

Kim H. Veltman

Acceptance of CAPIRE PRIZE 1996

Mr. President, your Honour, the Mayor, distinguished guests, I am deeply grateful for the honour that is bestowed upon me through this prize which I accept on behalf of our team, for it is as much theirs¹ for having built the system as mine for having had the idea.

A stranger to these isles is first struck by a very different approach to time. Indeed to a Northerner when things begin over an hour "late" one immediately thinks in terms of some unforeseen disaster. Yet as I stand here and witness a full moon rising majestically over these magical islands, I am conscious that a different sense of organization is in place, one which integrates even the moon and nature in its scheme.

Standing on this island where Hippocrates was born, next to Socrates Beach, one is very conscious of a great philosophical and cultural heritage. Traditionally the details of this heritage were always local. One had to go to the place to see its special features. In a sense this will always be the case and yet the revolution that is being honoured by this prize is transforming aspects of that experience. For the past decade our team has been working on a System for Universal Media Searching (SUMS), which serves as a new interface for systematic access to the Internet. Last year SUMS was chosen as one of 19 Canadian projects at the first G7 exhibition on the Information Society (Brussels) and at the World Summit (Halifax). At those meetings it was proposed that the G7 should sponsor 11 pilot projects covering a range of topics: a global inventory of projects, global interoperability, education, libraries, museums, environment, global emergencies, health, government, small and medium enterprises and maritime information systems. Of these, pilot project five on museums, officially termed, *Multimedia Access to World Cultural Heritage*, is being headed by Italy. It has four sections: capture (the Canadian NRC laser camera, Ottawa), archive (multimedia system of the Museum for the History of Science, Florence), display (a virtual reality version of the tomb of Nefertari by ENEL/Infobyte, Rome) and navigate (SUMS, Toronto).

This is in response to a revolution that is underway. IBM, with funds from Rio di Janeiro, is scanning in all the 150,000 manuscripts of the Vatican Library. The Bibliothèque Nationale de la France is scanning the complete texts of 400,000 works. The Coalition of Networked Information is planning to scan the full text of 10,000,000 books. Similar plans are underway in the great museums. The National galleries of England, Canada, and the United States have scanned in all their paintings as have the Louvre and the Uffizi. At the Uffizi efforts are underway to scan in the 1300 paintings at a rate of 1.4 gigabytes/ square meter. The European Commission (DGXIIIb), has arranged for a Memorandum of Understanding, which has been signed by some 250 museums with a view to ensuring that 50% of their collections will be scanned in by the year 2000. G7 pilot project five, which met in the context of the ISAD (Information Society and Developing Countries) conference, and brought together representatives from 42 countries, aims to spread these initiatives around the world.

Making these materials accessible on a global scale marks a first step in the revolution. Unlike books which permit only a single serial presentation, electronic media allow multivalent access, which will mark a second step in the revolution. When I was a child I learned about the Fall of Constantinople (1453). Later I heard of the rise of the Ottoman Empire (1453) and only gradually realized that the fall was the rise depending on which point of view one took. We need software that will make us aware of both viewpoints, a Christian and a Muslim view, a Russian and a Chinese view, multiple viewpoints, so that we can comprehend the complexities of historical experience. To achieve this requires much more than simply scanning in the documents. The electronic versions will need to be translated, carefully sifted and interpreted. This is a great challenge and will require a revival of the energies unleashed by those thousands of monasteries which prepared the way for modernity centuries ago.

The great moments in civilization were those which took seriously this challenge of synthesis: the Greeks at the time of Aristotle, who sent his student Alexander the Great to India to collect materials; the Arabs beginning at the court of Gundishapur when a decision was made to collect and translate the riches of the Greco-Roman heritage; the thirteenth century when the efforts of the monks culminated in the quest of Thomas Aquinas to create a *Summa*; the Renaissance which continued this on a greater scale; the *Enclopédistes* in the eighteenth century and now perhaps we with our computers.

Yet all these potentially magnificent developments bring as many dangers as they do opportunities. Globalization can readily become a negative thrust towards homogenization, a triumph of the banal, rather than of the unique. Yesterday I was walking down the streets of Kos and was horrified to see a shop with tee-shirts of *Pocahontas* and other Disney characters. As a tourist I am not interested in flying half way around the world to see stereotypes. I want to witness the special features of this former home of Hippocrates, the plane tree associated with his name, even if the capital used to be on the other side of the island, the healing and the magical features of an Asklepeion, the mountain associated with the mythic Herakles/Hercules.

Rather than imposing stereotypes, globalization must bring a reinforcement of the uniqueness of each place. The networks we build must teach persons to recognize the differences, not just the similarities, to open questions rather than to close them, to discover richness, variety, complexity, to increase our sense of wonder at the miracle of being. This is what our software is trying to do. It is still very much in the beginning stages and will require much work for its underlying goal to be achieved. When SUMS comes to Kos it should bring into focus all the unique aspects of this island which set it apart from everywhere else, in the micro-Kos-m, the macro-Kos-m and all its "Kos-mic" dimensions. On behalf of my team thank you again. To keep alive the details, the unique, the inimitable, everywhere, is the wonder that we are trying to understand, CAPIRE as the prize states, to grasp, to share, to give a deeper comprehension of the past, richer visions of the present and more open minds for a truly creative future.

¹ The team which includes over twenty persons has among its key figures Jordan Christensen, Andrew McCutcheon, David Pritchard, Rakesh Jethwa and Greg Stuart. I am deeply grateful to all of them.