

Marrying high art with high tech

by LISA BENAVIDES
JOURNAL STAFF

World Wide Web page designers may seem a dime a dozen to businesses looking for help in establishing an Internet presence, but one Cambridge-based outfit is distancing itself from the pack by offering artistic and marketing flourishes that would make even a ballet star proud.

Describing itself as a "soup to nuts" Internet provider, Millennium Productions Inc. goes beyond creating a neat-looking web site by marketing it to ensure people see it and by helping companies better link their electronic resources.

The net result is a "one-stop shopping" Internet provider that got its start by serving such nonprofit entities as the Boston Ballet Co. and the American Repertory Theatre.

"We come in as strategic business consultants, helping businesses manage their interactivity," said V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai, a doctoral student at MIT and president and CEO of the 5-year-old company.

"Our pitch has been, 'What are you going to do once you're up on the web? How are you going to drive someone there?'"

The company has been quickly making headway in a field glutted with Internet start-ups.

Last year, it pulled in revenue of about \$250,000, despite designing a lot of pages for nonprofits free of charge in order to get the exposure.

But this year, Ayyadurai projects revenue to surge to \$2.5 million from its Internet services, two how-to books and sales of interactive software.

The company has been so successful that Cambridge-based Information Cybernetics Inc., an advanced-technology provider, purchased a majority interest in the firm in January for an unspecified amount. Millennium will help Information Cybernetics market its various Internet technologies.

"The main things that stand out are Millennium's client base and their ability to deploy Information Cybernetics' technologies," said John Petrocelli, Information Cybernetics' strategic-business consultant.

"Millennium is perceived as the preeminent interactive company in the Northeast."

That may be because Millennium views itself as much as an advertising and marketing consultant as technology services provider.

"Business people do a web site but don't see how it relates to their overall advertising," Ayyadurai, 31, said from Millennium's Harvard Square headquarters. "When we go to a client, what they're buying is our creative resources."

Those resources include 15 full-time staff members, among them a former animator for Disney, a musician, a writer and other artists.

For promotional purposes, Millennium Productions is now poised to launch Harvard-Square.Com, a web page that lets anyone take a "virtual visit" of all the stores, restaurants, street performers and characters that give the square its unique identity.

Planned to be launched Aug. 13, the site will feature shots from a video camera mounted outside Millennium's

second-floor offices and pointed down into "the pit" just in front of the Harvard T stop. There also will be interviews with long-time denizens of the square, a kids' guide to the square and schedules of performances at area clubs and movie theaters.

"Our take is coming at it from a conceptual space viewpoint," said Zoe Helene, Millennium's art director. "Shiva's a visionary, which you have to have, otherwise you're just another web site lost out there."

Ayyadurai started Millennium in 1993 with \$55,000 of his personal savings and the idea of using the Internet to fuse art and technology.



The outlook for V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai's Millennium Productions is promising as the firm expands its Internet arts offerings.

With a staff of four working in a 1,000-square-foot office in Kendall Square, the company created Arts-Online.Com, a virtual arts community. Users calling up the web page find a comprehensive listing of goods and services related to music, visual arts, writing, film and dance.

Now the company has expanded its operations over three sites: 6,000 square feet in Harvard Square, the Kendall Square office and a 2,000-square-foot office in Washington, D.C.

Not bad for someone who, as a bored teenager in New Jersey back in 1979, wasn't sure what to think when a professor at Rutgers Medical School mentioned the concept of electronic mailboxes to him.

"I thought electronic mail was sending electricity somehow," he said.

His ignorance quickly faded, though, and Ayyadurai spent the next three years developing the software and security to link Rutgers Medical School with two other schools. Working after school with the professor, a family friend, the project won him the prestigious Westinghouse Science Award in his senior year of high school.

Although submerged in the electrical engineering and computers field, Ayyadurai, the son of an engineer, always retained an interest in the arts. Later, his joint degree was in theoretical mechanics and visual studies at MIT, where he used computer animation to illustrate scientific and business data.

"I used to do a lot of painting, but grew up in an engineering family," he said. "So the MIT Media Lab was the first place I felt comfortable doing the visual design."

After spending a number of years working for computer software companies, Ayyadurai decided to create Millennium. Its first commercial web site, the Arts-Online community, was sponsored by beverage-maker Zima for \$43,000.

From there, Millennium took on, free of charge, several arts groups as clients, helping them understand the Internet and creating their web sites.

Boston Ballet was one of its first major clients in June 1995. Millennium's melding of arts expertise and computer savvy made it an attractive choice for the ballet company to work with, said Mary Corty, spokeswoman for the Boston Ballet.

"The driving force was the strong technical capability that they offered," she said. "The fact that they were artists was a major factor, of course."

From there, Millennium designed pages for free for the Alvin Ailey dance troupe, American Repertory Theatre and the nonprofit Very Special Arts in Washington, D.C. It was while working for Very Special Arts, which offers disabled people educational opportunities through the arts, that Millennium became a full-service interactive provider.

"It just kind of grew; they asked us to set up their computers and hardware and we said, 'Sure,'" Ayyadurai said.

Very Special Arts was thrilled with the stand-out web site Millennium created for them. Located at www.vsaarts.org, the site features masks designed by disabled artists.

"We were coming with an idea and they were right there with the technology to support us," said Rob Merrill, spokesman for Very Special Arts. "They also created an intranet link for us between all 50 state offices, so we can send e-mail and share information within the organization."

Millennium has used its artistic experience to branch out to design pages for commercial clients, such as the Boston-based brokerage firm Brown & Co., Samuel Adams Longshot Beer and the Boston-based Frontier Group. It didn't take long for Millennium to attract industry attention, particularly from 2-year-old Information Cybernetics, a maker of Internet software.

Ayyadurai, on the brink of finishing his doctorate, has put his academic goals on hold as Millennium's expansion takes up more and more of his time.

This month, Allworth Press in New York will publish his book "Arts and the Internet." A second book, "The Internet Guide to Publicity," is scheduled for publication next year.

Ayyadurai has also been nominated for the 1996 Lemelson-MIT Student Prize for inventing a computer kiosk that enables youngsters to discover what they have in common with famous inventors. The interactive program is on display at Disney's Epcot Center's Innovations in Orlando, Fla.

"The opportunities on the web are going very quickly and I just want to ride them," Ayyadurai said. "The dissertation will always be there." □