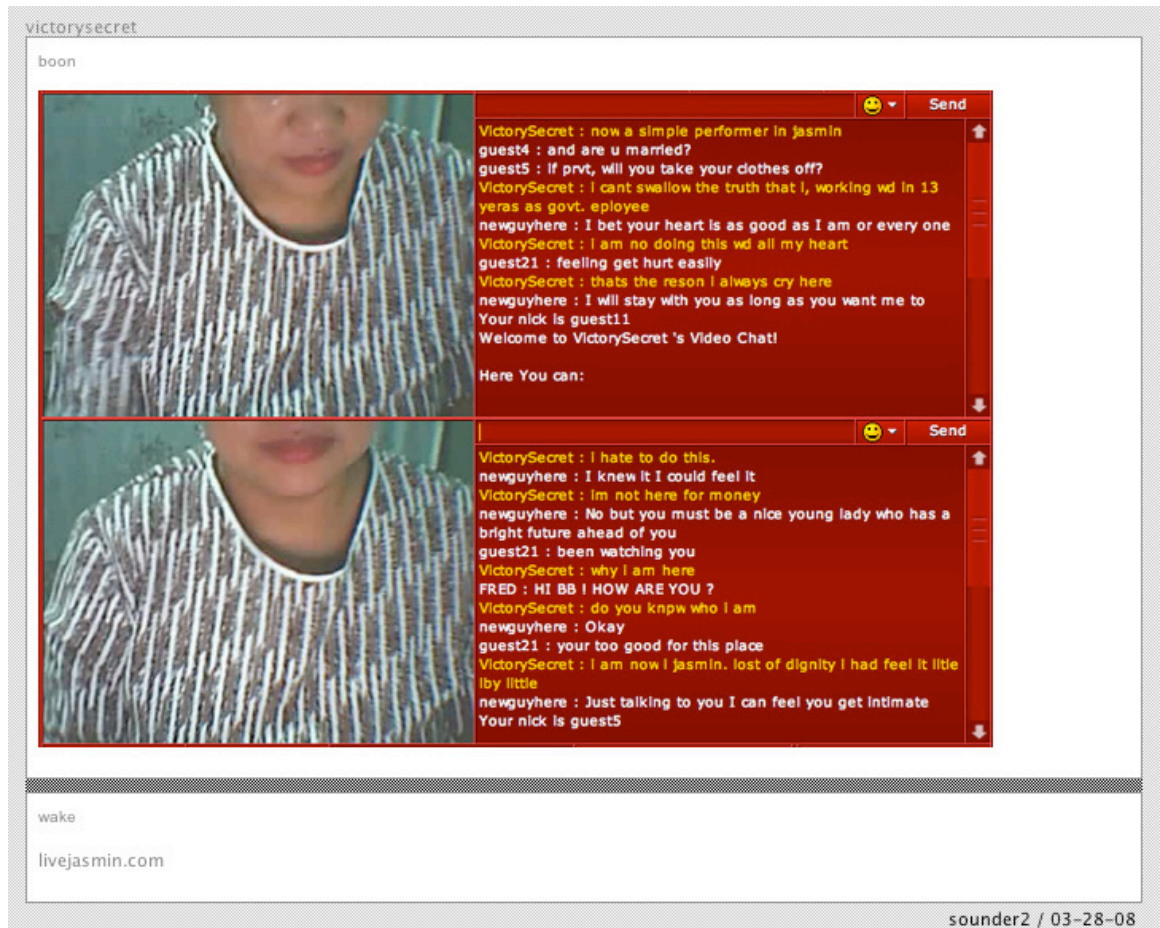
*Kevin Bewersdorf, Spirit Surfers, (collection with boon and wake)



— [Travis](#) 9/18/07 3:02 pm

[Comments \(2\)](#)

* Travis Holebeck, NN, (image + text capture)



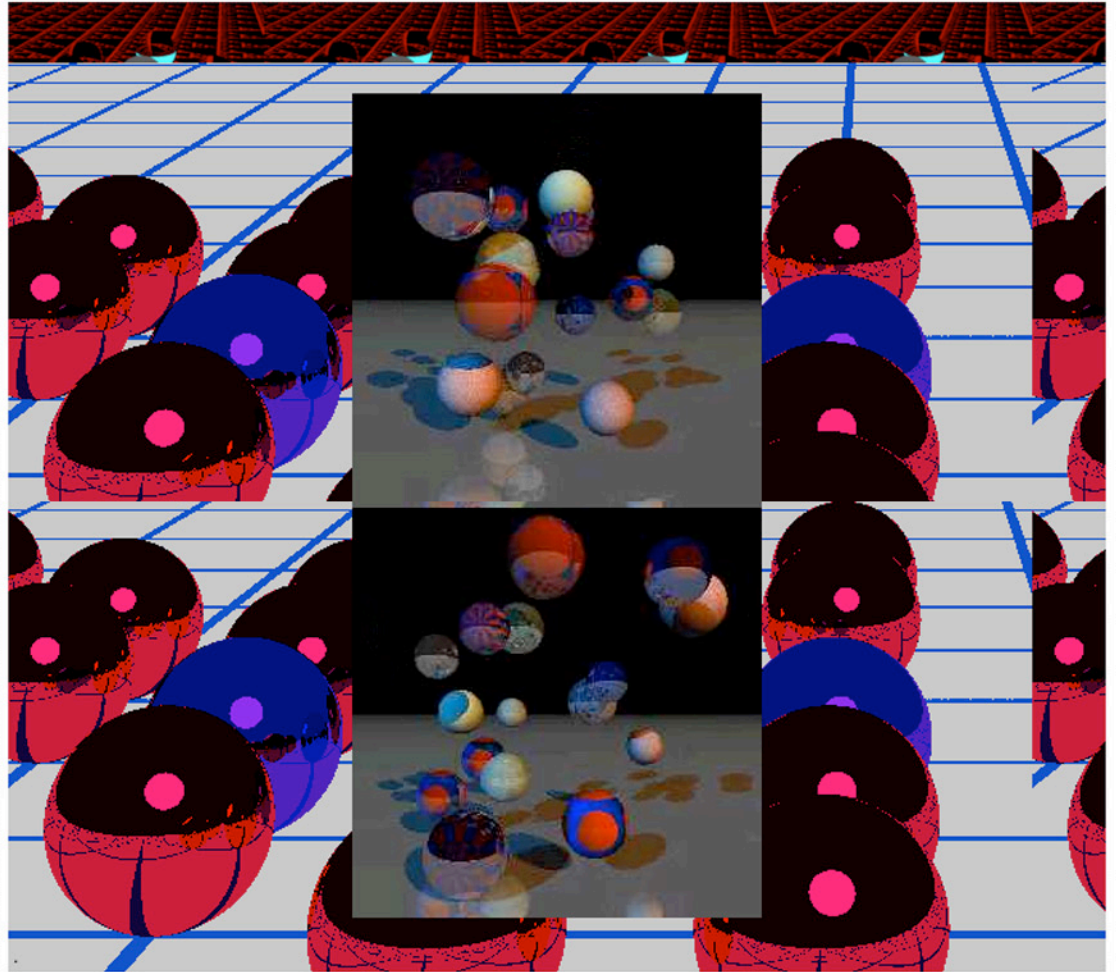
*Marcin Ramocki, Spirit Surfers, (video chat capture)



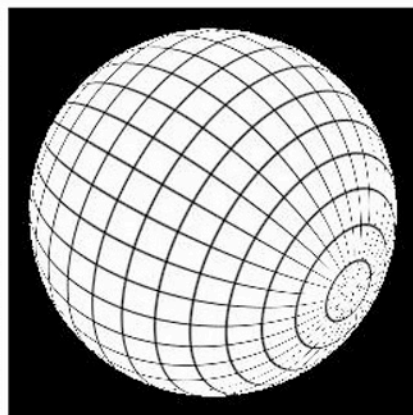
*Double Happiness, fragment of an environment

ray trac'd '95

boon



wake



tntet / 04-11-08 / 1 comment

*Paul Slocum, Spirit Surfers, (gif + flash manipulated)