

Anne-Tove and KIDART

by Dan Wheeler
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My friend Anne-Tove Vestfossen died a few days ago with her husband, Odd de Presno, by her side in Arendahl, Norway. This photo was taken just a few days earlier. Anne-Tove and I worked together for several years on art activities for KIDLINK. I am writing this memoir as a tribute to her.



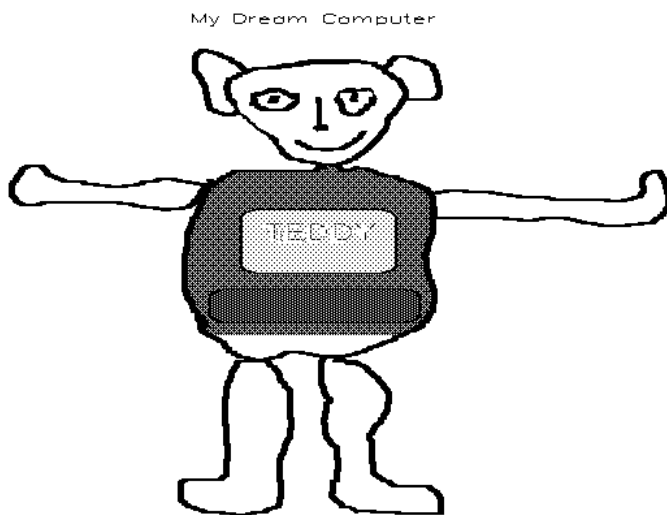
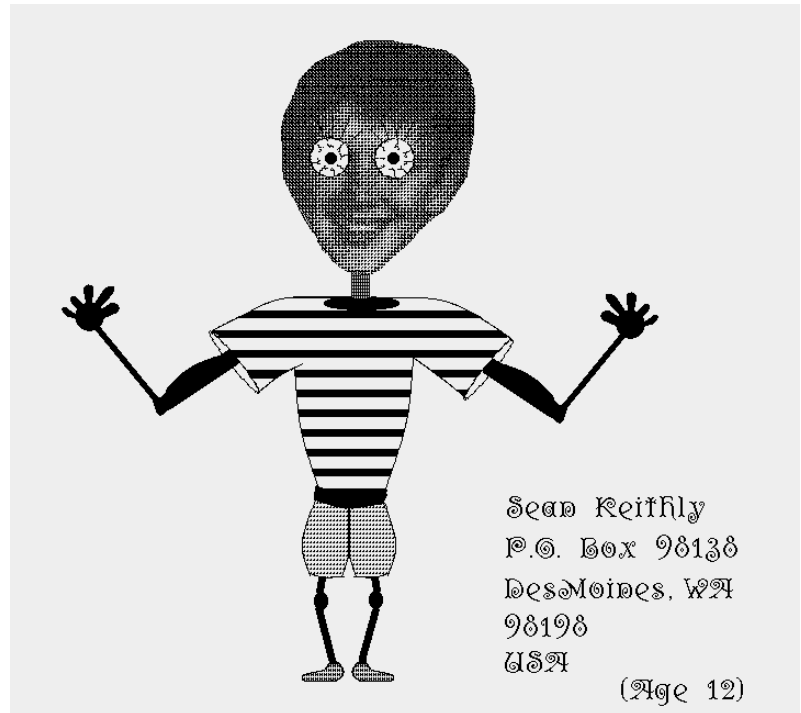
First some background. Odd founded the KIDLINK Project in 1990 with the goal of creating a global dialog among all the kids of the world. I volunteered to help almost immediately. A major part of my role was to run the KIDCAFE email penpal list. This proved very popular; on some days we had over a hundred messages sent by kids to each other through the list. Within five years we had a hundred thousand participants in over a hundred countries.

One of our major problems was the language barrier. Kids can't have a dialog if they can't understand each other's language. Anne-Tove was an artist and the owner of an art gallery in Arendahl. It was her vision that kids could break through the communication barrier with art. She encouraged me to develop an online gallery to display the artworks created by the kids. So I arranged for file space to store the pictures and sent out an invitation to send me artwork to put in the gallery. Then I sat back to wait for the entries to come rolling in.

I waited.

I waited longer.

Finally this picture arrived. Sean, with a little help from his father, sent us his self portrait in July of 1991.



By Jeremy Naylor (8), Tawa, New Zealand

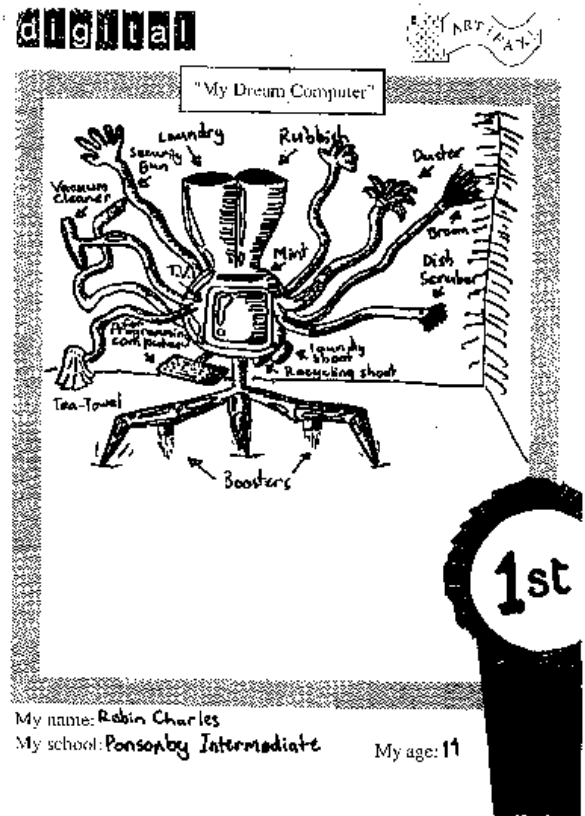
It was soon followed by this one from Jeremy Naylor in Tawa, New Zealand. I was charmed by the idea of a dream computer looking like a teddy bear.

In those early days of computer graphics it was not easy to draw on a computer, nor was it easy to get or send images from or to other people. The World Wide Web did not yet exist. All we had was email and the email programs of that time could not send attachments. Image files had to be laboriously converted to text form before they were sent and converted back by the person who received them. This is what the first few lines of Sean's message looked like when we received it:

```
begin 644 sean.gif
M1TE&.#=AT`**`H`~~~~~`.[N[BP`~~~~`T`**`@`" `^XR/J<OM#Z.<M-J+L]Z\
M^P^&XDB6YHFFZLJV[@O'\DS7]HWG^L[W_@,\"H?$HO&(3"J7S*;S"8U*I]2J
M]8K-:K?<KO<+#HO'Y++YC$ZKU^RV^PV/R^?TNOV.S^OW_[[_#Q@H.$A8:'B(
MF*BXR-CH^`@9*3E)66EYB9FIN<G9Z?D)&BHZ2EIJ>HJ:JKK*VVKZ"ALK.TM;
M:WN+FZN[R]OK^PL<+#Q,7&Q\C)RLO,S<[/P,'2T]35UM?8V=K;W-W>U]#1`N
```

We had to give people long and involved instructions about how to get and use the programs they needed to do these conversions. We had separate instructions for several kinds of computers, including the Apple II, Atari, and IBM PC. Although the pictures were in the gallery, they couldn't be seen until you downloaded the picture file and converted it to the right format for your computer.

It is not surprising that the next group of works in the gallery arrived via an easier route: fax. Kidlink volunteer Richard Naylor (father of Jeremy) in New Zealand organized an exchange of art using fax to send the works. These were then scanned and put in the gallery. We received two groups of images in July, 1991. The first group came from the Young Persons Festival, Wellington, New Zealand. The second group came from the DIGITAL Art-i-Fax Celebration in Auckland, New Zealand. These showed kids' ideas for their dream computers.



The next batch of four entries came from Kirill Lugovsky (age 11), a talented artist in Protvino, Russia. They came with a note saying that the first three were done in honor of the centenary of J.R.R. Tolkien (born 1892 January 3), beloved author of *The Lord of the Rings*. Here are two of them:

Hobbitany
from the Elrond's Castle



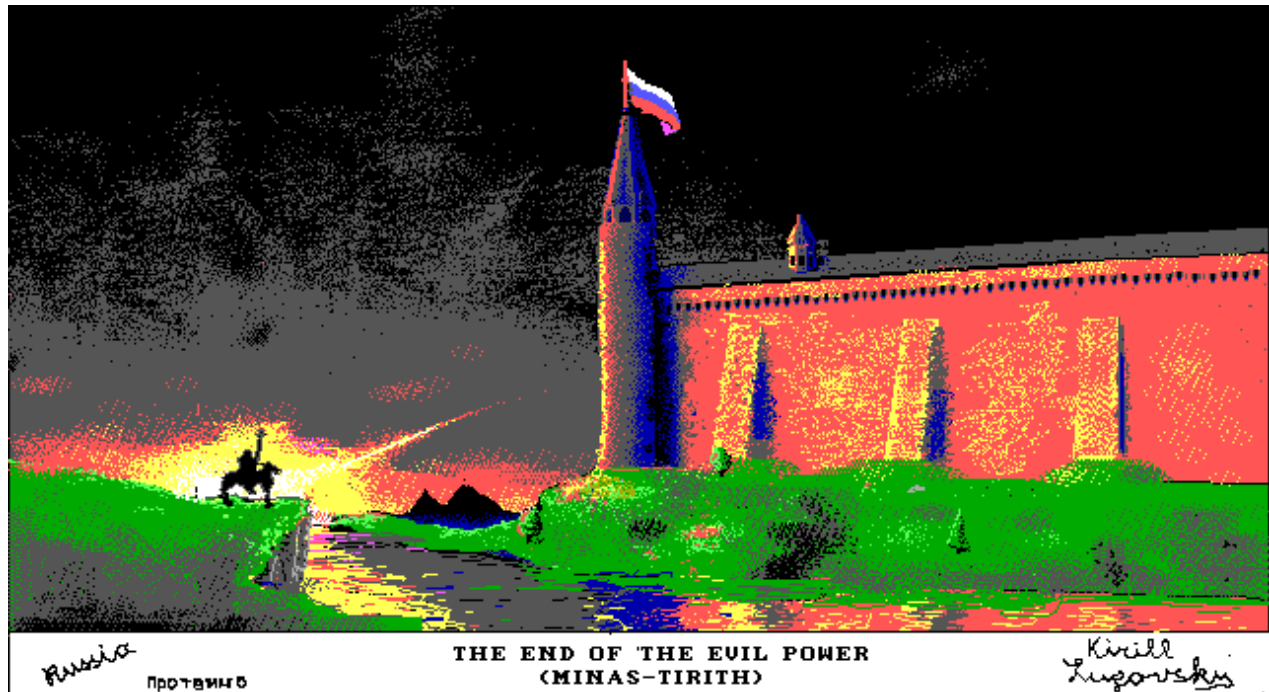
J.R.R. Tolkien

I must admit that my first reaction to these pictures was one of skepticism about whether they were done by an eleven-year-old kid. The one of Tolkien surrounded by significant scenes from *The Lord of the Rings* seemed a lot more sophisticated than I expected from someone that age. But I accepted them and put them in our online gallery.

I later got confirmation that Kirill really was a talented kid. Claus Berg, one of our Danish KIDLINK volunteers, made contact with the group in Protvino and became friends with Kirill. Now we have come full circle. After Anne-Tove died a week ago,

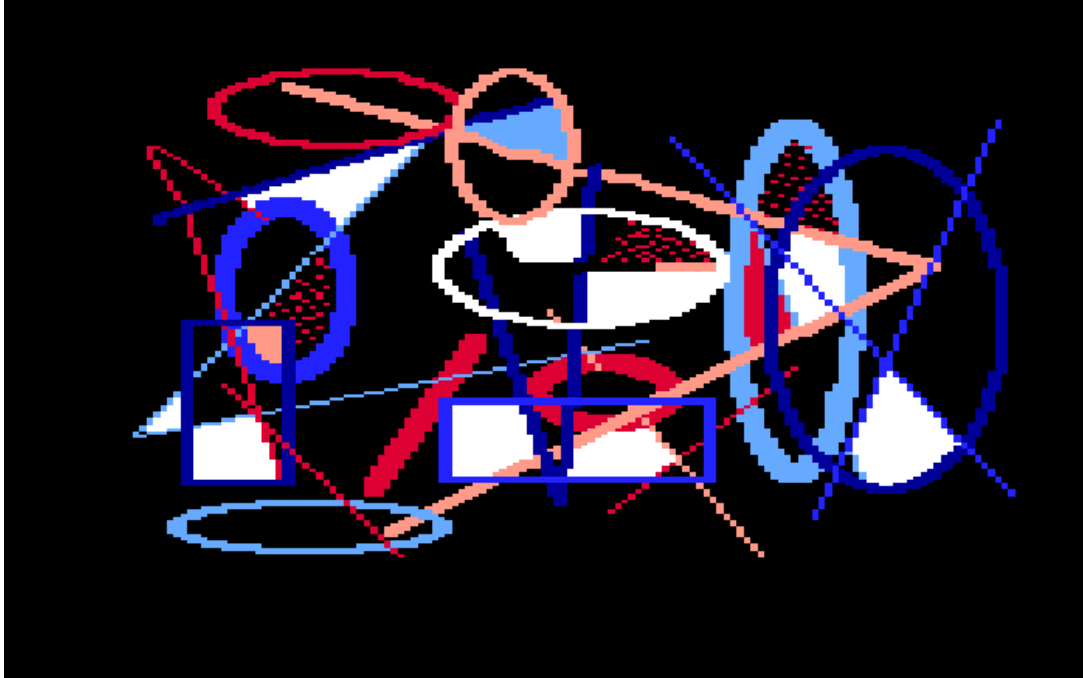
Claus contacted Kirill. Kirill then posted a message on a Facebook memorial notice. I've now become a Facebook friend of Kirill. He is now living in Berkeley, California, and working at a lab.

Here is another of the pictures Kirill sent us a little later:



When we got this picture in late 1991, the Soviet Union still existed but was about to crumble. I assume that Kirill intended this as a political commentary, but if anyone raised any questions, it was "just about middle earth." Kidlinkers loved this picture; we had t-shirts made and I still have mine.

I'll show you just one more picture from the first year of the KIDLINK Gallery of Computer art. In January I got a batch of eight files from an art teacher at the middle school in Pittsford, New York. It took me until August to figure out how to convert the files to a format I could view. They were all abstract images done with a drawing program on their classroom computers. Here is the one done by a student named Rebecca Miller:



I was very pleased by the success of our KIDLINK Gallery of Computer Art. By the end of the 1991-1992 academic year, we had 32 artworks done by kids on display in our gallery. Of course, "on display" did not mean that you could see them like you can now on this page. It meant that they were stored on a mainframe computer at North Dakota State University. In order to see the image, you had to send an email message requesting the files. When you received the text files, you had to convert each one back into an image file. Finally, you had to have a program that would display GIF files, the new format that was making it possible for the first time to share graphics files across different kinds of computers.

Fortunately technology improved rapidly. The World Wide Web exploded on the scene and spread graphics across the formerly all-text internet. Email programs evolved to carry attachments with just a click of the mouse. Within a few years KIDLINK had a web site on which kids could participate in our art activities.

As the technology matured, Anne-Tove came into her own as a mentor to our individual participants and as a promoter of their work. She organized contests with themes that were spelled out in several languages. For instance one of the themes was "My Peace Machine . . ." The contests were judged by an international group of artists. They selected a picture by Diana, a 13 year-old girl from Romania, as the winner:



Diana's work suggests that the peace machine exists in our heads.

Diana was one of the very active kids working with Anne-Tove on a number of art projects. She is one of the few with whom I also interacted individually. When I learned that she was studying mathematic, I sent her a slide show about mathematical modeling that I had prepared for my graduate course in modes of inquiry. I got back a message thanking me and saying that her father had helped her make sense of it.

I have a feeling that Anne-Tove's work with kids on art was one of the most effective parts of the whole KIDLINK Project. It would be interesting to contact some of the kids today to see what they say as adults about their experiences with KIDART.