

E-VISIONARY

This week's e-visionary is Tod Machover, director of Toy Symphony project, MIT Media Lab and Media Lab Europe

What's your definition of e-business?

I take the term to mean any significant intellectual or economic transaction that takes place via the internet, rather than in person-to-person or primarily physical form.

Is the heyday of the internet behind us or still to come?

It's still to come, but to be truly successful it will have to embrace three factors: the complete integration and dissemination of broadband content; the development of richer physical interfaces, so that discourse with the computer becomes enticing and exciting, rather than nerdy; and the recreation of online experiences in the actual physical environment of the user, so that person-to-person contact and virtual experiences can 'come alive' in one's home or in public spaces and forums.

What are the obstacles standing in the way of e-business development in Ireland?

Global competition. The particular conditions that have given Ireland a jump-start on many e-business-type developments have now been replicated in many countries, both big and small. This is especially true after this year's aggressive regrouping following the global economic slowdown and tech industry problems.

What do you think will be the next big thing in e-business?

The technical upgrade and commercial infrastructure that will integrate broadband into online applications. This is needed to make sure that AOL-type losses, now scaring the whole industry, are turned into gains in the coming year and that attractive content is actually available online.

What's your favourite piece of technology?

I am in love with my BlackBerry, which I use primarily for constant email communication. It's the right size and the always-there email feature is infinitely superior to any other portable device I have seen. Also, the simple interfaces — including the roller/click mechanism and thumb keyboard — are a real delight to use. It's good enough to access, read and respond to email with one hand while I am driving (although please don't tell anyone I do that!).

What company do you most admire?

I am currently very interested in the BBC,



Tod Machover is the director of Toy Symphony, an international music performance and education project

which is at the apex of the next generation of online content conception, production and distribution. The BBC is first out of the gate with a full stable of purely digital TV channels, with an integrated broadcast/online approach. Its two new education channels are attempting to provide an integrated complement to the entire national school curriculum and the arts/entertainment channel is trying to reinvent a vigorous interaction between broadcast of live performance events and interaction from users. In addition, the BBC has become a pioneer in exploring a new relationship between high cultural content and broad popular acceptance. Its approach is controversial, but it is the only major institution seriously grappling this issue as far as I can see.

How have technology applications made a difference in life, rather than business?

To me, the biggest positive influence that technology can have at present and in the near future is to encourage and enable people to take active control over their lives, rather than to accept a more passive role. In the artistic — and particularly musical — fields (which I know most about), this can bring about a revolution in personal creativity, when we are encouraged to shape, influence and express experiences rather than only accept finished products from out-of-reach 'experts'. But this enhanced interactivity applies to all forms of human activity, from education to medicine, health to politics. We have tried to promote such concepts and technologies in recent activities, such as 'Toy Symphony', recently premiered in Dublin, which uses new technological music toys to enable children to perform and compose as equal participants with top-level professionals. By adapting physical interfaces to accept and augment each individual's skill or lack of it, and by filling in expert information needed for a particular domain, technology can be adapted to encourage each of us to take the responsibility to express our own individuality and to more directly take control of our destinies and fulfilment.