

Digital culture – the symptom or the cure?

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The roots of digital creativity

Despite the claims of the digerati, the idea of "digital culture" is quite young, and continues to be contested. There remains a deep-rooted aversion and rift between the reality of computers and what used to be called "cultural life". Partly this is a question of cultural heritage, of different domains and distance. Computers and information technology have traditionally been tools for administration and scientific calculation. Yet, there have been efforts to bring technology into close contact with the pursuit and tradition of humanism and the creative spirit. The utopian impulse to increase and qualitatively improve human life and society with information technology dates mainly to the 1960s. This short paper is a quick look into the landscape of digital culture, mainly from a cultural studies perspective.

As anyone familiar with the history of hypermedia knows, an article by Vannevar Bush, published in *The Atlantic Monthly* already in July 1945, is heralded as the first exposition of the field's key ideas. "Memex", as Bush called it, was conceived as an "intimate supplement" to an individual's memory; the key idea was the process of tying together two items from the increasingly overwhelming store of information. This concept of "associative indexing" was later explored and expanded by Ted Nelson. Nelson celebrated the liberating powers of the new, digital form of media he named "hypertext" in 1965 (hypermedia and other hyper-derivatives all exploit the same basic principle of associative indexing).

The creation stories of the Internet vacillate between the military and counter-cultural versions. According to the military version, the decisive factor was the need to create a distributed communication network that would not have a single nervous center that a Soviet missile attack would be able to wipe out. The alternative version focuses on the deep-seated mistrust of authority and on the emphasis laid on the decentralization of power prevalent in the early hacker community.

J.C.R. Licklider and Robert Taylor presented in their 1968 article the basic idea of Internet (first known as ARPAnet) as centering on the "mutually reinforcing" and creative aspect of communication. They reinterpreted the computational device as a social medium. The aim was not only to augment the mental capacities of a single individual – rather, the goal was set on transforming how society is maintained and culture created.

One landmark of digital media that is not so widely recognized was passed already in 1962, when Steve "Slug" Russel with his MIT friends devised the first graphical video game, SpaceWar. The supremacy of cognition and conceptual information was challenged by pleasures linked with movement and real-time manipulation of visual representations.

Visions of the future

There are valid reasons for maintaining positions that are at a critical distance from technology. Every culture is based on an implicit or explicit set of values, discourses and practices that join together to form contours in its map of significance. One of the main purposes for such a cognitive map is to provide a subject position, and answers to what it means to be human.

One could simplify here for the purposes of this paper and say that modernity was produced by splitting self-consciousness and individuality off from the trans-subjective field that Church and (the Catholic) faith represented in Renaissance Europe. Humanism, and human values, was affiliated with the freedom to think and create. The scientific-technological project of Enlightenment has created a different social reality, where humanity is no longer defined by its difference and separation from the supernatural, or religious domain. Rather, the limits of subjectivity are defined in relation to socio-technological systems, and it is there where the politics of the everyday are acted out. An artist, scientist, or educator finds out daily that one has to choose sides: whether to persevere in the old ways, or to give in and co-operate with the increasingly pervasive digital machinery.

There are multiple processes of cultural and political dialectic involved with the endorsement of new tools for expression. The borderline with technology is both tempting and threatening. The seduction is clear. Since the industrial revolution our Western culture has been measuring its success with its technological advancement. Technology symbolizes power and success;

increasingly hi-tech automatically introduces itself into dominant contemporary discourses as a step in qualitative improvement. It is often harder to perceive the opposing forces: the frustrations and inevitable loss of control involved in dealing with complex systems.

An important factor in the production of the 'technological imperative' is the general future orientation of the last two centuries. Science fiction is the prime locus of this dimension: our images of the future are dominated by visions of technological novelty. In this context, advances in art and culture are easily linked with the adoption of new technologies.

Three digital decades

When information and communication technologies, ICT, began noticeably to influence (work) life in the 1970s, the predictions of its impact diverged wildly. On one extreme were the dystopias of robots replacing workers, and automation breaking down the structures of society. The opposite view held up utopias of life in computerized homes and prosperity produced by immaterial information exchanges.

The 1980s saw the real beginnings of what might deserve the name of "digital culture". The decisive step in this process was the arrival and adoption of personal computers. In contrast to the preceding era of mainframe computers, PCs created possibilities for individual encounters and empowerment in relation to ICT. The culturation of technologies is always a process where inventions, experiments and use by a narrow privileged group may develop into practices relevant to the more general audience. This decade was also important in the sense of spawning the first generation to spend its childhood in environments where the personal computer was an element or possibility.

In the 1990s the possibilities of networks were suddenly realized and expectations of revolutionary change became hyperinflated. Licklider's vision of networked computers as a new medium of social communication was starting to be realized, and resulted in the typical adoption pattern of fluctuation between expectation and frustration.

Digital culture – is there such a thing?

For a critic, it is always hazardous to build interpretations of the contemporary, especially when commercial interests are involved. There are no neutral descriptions or outsider views available for digital cultural production. The expert opinions often read as advertisements of the possibilities of the new services and technologies. Critical evaluation, on the other hand, is too often produced from distance that seems to lack concrete contact and knowledge of the current situation in the (rapidly changing) digital scene.

Culture is not being created in an environment that lacks commitment and a value-base other than for commercial reasons. The overblown interest in culture during the last decade has been driven by a short-term desire for profit. The current slow-up in the e-business sector might actually be good in clarifying the real attachments in this area. Have we established a genuine and sustainable effort in exploring and expressing our relationship to the world, others, and ourselves, using the means offered by the interactive digital media? The borderlines of the phenomena under observation are not entirely clear either. As electronics are almost omnipresent in our tools and surroundings, the concept of "digital culture" is in danger of losing all specificity, if it is not reserved for cases where the sensibilities and practices involved are intimately rooted to the particular combination of programming, malleability and interactivity that is most characteristic of this area.

Presently, digital cultures exist in small pockets of active technology user communities. This means various groups of mostly young people who have integrated technology into their ways of communicating, working, creating and having fun. I will just quickly mention a few examples.

Examples: the emerging communities of interaction

Perhaps the most important element in the "net sensibility" that the intensive use of networks and digital tools has fostered is the erosion of such traditional boundaries and division lines as high/low, public/private and producer/audience. Changes in the roles of authorship and power of selection are inherently linked to the decentralizing tendencies inscribed in the interactive media. The development of media fandom is the prime example of this.

Fantasy and science fiction are areas of popular culture that are dedicated to a story-telling tradition dealing with mythical elements, the marvelous and the otherworldly, which reaches back to

antiquity. True to its folk-cultural origins, the SF community – called fandom – is used to a close interaction between artist and audience. The visual character of fantasy also makes it a natural candidate to exploit the possibilities opened by the techniques of digital image synthesis and simulations.

The development of professor Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* universe presents us with a paradigm of a communally shared and collaboratively explored system of significance. Since the publication of the fantasy novels in the 1950s, Tolkien's Middle-Earth has been expanded and extrapolated on, in written, visual and cinematic, as well as interactive media. Commercial products are only the tip of the iceberg: role-playing games, conventions, fanzines and various online forums make up the majority of the activity.

Recent fantasy TV shows have linked well with an audience that is already prepared to perceive itself as an active participant in the production of significance. Active domains include the "Xenaverse" (which means both the pseudo-mythical reality and the network of online communities devoted to the Xena Warrior Princess television show), and "Whedonverse" (named after Joss Whedon, the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the *Angel* series). In the subcultural spirit of a "cult" phenomena, the members of these media communities make use of chat environments, mailing lists, World Wide Web sites and portals, as well as video and television technologies, to share, debate and modify the original narratives.

The numerous game subcultures are a prominent part of contemporary digital culture. The 1980s' computer underground also generated its own art field; that of the "demo scene", where being a connoisseur in the art of programming is as important as being able to understand the aesthetic language in relation to the capacities of the particular piece of hardware used. So called "mods", or modifications to existing games, are also an area where the interactivity of the digital culture steps beyond and erases the producer/audience boundaries. Many popular games are today shipped with editors that allow gamers to create their own characters, game fields and even whole new games with self-designed challenges, sounds and environments. The social dimension of cultural activity is played out in WWW sites that serve these particular mod communities.

If one understands culture in anthropological terms, locating it into a community with a particular location is important. There are numerous theories and interpretations of computer-mediated communication (CMC) that emphasize its weaknesses when compared with traditional, face-to-face

communication and traditional social networks. Game cultures, however, are also fruitful examples when one examines the unique strengths and possibilities offered by mediated communication. Ultima Online, EverQuest and Asheron's Call are all simulated worlds that are simultaneously shared by thousands of role-players. Distance and liberation from all the rules and contexts of everyday reality are the main attractions of these digital domains. Rather than appearing as weak and ineffective, these worlds are more often linked with powerful immersion and even addiction.

At its most typical, everyday level, digital culture today is a particular combination of interests, sensibilities and lifestyles that are being shaped in close contact with the possibilities of interactive media. This means hybrid, half-local, half-virtual communities of people sharing e.g. an IRC channel, work in the media or IT sector, a café and a couple of dance clubs. Art and culture has never existed in isolation, and the thriving of a digital culture is connected with the continuing existence of a social context where it is felt relevant to explore the human condition in terms of digital aesthetics.

A symptom or a cure?

It is customary that scholars dealing with culture and technology will give prognoses of the future. This privilege or obligation is probably based on the expectation that technology will be the single most important factor influencing the ways our culture and society is going to develop. This view can very well be questioned. Even within significant technological breakthroughs, periods of technological enthusiasm and critical backlashes alternate in the process of appropriation.

One can be most confident in claiming that future life and society will be quite like today: a hybrid mixture of different realities, different value systems and different life styles. Even if one adopts the model of cultural "eras", one is forced to see that whether the culture has been dominated by writing, radio or television, these media have played different roles and served different purposes for different people – historical phases and cultural realities are not monolithic and unified.

In an optimistic mode, we can witness the empowering development of digital layers into our culture. The non-governed and decentralized character of digital media seems to encourage cultural exchange. Old cultural centers and new ways of interacting become merged into a dynamic and multicultural complex of renegotiated "glocal" culture.

In a more critical and cautious tone, however, one must simultaneously point toward the many problems linked with techno-cultural developments. It is widely recognized in sociological literature that social and cultural fragmentation is the ailment of modernity. Anomie – a lack of location and inner emptiness – is a close companion to urban growth, the rise of mass communications, and the ongoing process of globalization. A heavy investment in terms of time, energy and symbolic significance into hi-tech tools and media can be interpreted both in terms of a symptom or an attempt at a cure. Technology is perceived as an element of subjectivity in the context of digital culture; therefore it cannot be separated from the analyses and attempts at solving possible dysfunctions within this subjectivity.

It can be pointed out that digitally mediated connections are socially ambivalent: easy to open, easy to lose. Immersion into technology also has the status of prosthesis. Close connection to a technology is liberating and confining, linking and separating – it explores the division lines of subjectivity as both self and alien. In the deconstructive logic of an attachment, the simulation increasingly displaces the real thing. This can be seen in literature, cinema and media criticism alike; themes of unreality are getting increasingly more attention. On the other hand, the focus is shifting from an unconnected and abstract "cyberspace" into more integrated and multi-faceted ways of employing and perceiving digital media.

It is important to cultivate a comprehensive contextual approach to any cultural phenomena. Only when the significant attachments are revealed can one make reliable interpretations. These attachments can be into the social reality and everyday life of a community, as well as into the context or genre, or the institutional context of production. Paying attention to the social attachments and cultural dimension is also the main counterforce against the abstract, and too often ironic, approach when cultural phenomena are approached in isolation.

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