

DRUM BEATS TO DRUM BYTES

INTRODUCTION

The **drum beats to drum bytes** gathering was held at the Banff Centre for the Arts from March 12 to 15, 1994. The gathering was coordinated by the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance with the assistance of the Banff Centre for the Arts, the Canada Council and the Department of Canadian Heritage. The gathering brought together 16 Aboriginal resource people from across North America involved in First Peoples' arts and cultural development, facilitation, production, education, communications and telecommunications network development.

The purpose of the gathering was to begin the process of establishing a nation-wide computer based multi-media telecommunications network to serve the communications, information resource, and training and professional development needs of First Peoples (Metis, Inuit, and status and non-status Indian) cultural producers, facilitators and educators working in the fields of our languages, literatures, visual and media arts, performing arts and music, etc.

The gathering was co-chaired by Loretta Todd, Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance President; Marjorie Beaucage, Alliance Runner and Steering Committee member; and Sara Diamond, Director, Television and Video Program and Co-Director of New Media Research program, Banff Centre for the Arts.

The commitment of the Banff Centre for the Arts to supporting the work and leadership of the Alliance has, and will continue to be crucial to the on-going development of an Aboriginal arts and cultural multi-media telecommunications network.

[Drum Bytes] is a welcome part of the aboriginal self-government project, our larger NOMAD network project and new media research at the Banff Centre.

[The focus of the New Media Research project at Banff] is to create and enhance artistic and culturally meaningful uses and designs of new technology. Our work centres on authoring technologies, including network based authoring, virtual reality and audio tools. In all of these areas we believe that the knowledge that creative individuals from a range of different communities and visions bring to developing technologies is critical. We are funded in part by the Centre for Information and Technologies Innovation, a Canadian public sector research consortium and the Canada Council.

Our research has included artistic projects in virtual reality, the Internet based NOMAD networks project, the creation of MIXNET and audio works making use of this multidimensional sound tool, the first stage report for NATIVE NET and critical discussions of new technology and culture.

Sara Diamond

The Centre also coordinated administrative assistance from Jill Swartz, Computer Software Workers Training Program participant; gathering transcription through Patricia Buckle, Computer Software Workers Training Program participant; documentation by Woodrow MacPhail, Audio Visual Technician; and technological assistance and advice from Jeff Mann, New Media Network Specialist; and Daniel Schiedt, New Media Network Events Organizer.

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BACKGROUND

The structure and function of the network will be based on Aboriginal perspectives and values and the Alliance vision of Self Government in art. This vision is a commitment to honouring the diversity of perspectives, stories and experiences of Aboriginal peoples. It seeks to have the variety of forms and approaches in both traditional and contemporary voices, developed and shared. To govern ourselves means to govern our stories and our ways of telling stories. It means that the rhythm of the drumbeat, the language of smoke signals and our moccasin telegraph can be transformed to the airwaves and modems of our times. We can determine our use of the new technologies to support, strengthen and enrich our cultural communities.

The network will have the capacity to provide basic multi-media communications between individuals and group conferencing around self-determined issues. It will also have the potential to function as a presentation, exhibition, performance and broadcasting space for works produced in other media and for work created specifically for network presentation. First Peoples' arts and cultural organizations can establish their existing databases on the network in conjunction with new databases created by and for diverse First Peoples' arts and cultural communities interacting on the network to create a powerful cultural archive. The network will also have an important development aspect whereby other types of new services and tools will be created for and by First Peoples arts and cultural communities according to their evolving needs and interests.

- BENEFITS FOR ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The network will play an important role in stimulating professional and economic development for both isolated and urban Aboriginal cultural communities. The network will give access to new markets and employment opportunities for Aboriginal artists and educators in the North and in urban communities. The ease and economy of communication through the network will enable sharing of research and successful models of community development. Another important potential use of the network will be the preservation of Aboriginal languages and the continuing development of our unique literatures based on our histories, philosophies, theologies, language patterns, social structures, geographies and inter-cultural relationships.

- ABORIGINAL NEW MEDIA DESIGN AND AUTHORING

Partnership with the New Media Research Program of the Banff Centre provides an important opportunity for the national Aboriginal arts and technology community to design and author a multi-media computer based telecommunications system which will act as an important developmental model for other types of application designers and authors, and as a valuable product for markets with similar or identical needs, nationally and internationally. As well as providing access to these markets, the partnership with Banff will ensure that a very high degree of technical competence will be nurtured in the Aboriginal community, and will be matched with a very carefully considered ethically and culturally appropriate operation structure. Technological competence combined with this level of cultural understanding and inclusivity will ensure the long-term value and continuing development of the network.

Some of the potential services which have been identified by Murray Jurak in his research report "Native Net" commissioned by the Alliance and the Banff Centre for the Arts include;

- BULLETIN BOARD SYSTEMS

The BBS will be constructed of three elements; a Skills Bank, E Mail and a Computer Based Catalogue. A Skills Bank Directory would enable Aboriginal arts and cultural professionals who are creating employment through new production development to rapidly locate available artists, technicians and production resources as well as engage in distance collaboration with other professionals through E Mail in writing, production research, pre-production, and distribution planning and implementation. Distribution of artists' production descriptions and related critical analysis research materials would also be facilitated through the Computer Based Catalogue system that would serve both artist/producer and presenter/broadcaster. Training and professional development resources in all phases of production, distribution and critical analysis will also be an essential aspect of the BBS System.

- DISTRIBUTION SYSTEMS

A multi-media distribution system is a critical component of a telecommunications network that serves Aboriginal arts and cultural professionals and their primary audience which is the Aboriginal community at large. The ability to transmit excerpts or entire works as well as other visual and audio materials related to the production process is critical to the effective support of our communities, especially in the North. The immediacy, accessibility and economy of this system is also valuable to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal presenters, exhibitors and broadcasters in both urban and remote communities. A multi-media transmission system also makes possible distance collaboration between producers, talent and technicians sharing various elements of the production process in a manner not often possible due to the negative economies imposed by distance. The report goes on to include;

“educational and cultural institutions, museum curators or art gallery programmers from across the world will soon be able to subscribe to or have direct access to the intellectual wealth of creative Aboriginal professionals. These persons will be able to facilitate dialogues, host lectures, instruct skills training seminars or simply speak directly to issues and thereby raise consciousness.”

An Aboriginal multi-media telecommunications network will serve the needs of Aboriginal artists in almost every creative discipline utilizing images, audio or text. Databases of biographical and critical analysis materials, bibliographies, and visual and audio based materials will be available for research, opportunities for training and professional development will multiply in accessibility, variety and number, and the artists' works themselves will receive unprecedented and long-overdue recognition.

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NETWORK PRINCIPLES (Special thanks to Don Fiddler)

"We must not become road-kill on the information superhighway". Randy Ross

Recognizing that the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance is an aboriginal organization dedicated to the principles of aboriginal self-government in art; and

Recognizing that art and cultural practices arise from diverse aboriginal communities representative of urban, rural and reserve settings; and

Recognizing that art and cultural practices arise from individual and collective sources and must be pursued according to the principles of aboriginal artistic and cultural self-determination; and

Recognizing that it is through aboriginal art and cultural practice that sovereignty and culture are upheld;

be it known that the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance agrees to work together with other organizations in order to facilitate the development of a computer-based telecommunications network dedicated to serving the needs of aboriginal artists and cultural practitioners according to the following principles;

1. Access to the network must be equitable and available to all aboriginal artists and cultural practitioners;
2. The freedom to pursue aboriginal art and cultural practice autonomously must be upheld;
3. The network must operate according to aboriginal concepts of sharing and ownership;
4. Access to the network is provided subject to participants upholding the principles of aboriginal artistic and cultural self-determination;
5. The network must utilize configurations and technologies consistent with a multi-media interactive environment.

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FIRST STEPS

Consensus was reached that the gathering would continue on-line to develop and refine short and long-term recommendations relative to network structural technology and authoring tools, membership criteria, multi-media software interface development, network access facilitation for non-urban communities, intellectual property and copyright, coalition building, database development, First Peoples languages, culturally sensitive materials, cultural and technological education delivery, leadership from elders, cultural appropriateness, network flexibility and on-going evolution, and funding strategies. These recommendations will be presented at the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance gathering in June, 1994.

Two structures were chosen to facilitate this on-going conference. They will each maintain identical materials. The first is the WildCat software BBS located at the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres at;

191 Promenade du Portage, Suite 500
Hull (Quebec)
J8X 2K6
Modem: (819) 772-4805
Tel.: (819) 772-2331
FAX: (819) 772-1826

which is moderated by Glenn Morrison, FNCCEC Vice-President Coordinator. There are two conferences dedicated to the **drum beats to drum bytes** gathering on this system. After being signed on by Glenn, it can be accessed by regular phone lines or Datapac phone lines (with accompanying toll charges) through the FNCCEC modem or by Internet EMail at:

GMORRIS2@FOX.NSTN.NS.CA

The second structure is an Internet EMail list server located at the Banff Centre moderated by Marjorie Beaucage, assisted by Gordon Tait. Gathering participants can sign on by sending the EMail message:

Subscribe Drum-Bytes (your name here)

to: **listproc@BanffCentre.AB.CA**

Once signed on by the moderator, the list server can be reached at:

Drum-Bytes@BanffCentre.AB.CA

Further assistance including the listserver archive index can be accessed by sending the message:

HELP

The conference participants are limited to the First Peoples members of the initial **drum beats to drum bytes** gathering and the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance Steering Committee. The contents of the conferences are to be confidential. The recommendations from the

gathering will be released at the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance gathering at the Banff Centre for the Arts in June, 1994.

The following list of potential on-line conference topics has been compiled from the transcripts of the gathering and is intended to facilitate the development of network recommendations. It is open for augmentation and alteration as the nature of the discussion evolves.

- Network Structural Technologies Research
- Multi-media Software Interface and Authoring Tools Development
- Network Services and Programming
- Cultural Appropriateness
- Network Access Facilitation for Non-urban Communities
- Database and Cultural Archive Development
- Network Flexibility and On-going Evolution
- Participation Criteria
- Intellectual Property and Copyright
- Culturally Sensitive Information and Materials
- Leadership from Elders
- Cultural and Technological Education Delivery
- Coalition Building
- First Peoples Languages
- Funding Strategies.

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DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The gathering expressed a strong commitment to elders, the community of Aboriginal peoples, and the central role of storytellers and oral traditions in First Peoples' cultures.

Artists in the group indicated that the technological learning curve should enable ease of access and use so that creativity and spontaneity would be supported and encouraged. It was also felt that the interaction with technology should be taken on with care to ensure that the value of live interaction and experience of life not be eroded.

The need for databases and cultural archives was stressed as a necessity for the network in terms of information on artists' works, artists' skills banks, and support resources.

The gathering indicated that a commitment to enriching communications resources for isolated and rural First Peoples cultural communities was a significant aspect of the network and that software training and access to technology combined with community-based, culturally specific development of network services should be a priority in constructing the network.

It was also felt that we should work toward becoming producers of information as an economic development resource rather than remain as passive consumers.

The development of an aspect of the network as a teaching environment and resource was seen as a priority.

A strong concern was expressed regarding cultural appropriation, misrepresentation and exoticization. An important element of the discussion centred on copyright, protocol, culturally appropriate network moderation and the necessity to have networking spaces which were reserved for First Peoples' participation.

The gathering discussed the need to provide relevant services of real value to cultural communities instead of just imposing technology for its own sake.

Strong support was indicated for de-centralized cultural and artistic autonomy and self-determination independent from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal political agendas.

Different software models were discussed, including First Class, Mosaic, HyperCard etc. CD-ROM interaction was also noted.

It was stressed that the development of the network must be directed toward becoming a tool for multi-media collaboration while maintaining the potential for interaction with other levels of computer technology.

The gathering indicated a commitment to the development of aspects of the network devoted to First Peoples' languages including education, literature and translation.

It was felt that an essential aspect of the network was the involvement of elders in providing guidance and leadership especially in regard to culturally sensitive information and materials, mentoring relationships and network parameter establishment. There was also strong support

for the capacity of the network to become an important venue for arts, cultural and educational policy development.

The Banff Centre for the Arts also coordinated a live on-line telecommunications link between the Institute for Contemporary Art in London, England and the Banff Centre for the Arts to enable members of the gathering to dialogue with participants in the I.C.A. conference SEDUCED AND ABANDONED - The Body in the Virtual World.

This experience was assessed in a variety of ways by the gathering participants and it led to further elaboration of positions regarding Aboriginal arts and cultural network participation criteria, the nature of the technology and its potential uses.