

Inter Office Memo

CORPORATE DIVISION
Corporate Research

To: Alan Kay

From: R. Stein

Subject encyclopedia project

Date: 10/29/82

A recent meeting (the first) of the ad hoc/informal encyclopedia project committee came up with some interesting ideas regarding the short-term online encyclopedia. There was unanimous opinion that the online encyclopedia should not be put into a development phase at this time. A complex of reasons boils down to the following:

- A) We don't even have a working model of what we want so how can we expect to have something on the market in 3 years. (And a close variant) If we don't have a model, then it is really still a research question and should not be put into development at this time.
- B) An online encyclopedia that is "Nexis with a better interface and some PLP graphics" may not be good enough - especially in three years. The major concern here seems to be the limitations imposed by existing CRT displays.

While I don't accept "B" as given, I agree that we need to do some experimental work, free of the pressures and constraints of product development before we can decide whether or when we have a model that is ready for development.

Specifically it was suggested that we could bring in the seeds of a development team now and let them work on the job of "putting the existing database (EB etc.) online," working particularly on some of the problems and developing the tools related to manipulating a database of this size and complexity. Second, a small number of people could work on designing an interface, while others study communications questions etc. Then nine months or a year down the road we can decide whether to go for a short-term product or not.

In addition to allowing us to proceed with a lot more confidence and knowledge, this strategy has the compelling advantage of not requiring the hard sell (to HCD, EB, and to Ray) of the online encyclopedia at this time - before we have a model, before we address the communications/distribution questions and before we've done our business plan type homework.

4. Microcomputer Software and Videodiscs

I assume that at some point we will have a go-ahead to do at least a small number of microcomputer programs and videodiscs - as products - related to the encyclopedia project. There is a lot of preparatory work that can go on now. We should sharpen formulation of goals, identify subject areas, solicit specific ideas and begin to choose groups to develop them. Brenda very much wants to tackle the microcomputer software. We should hire someone to head up the videodisc aspect.

5. Databases - Treasure Hunting

The IE can be expected to provide a gateway to other databases (eg. The New York Times, Dow Jones, etc.). In many cases we would probably not be able to get these databases on an exclusive basis. There are still a large number of databases, most of them still in print form only, which we could probably buy exclusive rights to. I'm thinking of such periodicals as the Harvard Medical School Newsletter (written for the layperson), Archaeology, American Heritage, Audobon, The Whole Earth Catalog etc.

We should hire someone to survey all available "databases," recommend the winners and advise us on such things as who owns/controls them This is definitely something that needs to be done NOW, before all the opportunities get gotten by someone else. I like your idea of having Stuart Brand advise on this - if not actually do the work.

6. Images - More Treasure Hunting

There are unfortunately a finite number of great images - still and motion. Short of working out deals with Time-Life or National Geographic (not impossible) we are going to have one hell of a job finding affordable images for the IE and all its less talented predecessors. Even if we did work out a deal with Time-Life or NGS, those collections are not all inclusive and we would still have the problem of motion pictures, for which there are not any equivalent collection in terms of comprehensiveness and excellence. Suggest we hire someone to start an extensive effort in this area. Bargains are going to get harder and harder to find.

7. Going Public

Sometime in the not too far distant future we are going to be able to announce publicly the existence of the encyclopedia project at Atari. If carefully conceived and carried out we can use the announcements to attract and orient people around the project. A few specific suggestions.

A whole strategy should be prepared in terms of conferences to present papers at, journals and magazines to submit articles to etc.

A major piece by A. Kay and C. Van Doren should be written on the theme of the leap in mankind's abilities that computers will enable and the role of the encyclopedia project within it. The combination of A. Kay and C. Van Doren is quite unique and by itself makes a statement about the synthesis we are working toward.

Glen Keane's pictures have had an overwhelming effect on many of the people we've shown them to. On more than one occasion people have fondled them and looked at them over and over again. It is highly unusual to see this sort of dream represented so artfully.

I suggest that we get Glen to fix up the pictures that need fixing and then prepare to publish them.

8. Conference

One of the ways to engage leading theorists and researchers in the project is a small working conference, the sort that is so seminal and rich in new ideas that it is referred to for years, "As Soandso said at the Yadayada Conference." I see us inviting about 25 people representing the full spectrum of intellectual endeavor. Each participant would present an original paper on a relevant topic (the charter on this would have to be well thought out). Taking place over a week or more there should be ample time for lively discussion and an attempt at synthesis where possible. While most of the participants should be recognized world-class figures a number of (younger) people should be invited at least as observers - to ask questions and inject an irreverent element. (Such a conference should yield at least a book and an edited video documentary which can be used to broaden the range of its influence, on the project and in general.)

Presumably the participants or a subset could be constituted as an ongoing advisory committee. Perhaps our Mortimer Adler, or Mortimer Adlers will come

9. The Atari Lectures

Related to the conference idea is the possibility of endowing an annual lecture series at a university. For example Columbia could present the Atari Lectures on the Expansion of the Human Intellect (concentrating on but not limited to the role of technology. Presentations could either represent an attempt at synthesis (Marvin Minsky on the First 25 years of AI) or somewhat more exploratory (So & So on "Toward a Concept of Interactive Art"). It seems possible that the process of establishing the lecture series could begin to lay groundwork for the Atari Institute.

An interesting variation on the above (to do in addition, not instead of) would be to offer a prize for the most original paper by an undergraduate/graduate on the same general theme as above.

10. Question Journals

The idea here is to get various people in various institutions and venues to keep a running log of all the questions that occur to them or that are asked of them over a given period. Teachers, students, families, doctors, librarians, museum guides, people on a nature walk, secretaries, businessmen etc. The log would include a list of questions, the circumstances under which the questions arose and whether and how it was answered. My hunch is that there is a wealth of insight to be gained from this - the range of questions, the study of current methods of answer seeking, ~~the~~^{the} depths to which people chase original and subsidiary questions. All this and more will help sharpen our understanding of what is needed.

People could be lent tape recorders to record the information and be given an Atari 400 or equivalent upon completion. I suggest we start out with a couple of people and see if it's practical and/or worthwhile.

11. Business Plans, Evidently a Sine Qua Non

Let's hire a congenial MBA as soon as possible. The person's charter should be to start looking into development of a business plan for the IE. Since such a plan will obviously be a long time in development, as a warmup they can work up a business plan for the microcomputer software and videodiscs so that we can pass them on to the operating divisions when appropriate.

12. A Study of Learning Environments

Let's find a few bright graduate students, with keen eyes and the ability to write who would be interested in taking as their thesis topic the study and comparison of various learning environments, particularly some of the informal variety such as the Exploratorium and the Capital Children's Museum. We want to look at how both kids and adults function in these environments - what works, what doesn't. We especially want to understand the question of motivation, shared learning etc. A lot of important generalizeable lessons just waiting to be synthesized. It would be particularly interesting if we could get graduate students from different disciplines - eg. anthropology and cognitive science.

13. What's In a Name?

The word 'encyclopedia' does not cut it. Too many years of furniture duty and dusty tome connotation have taken their toll. In fact, I would guess there are no available words or combination of words in English which can convey the richness of the IE concept. We need to come up with a word which implies the ultimate fact reference tool (Hitchiker's Guide), learning machine and adventure game. We may have to invent the word and win people to its meaning and use over time. One good thing about searching for a name is that it tends to focus and sharpen your thinking about what you are doing.