A Thinkie for the Society of Audience

Lee Morgenroth, Research Assistant
Glorianna Davenport, Associate Professor of Media Technology Interactive Cinema
Group, MIT Media Lab 1995

http://lurker.www.media.mit.edu/registration/

This paper introduces the newest example of a form of interactive cinema called "thinkies." Thinkies use the medium of interaction, along with cinema, to elicit a thought experience in an audience.

Lurker is a thinkie designed for multiple participants. The collection of individuals that experience *Lurker* make up a society of audience. *Lurker* uses an immersive environment to engage this audience in a community built around a story.

The Internet serves as both the medium for distribution and as the basis for interaction in *Lurker*. As a thinkie, *Lurker* is designed to engage its participants in the "hacker ethic." Through the use of story and interaction, participants in *Lurker* experience the content from the perspective of a hacker; the participants are also encouraged to do some hacking themselves.

The *New Hacker's* Dictionary defines a hacker as:

> hacker n. <p> [originally, someone who makes furniture with an axe] 1. A person who enjoys exploring the details of pro- grammable systems and how to stretch their capabilities, as opposed to most users, who prefer to learn only the minimum necessary...7. One who enjoys the intellectual challenge of creatively overcoming or circumventing limitations. The term "hacker" also tends to connote membership in the global community defined by the net (see network, the and Internet address). It also implies that the person described is seen to subscribe to some version of the hacker ethic (see hacker ethic, the). (Raymond, 1994)
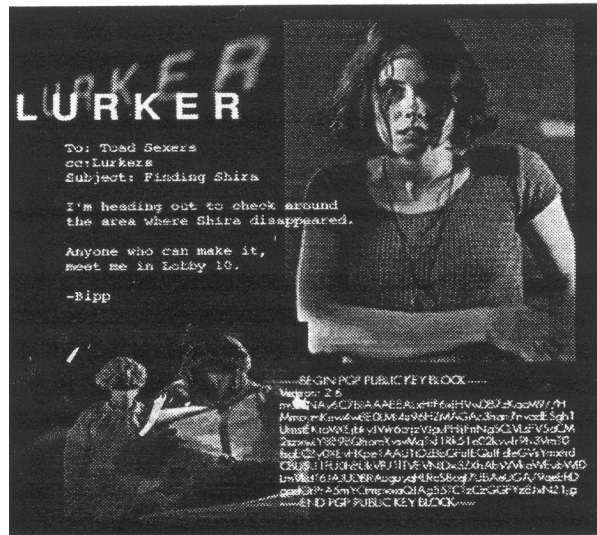
The story of *Lurker* focuses on an on-line hacker group who call themselves the "Toad Sexers." The audience is exposed to seven members of the group located at a technical institute. The experience begins when the participants sign up for the Toad Sexers' initiation test. The act of signing up requires the participants to enter their email addresses on the Toad Sexers' registration Web page.

Lurker is an entirely network based experience. All of the content is delivered to the participants through a combination of email and the World Wide Web. *Lurker* is interactively narrated through these two media.

Email is used extensively in *Lurker* as a communication medium between the participants and by the characters. One useful feature of email is that all the mail messages received by an individual are stored chronologically in that individual's mailbox until they are deleted. This condition allows email to be used to convey the linear aspects of a narrative.

The real time implementation of *Lurker* allows the author to control when the audience will be exposed to each email message. This feature provides a means of maintaining dramatic control throughout *Lurker*.
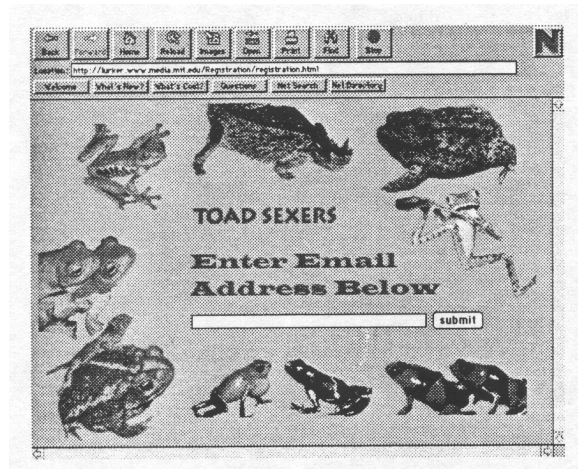
The World Wide Web is used to deliver all the remaining content of *Lurker*. The remaining content consists of video sequences, a number of web sites, and several interactive episodes.

The video sequences in *Lurker* add the emotional impact of cinema to the on-line experience. These segments of video allow the audience to form a complete image of the characters in the *Lurker*.

Movies served over the network can take anywhere from minutes to download, on a well connected workstation, to several on machines with slower connections. In order to make *Lurker* equally accessible to all users, time must be allotted for downloading these movies. The implementation of *Lurker* allows for these breaks to be incorporated into the story, without sacrificing the ongoing narrative.

Lurker contains a number of interactive episodes. During one of these episodes, the Toad Sexers enlist the aid of the participants to help them crack a secure file server. Each participant is given the Web hotlist of a major user of the secure file server. The participants are then charged to examine the areas of interest contained in the hotlist, and to try to guess the password from that information. This task, along with all the following interactive episodes, is designed for a group experience.
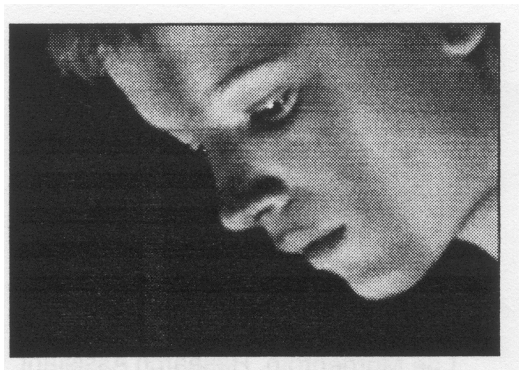
Each hot list contains between ten and twenty entries. Each of these entries is an existent Web site. For an individual to thoroughly explore all the sites on their hot list would take several hours. If the participants share their individual hot lists with each other, they will quickly realize that there is a subset of the total number of sites that occurs in each hotlist. The discovery of these repeated sites is the key to uncovering the password. Although it is possible to derive the password from a single hotlist, communication between the participants greatly simplifies the task at hand.

The interactive episodes in *Lurker* present the potential problem that the audience will fail to complete an episode, and the story will grind to a halt [l]. *Lurker* avoids the problem of audience failure by involving the characters.

Throughout the story, both the Toad Sexers and the participants are involved in every situation. Therefore, if the participants have not finished a section of the experience in a reasonable amount of time, the Toad Sexers finish it. In order to further integrate this idea into the story, the participants, through reading the Toad Sexers' mailing list, are able to track the progress of the group in each situation. Ideas put forward by the Toad Sexers act as clues for the participants. In this way, the story doesn't stop when the interaction becomes more intense.
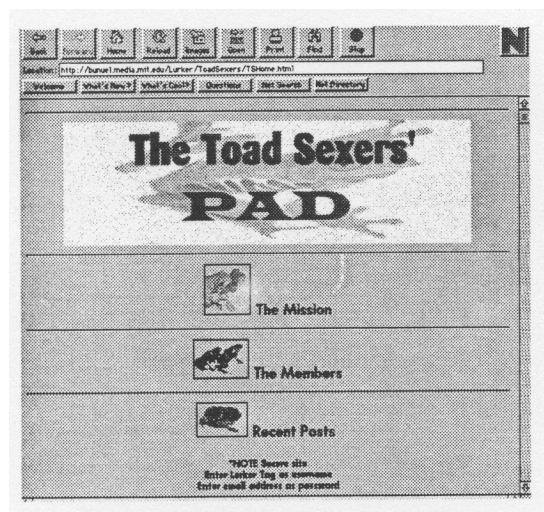
This story device allows users to interact at a level at which they feel comfortable. Many interactive narratives assume that everyone wants to interact all the time. Audience members vary widely in their desire to interact with content and the way in which they want to interact. Lurker allows audience members to participate as intensively or passively as they desire. If a viewer does not enjoy solving problems or hacking situations and would rather just experience the narrative elements, this viewer can ignore the Toad Sexers' requests for aid. Even if all the participants in an experience decide not to interact, the story will continue until its conclusion. Conversely, active participants can try to solve every problem, and can extend their enthusiasm to building relationships with their fellow participants. This sliding metric of interactively points to the development of truly variable experiences.

I. Myst and experiences of similar nature suffer from the problem of audience failure. If the puzzles contained in these applications are not solved, these experiences stop.
Because of this dependency, authors of these applications cannot control the pace of the viewer's experience. The dependency of these stories on problem solving can be frustrating to some users.

In many ways the most intriguing and innovative aspect of *Lurker* is the community that develops among the participants. In any single run of *Lurker* the audience can be from all comers of the globe. Individuals have already participated from as far away as England, France, Australia, Japan, and Hawaii. Through the design of *Lurker*, the individual participants are encouraged to work closely with each other and, as a result, form a community over the course of their experience. (Morgenroth, 1995)

References
Morgenroth, Lee (1995) "Movies Talkies Thinkies: An Experimental Form of Interactive Cinema ". MS Thesis in Media Arts and Sciences, MIT .

Raymond, E. S. (1994). The New Hacker's Dictionary .Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.