

Anything God can do, I can do better - Life & Style

In the world of Technosphere you design your own life-form - but then it can grow, multiply and evolve on its own. Cooper James reports

The World Wide Web, the graphically rich region of the Internet, is host to many weird and wonderful experiments. Few, however, are as intriguing as Technosphere, an attempt to create a world of computerised creatures that will live and die in a landscape created by the latest image-rendering techniques. It will be launched on 1 September.

The Technosphere team is headed by Jane Prophet and Gordon Selly, from the University of Westminster and the London College of Printing respectively. "People take part in Technosphere by constructing creatures from the templates provided or by inputting their own customised life-forms," Ms Prophet says. "As the creatures grow, move, evolve and die, users are able to experience these events from an overall viewpoint or from the point of view of a particular creature. Technosphere can support many thousands of competing life forms, and separate Technospheres can be linked together over a network to form super-environments in which people can explore the outer reaches of other worlds and their inhabitants."

For Ms Prophet and Mr Selly, the project is a chance to experiment with an interactive game on a global scale. The landscape and artificial life-forms will evolve over time, guided by genetic algorithms (an algorithm is a rule for behaviour; a genetic algorithm is a kind of computerised version of natural selection and genetic variation). They hope that simple life-forms will multiply and support larger creatures, so that food webs and ecologies will evolve. The environment will include plains, deserts and mountains. Trees will self-seed above certain heights to create forests, and whirlwinds will spin across the globe destroying all life-forms and creating new terrain in their wake, bringing a touch of catastrophe to the world.

Ms Prophet says: "We are hoping to use the public as a source for evolution based on their individual likes and dislikes for shape, colour and function. Without the intervention of the public, Technosphere might become a stable state devoid of variation and evolution. The process of natural selection offered by Technosphere will drive creatures far away from their original genetic descriptions and hopefully will produce interesting events ... The form of the creature will also change, along with its genetic description, because the relationship between form and function is very tight in Technosphere. We use the volumes of body parts to work out how heavy the creature is, how much energy it requires to live, how fast it is and much more."

If you are an Internet user, you will be able to introduce your own pet life forms which, at key moments in their evolution, will e-mail you a postcard. That will give you a chance to visit the Technosphere and investigate. Your virtual plankton may have taken over the world - or it may have been scooped by a virtual whale. Worse still, your virtual dog may have virtual fleas.

The Technosphere project can be reached at: Technosphere@cairn.demon.co.uk. For details, see <http://www.lond-inst.ac.uk/>