

festival

Electronic media is progressively asserting itself as an engine of economic growth, and many cities and states are anxious to tap into these burgeoning markets. Take, for example, the state of Louisiana: although known more for its petrochemical industry, it is now working the game and digital video production markets. Despite 3D 'software-content providers' such as Digimation and TurboSquid (based in New Orleans) and a statewide mandate to develop current forms of art and entertainment, Louisiana may be an unlikely place to look for the digital arts. Although New Orleans has been a destination for numerous conventions and symposia in the digital arts, the most notable being SIGGRAPH 2000, the function of this event was clearly to woo the entertainment industry to a town known for its own dedication to entertainment.

The New Orleans Media Experience is a 7-day festival devoted to the convergence of film, video, advertising, music and video games. Featured events at the Experience were numerous panels, an ongoing gaming preview pavilion, as well as the requisite parties (including a Halloween bash hosted by pinup model and burlesque queen Dita Von Teese). I stood in line for a ticket for that party, but as you can imagine those tickets were rare as hen's teeth...

I won't be too critical with regards to the fact that the offered fare was maturing and also oriented towards the entertainment industry -- as a journalist, I'm heavily skewed towards the digital fine arts and after all, this was the first year for the NOME, which is looking to find its identity with a mix of commercial and experimental formats throughout the city.

One of the more exciting venues showing digital media in cooperation with the festival was the Canal Street Projection Project, which provided over a dozen 10- to 16,000 lumen projectors, as well as the LED signs at the Harrah's casino to feature a local and national selection of video art on the walls of the buildings of Canal Street. It was quite startling to be driving down the street and see flocks of projected birds on buildings nearby, or chattering electronic parrots. To see video art so prominently featured in a city such as New Orleans was one of the most progressive components for the festival.



I also had the opportunity to go to the gaming demonstrations hosted by NVidia and GameRiot, which featured some beautiful demos of hardware renderers alongside the currently hot games and upcoming releases (I loved Need for Speed Underground and hated Lord of the Rings, which just amounted to another fighter). Add in the models, as well as the MC who called the play-by-play for the various matches, and you had a fun event that you would expect to be part of an affair such as E3 and that was worth one's time if the goal was to experience the current 'shape' of console gaming.



One of the most interesting panels at the NOME epitomized the theme of the event: the industry's intent on convergence. On hand were pundits from WIRED Magazine, Sony, Microsoft, TechTV, and others. The issue at hand is that the electronic entertainment industry is in a state of rapid change. This doesn't mean to say that it has not been in the past, but the change is especially pronounced today. From a marketing perspective, going from one box to another (e.g. from a VCR to a DVD to a Playstation) means that you could be moving away from a company's delivery platform; from a logistical perspective, companies today are warehousing several hundred thousand components to produce all the lines of contemporary consumer electronics. Therefore, the current push is to keep you in front of the respective company's box, watching their content, start to finish. This also becomes evident in the corporate cultural analogue: the consolidation of companies through vertical marketing. While this trend isn't particularly surprising per se, it was interesting to hear the blunt ambitions of those in the industry.

The first NOME was a strange, mutant beast, part film fest, part E3, part SxSW -- or so it seemed. The fact that it took place in New Orleans was not particularly surprising. What did pique my attention was that a state not known for its technology is making serious efforts to find ways of becoming a serious player in the world of digital media. Probably by its own admission, New Orleans is in many ways still in its adolescence as a center for digital entertainment, but with events like the New Orleans Media Experience, it is poised to assert itself as one way pint in the Silicon South.