



A Rose By Any Other Name...

The hows and whys of *Web Dances*

by Richard Lord

The *Web Dances* are on-line at www.webdances.com

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What's in a name?

I started developing world-wide-web sites in 1995 to supplement my income (or lack of it) as a choreographer. While programming web sites was easy for me (I used to program computers before Terpsichore reformed me) I found designing web sites challenging. So in 1996 I started to experiment with transferring my choreography skills into this new medium, as a way to boost the quality of my design work. The result, as well as some better designed web sites, is the *Web Dances* [www.webdances.com]— a web site currently containing four personal works created for the web. My intention is that these works should be interesting, varied, experimental, and above all informed by my sensibilities as a choreographer. I call the work *Web Dances* because it seems an appropriate name - these works use many techniques and forms that I use when creating live dance.

It is assumed by many that I am asserting that the works created are dance. Perhaps they are and perhaps they're not (I'll deal with this later), but the name is intended as the title of a body of work, not a name for a genre of art. Unfortunately, the name has now been adopted to denote any dances created for the web. Being stubborn, I haven't changed the title of my work, so you'll have to accept the confusion. In this article, "*Web Dances*", capitalised and in italics, will always refer to my work, while "web dances", in plain text and not capitalised, will indicate the questionable genre of dance work created for the web. Questionable because many respected dance artists consider that such work is impossible. So before continuing, I'll address the question of what I think a web dance is.

What is dance?

Our brains naturally classify the world around us, grouping similar objects and experiences into categories like odd numbers, mammals, games, and dances. People form two different types of categories. In one type, the category has definitions, clear rules governing whether something is in or out of the category, and common properties running through all the members. Thus we know that five is an odd number and a lion is a mammal because they fit within the definitions of those categories. In the second type, the category has fuzzy boundaries, stereotypes and similarities between members.

These categories are derived from observing the similarities between items and classifying them accordingly. Because we have different experiences, we sometimes classify objects in fuzzy categories differently. Games and poetry are fuzzy categories, and while there are some elements which we would probably all agree are member of these categories, there are other elements which we will disagree over. This is inevitable because there is no strict definition for membership to the category so there is no correct answer to whether something belongs in the category or not.

Dance is a fuzzy category. It is based on classification of various observations, it has no strict definitions and it has no clear rules for membership. We can't define it strictly and instead must rely on observation of similarities and differences to back any assertion as to whether a particular work is or is not dance. We can each imagine a stereotypical dance and we can all attempt to define a kernel of unique properties which make something "dance". But since our individual experiences of dance differ, so will our stereotypes and kernels. Inevitably there will be works which we disagree about, with some asserting they are dance and others asserting they are not. In the face of that, what matters is that the word "dance" remain useful as a category so when I view a work which the creator categorises as dance, in any medium, I have some inkling of what to expect.

What is the web?

The "web" is an abbreviation for the "world-wide-web". The world-wide-web consortium (www.w3c.org) defines the world-wide-web as "the universe of network-accessible information, the embodiment of human knowledge". Both halves of this definition are far-reaching and generalised. "The universe of network accessible information" might include information on the telephone network, the railway network, or networks built by aliens on other planets. And the embodiment of human knowledge includes all libraries, whether networked or not. So this definition includes most of the universe. The truth is that the web is another fuzzy category, and so we can't define it any more accurately than we can define dance.

So what is web dance?

Given the above, it is understandable that people disagree over what is and isn't web dance. Web dance is a new concept for a fuzzy category which currently has too few elements within it for us to establish the qualities of a typical web dance. The classification is too vague, but here are some properties which I think may be within the properties of web dances:

- A web dance is composed from movement in time and space. The space and the time may be virtual as well as real, and the object doing the moving may be human, animal, plant, or inanimate object, and may be real or virtual.
- The web dance is composed by a human.
- The web dance is designed for viewing within a web browser, with formats for any other media (e.g. live, video, CD-ROM) being secondary.
- The web dance can be accessed over the internet from anywhere in the world.
- The person who created the work thinks it is a web dance.

Web Dances

Rather than presenting generalisations about this new, naive medium (generalisations which will inevitably be seen to be wrong within a couple of years) I intend to discuss some specific examples, namely my own *Web Dances*. I'll leave it to others to attempt to infer generalisations from my specifics. There are two reasons for using my own work as the examples: first because I know a lot about them since I made them, and second because I don't know any other web dances. The *Web Dances* are on the internet at www.webdances.com and this article will make more sense if you look at the *Web Dances* before continuing.

Progressive 2

Progressive 2 was the first web dance I developed, back in 1996 when the web was a new toy. One of the challenges facing any web site is the

narrow bandwidth of modems. All content on the web has to be compressed, with any non-essential information thrown away, so that the pages can be delivered to the user in a reasonable time. This situation reminded me of the use of sound bites within news reporting, rapid editing in movies, and similar techniques for squashing large amounts of data into a limited space or time.

Unfortunately, the data surrounding an important point gives it context and meaning. Reducing data to minimal bite sized pieces will sometimes destroy this context and the meaning will be compromised or lost altogether. The more information we try to cram into a fixed space, the more danger there is of this occurring. This is the inspiration behind Progressive 2.

For Progressive 2, I created nine video sequences, each of identical length (nine seconds). The first of these sequences is a single shot of a dancer dancing, lasting nine seconds and designed to loop. With each successive sequence, new video footage is added. This footage features the same dancer doing different movement and replaces a small part of the existing footage. Thus the total duration of the sequence remains nine seconds but subjectively the data contained within that time increases. As a result the context for the movement changes and in the final sequence, which contains thirty-one video clips within its nine seconds duration, including a very short part of the initial sequence, little meaning remains as the original context is lost.

I chose to present the work on my web site as a combination of nine quicktime movies. I could have used other media rather than the web, but the web is accessible to a wide audience. Quicktime video is compressed to reduce the file size and to make playback smoother, and the video sequences in Progressive 2 are deliberately over-compressed to cause compression artefacts in the images and reinforce the point about compression causing distortion.

Progressive 2 has very little interactivity. The viewer can stop and start each of the videos (by clicking once or twice on them), but that is the only interaction they have with the web dance. At the end of the twentieth century, interactive, non-linear, participatory art seems to be the big thing. Some people even assert that the old, linear forms for passive viewing will soon be a distant memory. I enjoy a good interaction, and it's sadly true that in many parts of the world there is far too little interaction between people, but the passive arts will never die. While I enjoy some interactive art (and don't overlook computer games - they are among the most complex and

innovative computer based entertainment around), I also enjoy cinema, theatre, concerts and art galleries, and I have no intention of abandoning them. Each project is served best by different techniques, and interactivity will be right for some and wrong for others. My next project had a lot more interactivity...

Brownian Motion

I wanted to make a web dance in which the viewer could interact with and modify a dance as it happened. The result, published in 1997, is Brownian Motion. Brownian motion is a term for the irregular movement of small particles suspended in a fluid or gas and can be seen, for example, by observing smoke particles in air through a microscope; the particles move erratically, under the influence of repeated collisions with invisibly small molecules of gas in the air.

The Brownian Motion web dance is inspired by autumn, so seeds and leaves falling from trees become floating, tumbling, golden figures. There are four different moving figures, and an armchair. The user selects which figures to use for the dance, and places them on the stage. The movement of these figures is randomised, using patterns based on brownian motion. Each type of figure has a different bias in its movement, according to its properties. So the tumblers drop towards the bottom of the screen while the flappers rise towards the top. A juxtaposition of a figure and an armchair produces the usual results – the figure sits in the chair.

Having placed a selection of figures on the stage the user has a number of ways to influence them. Any figure can be moved at will simply by dragging it around, the cursor can be transformed into an attractor or repeller with which to herd the figures around, and the user can group figures together so they move in unison. Information on how to achieve these effects is displayed within the web dance. In addition, there is a secret button which releases a special dancer, because I like the idea of encouraging and rewarding inquisitive people with something extra.

The result is a simple tool for making simple web dances. I didn't want to make it too elaborate, because I want people to be able to pick it up and play with it straight away. Giving users the opportunity to choreograph the movement of the figures would involve a much more complex system

requiring time to learn how to use it, so Brownian Motion allows limited control over a simple form of web dance. It is a useful experiment, and as the most popular of my web dances it indicates a direction I shall explore further in the future.

Lifeblood

In the mid 1990s there was a lot of talk about virtual reality, and many people talked to me about making virtual dances. The idea seemed to be that using virtual reality technology a user could experience a dance from the point of view of the dancer. But since the experience of a dancer is intimately linked to the physicality of doing the movement, the emotion of performing with others and before an audience, and the immediacy of the dance happening in the present, it seems improbable that any technology in the near future will convey the sensation of performing the dance to anyone other than the performer herself.

I took a different approach to virtual dance, simplifying it to the idea of a dance which doesn't exist and never has existed outside of people's minds, and yet which can be experienced from an audience member's point of view. A virtual dance would convey the experience of watching a dance without the dance ever happening. Inspired by MUDs, Lifeblood is a virtual dance which uses text as the medium for conveying the dance to the user.

MUD is an acronym for Multi-User Dungeon (or sometimes Multi-User Dimension, or Multi-User Domain). They were invented in the early 1980s as a form of virtual reality environment. A MUD is a space, with different connected locations, through which users can move and interact in real-time. All aspects of the MUD are utilised via a text interface – so visitors receive text descriptions of where their character is and type text descriptions of what their character does; descriptions which other users in the virtual vicinity read. Some users develop very elaborate metaphors to describe their character's behaviour and I have attempted to use some elements of this writing style in the text of Lifeblood.

Created in 1997, Lifeblood simply describes what an audience member might see if they were to visit a theatre to see the dance. It is unfashionable in its use of text, its linear structure, and its lack of interactivity. In fact, the form of Lifeblood doesn't depend on the internet or technology at all – it

could easily be written on paper and handed out to people. But since MUDs are usually accessible via the internet, it seems appropriate to use the same medium to distribute Lifeblood.

Burnt Cinders

I began work on Burnt Cinders in 1999. This work is unique among my web dances because I started working on it because there was a technology I wanted to learn and experiment with, dynamic-HTML, and not because there was a web dance I wanted to make. Quite early in the process a theme emerged, and the name is based on this; “burnt cinder” is Cockney rhyming slang for “window”.

The web, via the web browser, gives us a window on all parts of the world. We can discover the news before CNN broadcast it, we can check the current weather anywhere, we can see current share prices, and we can observe what various people are up to right now via web-cams. Because of the internet, the individuals in different parts of the world are connected together and we have access to quantities of information which would take an individual many lifetimes to read.

Burnt Cinders presents windows on four different parts of the world, displaying the current weather in London, New York, Tokyo, and Sydney. I was seduced by the idea of taking control of the windows on a users computer, so these windows dance around the screen as the user watches. The weather patterns of the world are interdependent, constantly interacting with each other. The moving windows make this interdependence explicit with simple geometric patterns.

The Audience

Unfortunately, while the *Web Dances* web site is accessible to millions of people around the world, most of these people don't know it's there. The *Web Dances* are listed in various search engines and web directories, but very few people find the site his way – to find a web site using a search engine one must first know what one is looking for and very few people know about web dances. Most of the traffic to the *Web Dances* comes via links from other sites, and recently a single link from an obscure “best of the web” directory

produced a fourfold increase in traffic to the site. People didn't know they wanted to see the *Web Dances* until they read about them.

Web dances meet their audience in different circumstances from other dance forms. A web dance audience is usually alone and seated in front of a computer. They are often unfamiliar with the technology they're using, and unfamiliar with dance itself. They may be at work, constantly looking over their shoulders in case the boss catches them surfing the web instead of working. They may be at home, browsing the web for something interesting to pass the time. They may be young or they may be old. They may be in any one of the hundreds of countries around the world. And no one will be present to mediate between them and the dance.

And when the audience do come, keeping them there is another problem? If a web site takes too long to load they will leave, either through boredom or because they think it's not working. If they can't quickly assess whether they want to be at the site, they'll leave. If they feel that they don't belong at the site they'll leave. If they think the site's boring they'll leave. And there's none of the guilt and embarrassment that many feel when walking out of a theatre production.

Web audiences are difficult to catch and even harder to keep, and being noticed amidst the mass of other web sites is a constant struggle for which there are no obvious solutions.

Next

The web is young, and web dances even younger. In time, the web will evolve, probably into something few of us can even imagine, and the current crop of web dances will be a distant memory of beginners playing with crude toys. Whatever the web becomes, there will be a place on it for enthusiastic choreographers to utilise their skills in devising work for the medium, and for others to argue whether the resulting work is dance or not. Whether we call the results web dances or something else is unimportant as long as we encourage the enthusiasts to experiment, create work, and share the results with the rest of us.