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BySaul Albert

Users of Andy Deck's Glyphiti applet are invited to engage in the collaborative editing of a mural, composed of 256 icon sized images (glyphs) by working on one 32 x 32 pixel section at a time. Black and white, zoomed in tight, Glyphiti feels like the dysfunctional amalgamation of familiar interface features from antiquated image editing software. The anonymous crowd of users are allowed to scrawl over each other's glyphs like bored schoolchildren carving expletives into classroom desks.

In the introduction Deck acknowledges his 'co-determined' relationship with users of Glyphiti (he codes the rules, we follow them), and offers the source code to users who are discontent with the interface, remarking: 'Copy it. Steal it. Share it. Print it. Pretend it's yours. I don't care.' Although this seems to jeopardise Deck's authorial status, few are likely to take up this challenge. Rather than de-centralising authorship, Glyphiti works because it attempts to confound it altogether. Once the seamless, anti-aliased surface of image editing software is stripped away, and the myth of 'on-line collaboration' is exploded, the user/author is left with 32 x 32 choices, black or white, one or zero. While playing with Glyphiti I noticed someone editing a glyph on the top of my screen. Jumping in, I added two little surprised eyes and 'hi' in a speech bubble. Enigmatically, my 'collaborator' wrote 'Jesus Paves' and disappeared. A few (mal)communications later I was hooked, and spent hours trading glyphs with whoever showed up.

Glyphiti is not just an experiment in human-computer interface, it is a breeding ground for a quirky development of computer-mediated (or computer-confounded) communication; the beauty of it is watching people find ways to work around it's implicit limitations.

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