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Influences of Users and Art in the Age of Digital Proliferation

In the Age of Digital Proliferation, I am fascinated with the success human users of digital domains create for the invention of the Internet, today. As N. Katherine Hayles puts it, people drive the success of the invention, which I mainly consider here to be the digital world of the Internet, and thus motivate the proliferation of the self-made Digital Age. In the twenty-first century, this proliferation has become increasingly concerned with making works that exist online as original and meaningful as possible through creative tactics of art and design. The aesthetically-concerned times have led to social phenomena in which design *creates* meaning in online mediums, and the mission for meaning-making seems to be challenged by everyone through every imaginative outlet possible. Today, everyone can be an author and publisher of scholarly works online, unlike in the Age of Print, which Walter Benjamin might have predicted. Today, there are “creatives” and “innovatives” and those who pursue ideas through ever-advancing technologies that marry, if not depend on, artistic design with technology to muster the desired digital and non-digital effects from Internet experiences. Never before have these adjectives been used as nouns—never before has a century seen art and design primarily forged behind screens, let alone by this vast number of people/users.

Here, I find an introductory discussion of design creating more substantial web experience to be useful in understanding the individual roles of users/everyday people with the Internet. I intend to relate past ideals of mass reproductions with our current situations of plurality through what I know from research related to technical reproduction in Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) and the values of the current digital climate through N. Katherine Hayles’s *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (2012). I will also use two examples of works that reside on the Internet today as classics of the ever-progressive concerns with projects for the digital world, to demonstrate the mission of the “creative” in these times. I intend on a discussion based in personal concern and relevance for all, and direct the discussion through a chronological,

conceptual, and quickly progressing mood like the apparent attitude of the users of the digital world I focus on, today.

Technical reproduction as lead for Internet

Stepping back to 1936 and the publication of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin brings attention to the shifting authenticity of artworks regarding the advent of technical reproduction. Using the principle example of an original artwork in the article, Benjamin explains that the existence of an original piece is the perceived prerequisite to *authenticity*, and with perception of authenticity any reproduction of that original feels less authentic (Benjamin 219). The reproductions of the exemplified original artwork, during this time, moved from manual reproduction to technical reproduction—a reproduction by machine rather than by hand. Intriguingly put, Benjamin claims,

“Since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech... Paul Valery pointed up in this sentence: ‘Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our need in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images’...” (219).

For us, technical reproduction is the original force that led to the creative liberties available today, including our technical advancements with the Internet. The internet today maintains the capacity to reproduce images that were once original artworks, endlessly. This phenomenon, relating to then and now, is like “meeting the beholder halfway,” as Benjamin says the reproduction is like a means to reach viewers who did not necessarily have the possibility to interact with the original artwork or object. This reaching out with technically reproduced images to meet the beholder halfway from the original, “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition,”—from the original—and instigates a *plurality* that reaches the beholder more than halfway; thus, new existence for the reproduced image (219).

The technical reproduction of images is the sort of initial trickle-down effect that led to freedoms of technical reproductions through machines, and their accompanied consequences in various genres and mediums. This phenomenon of less authenticity from the original but not less

authentic as reproductions—reproductions as new things that reactivate the object reproduced—relates to the changes in senses of perception in society as a mass movement. “The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by *historical circumstances* as well,” perfectly states Benjamin, mentioning the strong example of the Renaissance and the revolutionary shift of utilizing *perspectival space* in the art world in the fifth century (222). Wisely noted, Benjamin includes that this type of analogy—which I continue—can only be seen with future insight, and so I indulge in this background information of sorts with information from the future-present, (*How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*), to further us into the discussion of pluralism and its serious emphasis on people’s expectations for creativity as affecting our Internet, and the Age of Digital Proliferation.

Social phenomena define use

Segueing chronologically and conceptually from print to digital publications, we relate to recent discussions by N. Katherine Hayles’s (2012) regarding users’ evolutionary technological interests, in socially consented success for an invention like the Internet. As Hayles explains in her first chapter with the term “technogenesis,” we have a name for the idea that humans and technological objects have evolved together (Hayles 10). Like Benjamin mentioned, society did not know the sort of implications technological reproduction would have on artistic skills and communities, like in the Renaissance. It is undeniable, now, that technological evolution has impacted our artistic tools, and advanced specific tools that have made making and reproducing more accessible (like the Perspective Tool in the Adobe Illustrator program that was created in the twenty-first century to immediately apply depth in digital compositions). Hayles supports similarly when speaking of utilizing technologies for various goods and evils, being, “Every major development has been successful not (or not only) because of intrinsic technological capability but because users found ways to employ them to pursue their own interests and goals” (18). This is the very important point that what is user-driven is user-defined (the Internet), and this for me explains the mission of the artist/designer in the twenty-first century, and thus their phenomenal nature.

Shown true with the conception of the “creative,” scholarship for digital-based domains has become more substantial through the enhanced use of a verb, previously to describe oneself,

now as the noun identifying oneself. Hayles states, “Graphics, animation, design, video, and sound acquire argumentative force and become part of the researcher’s quest for meaning” being utmost impetus in this age of individualization and personalization (4). This phenomenon is akin to a lifestyle for these creatives, and manifests in the attitude and expectation of artistic elements married to every personal publication—digital and non-digital. Much success for a website today transpires through the efforts of the page’s designed layout and interactivity and intention, which have become decisions determined by designers and people that hold jobs for this purpose, i.e. website design companies, blog companies, search engines, personal artist and designer websites, etc. These efforts manifest daily in ways I am usually out of sync with (as I am not one who uses the Internet more than two hours a day), but still I can perceive the continuous elaborations of digital domains. These elaborations are usually created by a small team of creators or one individual, and thus the results of pluralism made possible by the Internet technology (like digital pop-up books, electronic writing, digital poetry, 3D printing software, applications for social media and others, interactive websites, interactive websites for specific designers [see David Stark Design], etc.). Like most that create for the Internet, each project seems to be concerned with pushing boundaries, as it has become so much of the social climate to reiterate, retranslate, and rethink the powers of the Internet invention, and its influences.

Pluralism through projects

In the Electronic Literature Collection, poet and multimedia artist Dan Waber has a work entitled “Strings” archived (<http://vispo.com/guests/DanWaber/1999>). The Electronic Literature Collection provides an organized domain where the considered “classics” of electronic literature reside. These works of electronic literature include animations, graphics, complicatedly encoded Flash projects, text, sound, videos, and more, in the ultimate sort of artwork for the Internet. Like the competitive “creatives” and “innovatives” of this Age of Proliferation, Dan Waber, like other makers, strives to communicate and form meaning in an impressive way from existing digital and non-digital elements. “Strings” in particular uses eight “poems” (with corresponding links) to demonstrate the extremely tedious process of controlling pixels to imitate lines that form text letters that depict moving letters. The process of the piece takes much longer than the viewing time of the digital poetry and ultimately demonstrates the author’s drive to simply endow text with anthropomorphic qualities to indicate tone. That being the essence of the piece, Hayles

would say here that the evolution of technogenesis pushes constantly, and that digital media like in the case of “Strings” has created opportunities for further pluralistic humanistic inquiry through technological resources. Like our attention spans, spurred and stretched in more directions than before with the capabilities of the Internet, users revel in—if not expect to experience—such inventions and exercises of digital resources. In 2014, almost everyone in the first-world has a web presence, and everyone is exercising their pluralism—their entitlement to reiterate—through public posts, blogs, profile pages, works for the Electronic Literature Collection, and more.

Also, in the Electronic Literature Collection, the motivated work called “slippingglimpse” by Stephanie Strickland, Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo, and Paul Ryan, exists as another classic of digital poetry as spawn of digital media and creative, liberal Internet exercise (slippingglimpse.org, 2007). Created by a digital programmer, poet, and videographer, the piece is a three-way translation of their respective languages: code, text, and moving image. As Hayles summarizes a general proposition by Bernard Stiegler, “all technics imply, instantiate, and evolve through complex temporalities” like this piece of technics, which relies on multiple temporalities and time-based natures of viewing, reflected in its construction. The work is programmed to read its three layers simultaneously, reacting to the layer of video, code, and floating poetry. The reading of itself exists in the time of its own computation, and from the viewer’s use. The work requires mild interaction from the viewer, usually one person at their laptop on the Internet (although, originally it was shown at an electronic literature festival) and involves the oscillating of the thinking of the programmed piece and the viewer/user. This type of inclusion is commonly asked of users of electronic literature and digital poetry—like an Hayles would explain as the “epistemic action” of apparent and dramatic change in the environments of society’s attention.

Ever fascinating, works like “slippingglimpse” and “Strings” hold a classic status but are joined by other new works every day, in the digital world. The lifestyle behind the screen of the computer penetrates the real world with the new missions and concerns of “creatives” and “innovatives” and ripples its influential wave across a broader and broader age group. The socially invented success of this digital domain, the Internet, furthers its pluralistic and flexible

nature. The range of originals and reproductions on the Internet expands infinitely as the desire and decisions of users grows grander.

Internet as product of users

In an introduction of the Internet as product of technological reproduction, social climate, and individual desires, users of the Internet prove crucially influential in the way the Internet has been growing. How can any domain on the Internet exist without its digital (and somewhat physical) makeup? The design of every pixel, from coding to appearance, continues the visions and efforts of individuals with access to the Internet to further personalize and modernize their experience through technogenesis. Side by side, we influence the Internet in its shape and content, as it influences us with its shape and content (outreach and impact). Today, everyone further defines the Internet, consciously and subconsciously, simply by being part of a community that utilizes it. As Hayles said, it is the issues of design that seriously substantiate digital-based scholarship, as “graphics, animations, design...acquire argumentative force and become part of the research’s quest for meaning” (Hayles 4).

We now can understand the phenomenon of the “creative,” as a result of socially-encouraged attitude of inquiry into pushing pluralistic iteration in the digital realm. Being aesthetically concerned through reproductions, reiterations, and exercises of pluralism, we see that the manner in which interactions with the Internet are executed show the weight of the digital makeups of digital projects: the design. The creative is now a type of person in the twenty-first century, prescribed with a lifestyle and mission, as committed definer and designer of the Internet. We strive to make our meaning online, and to Walter Benjamin’s point, we have almost forgotten the age in which we made meaning in print. Reproduction and reiteration have brought us to an almost desperate conception of pluralism, only existing through our ideas and abilities to express them. In the end, it is us that define our own experiences of the Internet in a full-circle manner as we know not initially the consequences of our designs, but we push further as “creatives,” anyways.