

LIFE

Computer program lets people talk with others from around the world

By Thomas Boylan

ENTERTAINMENT WRITER

It's late at night, and a computer user is bored, wanting someone to talk to. With his computer, he can — and so can just about anyone else with a modem. The citizen's band radio of the 1990s is here, and it's called Relay. Chris Barnes, Texas A&M's user service coordinator, uses the CB analogy. He says it was Relay that got him interested in computers.

"Originally I was a pre-vet major, and I was sitting in my first programming class, and someone next to me was on Relay," he said. "I said, 'Wow! That's neat!'"

Relay is a program and a system of computers that allows people all over the world to talk to one another, or rather, type to one another. Hackers and computer enthusiasts can spend months or years conversing, becoming good friends, yet never meet face to face. All it takes to get into the system is a computer, a modem (a device that allows computers to "talk" to one another) and paid tuition.

Each A&M student pays a \$10 computer access fee with tuition, and that fee goes to services which can put students in contact with enormous amounts of computer information.

Using Relay, a computer user types a message, and that message goes from a central system out to many users, as in a broadcast. Like CB radio, Relay has many channels, some of which have been (unofficially) commandeered for specific topics.

But what's Relay for? "Most students use it to play with," Barnes said. "The topics are generally pretty light."

Describing the system, he said: "Relay is more or less a program. Originally it was a type of program. When it was legitimized, the Relays had to talk to one another, so everyone has to use the same program."

It wasn't always legal to talk on a Relay, however. Barnes began using it in the fall of 1984, "when it was still not legitimate," he said. In the past, Relay simply was not considered a legitimate use for a computer. It tended to be, and still is, a place to play and to discuss the weather, boy- and girlfriends and computers.

But all the people talking bogged the computer system, Barnes said.

BitNet
The entire Relay system uses what is known as BitNet to communicate. BitNet is an international network of computers allowing all the computers to talk to one another. All the computers have a Relay program and a center that receives and re-broadcasts the messages over BitNet's lines. Those lines connect the users to an international network.

Unlike Relay, BitNet never had a problem with legitimacy.

"BitNet was always legal," Barnes said. "A good analogy would be that BitNet is like the Postal Service. Relay would be a chain letter using the Postal Service — one thing uses the other for access."

Barnes said BitNet came into being around 1981, when the first BitNet link was made. Relays first were made in late 1983 to 1984, he said.

BitNet was started with a computer link between Yale and City University in New York.

The system only recently has included the Southwest, and it still has not reached into some parts of the Northwest.

"BitNet started up in the Northeast, and it's still growing quite a bit," Barnes said. "In the first year there were 500 nodes (computer systems). They grew really fast right off the bat, and they're still growing relatively fast, but it's not like it was the first year."

Relay and its Uses

It did not take long for Relay to gain popularity.

"Right now there are about 2500 computer systems on BitNet, and everyone who has an account on any one of those systems could be on Relay at any given time," Barnes said. "There are around 10,000 accounts at A&M alone."

Not every system has that many accounts, but some around the nation have more.

At A&M, use of Relay is restricted to after 5 p.m., when all of the major University computer users have gone home for the day. Special privileges are necessary to use Relay during the day, but they are not entirely unavailable.

Relay does offer legitimate, academic uses during the day. It isn't a system just for play and relaxation.

Barnes described a scenario: "Say you've got several people who are in physics. You've got a couple of people here at A&M, a couple at Rice, and a couple at Cornell, and they want to discuss a topic together. Instead of deciding to fly somewhere to meet or to have a telephone conference, they have a Relay conference."

Because travel is expensive and time-consuming, Relay provides distinct advantages over having teleconferences.

"In a telephone conversation, you can only have one person speaking at a time, otherwise no one makes any sense," Barnes said. "With Relay you can have five or six messages being typed at the same time, and each message has a name with it. You can follow a thread of conversation and you can refer back to what people said afterward. It leaves you a record."

Each message enters every other person's computer as a line of text with a name at the beginning. Several people can discuss different topics simultaneously, and the discussers simply ignore those lines that are not relevant to them.

But physicists are not the only ones who can use Relay during the day. Using Relay is a way for university faculty to communicate informally.

During the middle of the day, Barnes received a message from a friend who works at Rice University. The message simply noted that his friend was at home and

See Relay/Page 16

'Rain Man' clear Oscar favorite; other winners still anybody's guess

LOS ANGELES (AP) — America's film industry honors its own at the 61st Academy Awards on Wednesday night, and it's likely that "Rain Man" will make a big splash.

Leading the field with eight nominations, the cross-country odyssey of two vastly different brothers appears to be the favorite to capture the best picture Oscar, with Dustin Hoffman the front-runner for best actor and Barry Levinson for best director.

"Rain Man" has the double advantage of being generally (but not unanimously) praised by the critics and embraced by the public (\$122 million gross in 80 days).

The other major categories look as unpredictable as a horse race.

Critics' awards have been scattered over a wide field, providing no hint as to favorites.

The uncertainty of the outcome should add excitement to Wednesday night's telecast, in contrast to last year's no-surprise awards. The event returns to the Shrine Auditorium despite the wave of protest over traffic gridlock and poor sound a year ago. The Los Angeles police and the sound engineers have promised to do better.

The Academy also seems resolved to restore glamour to the Oscar presentations. Producer Allan Carr ("La Cage aux Folles") will stage the awards "like a Broadway show," with Marvin Hamlisch providing the downbeat in the orchestra pit.

After 17 years of directing the awards, Marty Pasetta has been replaced by Jeff Margolis, who has attracted good ratings with the American Music Awards show.

The Oscarcast will have no emcee. Instead, a bevy of "couples, companions, costars and compadres" will present the awards. Among them: Demi Moore and Bruce Willis; Melanie Griffith and Don Johnson; Kim Novak and James Stewart; Sammy Davis Jr. and Gregory Hines; Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell; Farrah

Fawcett and Ryan O'Neal; Bo Derek and Dudley Moore; Kiefer and Donald Sutherland.

The nominees for best picture — "The Accidental Tourist," "Dangerous Liaisons," "Mississippi Burning," "Rain Man," "Working Girl" — offer a wide range of subject matter. But they have one thing in common: All were released last December.

That fact has brought renewed claims that movies released earlier in the year have less chance of winning Hollywood's big prize.

History seems to bear that out. Since 1934, when films became eligible on a calendar-year basis, 18 December releases have won as best picture. The tally: November, 9; October, 5; September, 4; August, 3; July, 3.

Only 11 movies released in the first six months of the year have been picked as the best.

Interestingly, the only January release to take the top prize was the classic "Casablanca," first seen in Los Angeles on Jan. 2, 1943. (For Oscar eligibility, a film must play at least one week in an L.A. theater.)

Academy president Richard Kahn offers an explanation: "The major serious films are traditionally released in the last three months of the year," he said. "Summer is now reserved for lighthearted, escapist entertainment. That's the way movies are dealt out to the public."

"That doesn't mean that movies released earlier in the year don't have a chance as best picture."

"The Godfather" came out in March. "Annie Hall" was an April release. But 11 of the last 17 best-picture winners were released in November or December.

Publicist Booker McClay said,

"There's no question that a year-end release enhances the possibility of Oscars."

McClay has conducted campaigns for "E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial," "Out of Africa" and this year's "Gillies in the Mist" for Universal Pictures.

"At the end of the year, Academy voters may have 30 pictures to see," McClay said. "They are much more likely to be attracted to the new movies than to return to those they have seen early in the year."

"It's hard to generate interest in movies that were released eight or nine months earlier. You have to book a theater on the west side, the film is available to Academy members."

"Meanwhile the new releases are attracting all the excitement."

Make your bets now on the Batt's Oscar picks

By Shane Hall

REVIEWER

Unless you've been on an extended visit to Outer Mongolia, you no doubt know that it's Academy Awards time. The awards, recognizing what the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences considers the greatest film achievements of 1988, will be broadcast Wednesday at 8 p.m. on ABC.

The adage "everyone's a critic" is probably more true around this time of year than any other. Not everybody agrees with the nominees or winners. Hence, there are several other groups making their own picks for the best in

movies.

The National Board of Review and the Los Angeles Critics' Circle are only two examples. What follows are the picks and preferences of yet another group, the Battalion Board of Critics.

We will concentrate on six major awards: best picture, best actor, best actress, best supporting actor and actress and best director.

Best Picture.

"Rain Man," the story of two brothers, one of them an autistic savant, is the picture to beat at this year's awards. It is distinguished by many emotional moments and a superb performance by Dustin Hoffman. Look for "Rain Man" to win this award and several others.

My preference, however, is for Alan Parker's controversial "Mississippi Burning," an intense drama set in the civil rights movement of the mid-1960s.

Best Actor.

Expect Dustin Hoffman to win this one. His role as Raymond Babbit, a middle-aged autistic savant, shows tremendous depth. Hoffman is thoroughly deserving of the Oscar, which, if he wins, will be his second.

As much as I liked Hoffman in "Rain Man," I'm a bit more partial to Gene Hackman, who in "Mississippi Burning" (Are you beginning to detect a pattern here?) gave his best performance in years.

See Oscars/Page 15

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