

Now and Then: The Possibilities For Contextual Content In Digital Art

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Introduction

This paper arose out of the author's experience of making and experiencing interactive digital art, specifically, a growing realisation that in much contemporary digital art there is no context other than that provided by the technical means of its presentation – the type of device or computer that it requires to be presented. Other than this, the work is essentially the same in any part of the world, at any time, and for any viewer. As Tony Sampson puts it,

“We look at an artwork, we move around it, we study it from different angles and distances. But within the virtual world, this is all utterly removed. And perhaps there is a dangerous process at work here, in which the virtual eats up the real.” (Sampson 2014)

Those bundled (variable) sets of associations which inform the 'reading' of physical artefacts such as; links to other texts, cues locating the work in a specific time, place or social situation, and distinguishing features upon which perceptions of uniqueness can be founded are often entirely absent from works whose domain is the digital. As an artist interested in social process, this placing of artefacts and experiences outside of some of the usual means for developing cultural meaning and reference is troubling and unsatisfactory.

Of course, this is not to say that interactive digital art is necessarily flawed, or that there are no digital artists creating works that are situated in a highly specified context; I would argue that neither assertion is the case. Rather, this paper will argue that the nature of the digital artefact, with its innate capacity for exact duplication, necessarily weakens some of the usual mechanisms whereby artefacts acquire relevance and authority although, I will also suggest that technology, particularly ubiquitous networked technology, does provide at least some means for artists to create works which engage with context.

Context and current practice

The recent *Digital Revolutions* exhibition at the Barbican Gallery, London provided an opportunity to experience a wide range of interactive digital media. Some artefacts were avowedly artistic, some presented themselves more modestly as games or demonstrations of technique. Chris Milk's *Treachery of Sanctuary* was a particularly striking and popular work (amongst many others) and perhaps exemplifies some of the ways that contemporary interactive art operates.

On walking into the work's exhibition space, the audience member is confronted by a triptych of large, bright screens set 3 or 4 metres back, separated from users by a shallow reflective 'pool'. The enabling technology, the means of production is completely hidden, but what is immediately evident (since the space was arranged so that the work could be watched as well as directly experienced) was the spectacle produced by other users' interactions; arresting and engaging images which because of their scale and dynamism drew and captured the viewer's attention even without actually engaging with the work themselves. The visual imagery of generated silhouetted birds and angels composited with the dynamically processed image of the user is deliberately intended to reference religious imagery, a key theme of western art:

“...it is also my intention to reflect the parallel experience of the artist as he journeys through the creative process. This parallel journey hinges on a religious concept.” (Milk 2012b)

However, these allusions are general rather than specific, they do not refer to any specific birds or angelic figures; They locate the work as drawing on traditions of expression rather than acting as nodes of intertextual relationships¹. They are also perhaps more appreciable to those watching rather than active participants.

A major part of the work’s appeal is ludic and physical, one could observe users playfully experimenting, absorbed in trying to understand the ‘rules’ behind the piece’s operation as they gradually progressed from screen to screen:

“As the player proceeds through the game, she gradually discovers the rules which operate in the universe constructed by this game. She learns its hidden logic, in short its algorithm.” (Manovitch 1999:83)

The attractions and significance of the piece for the user (and, to some extent for the watcher) is wrapped up in the essential ‘liveness’ of this process, the playing out of the process of specific discovery associated with this space and artefact with its imposition of ‘special’ rules that have to be discovered and then the demonstration to an audience that the medium had been successfully mastered. While the work was conceived as a journey for the user², it is significant that the work itself is unaltered by the user’s experience, no trace, either physical or digital, is left of the individual’s ‘performance’ other than the photographs many users encouraged their friends to take.

Context and theory

We are familiar with context being part of the overall ‘text’ in non-digital work; part of the rich mixture of signs and materials which inform the viewer or user’s experience of the work and their construction of its meaning. Walter Benjamin identified those parts of a work relating to its history as a work’s ‘aura’, details that are part of the received work’s materials, but a constituent whose referents are partly or wholly exterior to the work; links of association which anchor and locate the work within a wider narrative of culture and consumption, for example its patina and provenance. However, as Benjamin observed, any reproduction endangers this aspect of a work of art,

“In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus – namely, its authenticity – is interfered with The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction” (Benjamin 1936: 215)

If mechanic reproduction, with its essentially material nature operating on physical originals imperils authenticity, it is not unreasonable to suggest that digital works,

¹ I wouldn’t want to suggest that references to other digital texts are entirely absent; for example one could suggest echoes of Text Rain (Utterback & Achituv 1999) in the projected interaction between the user’s image and the diving birds in the first screen.

² The Artist actually suggests the work represents two, overlaid journeys, “Each panel in the piece represents a step on a journey. The panoptic narrative interpretation is of the universal human experience: birth, death, and regeneration. But it is also my intention to reflect the parallel experience of the artist as he journeys through the creative process.”. (Milk 2012b)

without a physical original and employing a medium in which copies are necessarily indistinguishable from the original, are necessarily challenged in this aspect.

For interactive digital work, to include contextual materials (particularly over a sufficiently long time span that memory cannot help) requires the incorporation of dynamic generative processes; the work needs to respond not only to the user, but also to some aspects of its context, the time, location, environmental conditions or preoccupations of those surrounding it. Given this, there are clear and close connections to concepts of liveness and immediacy.

Philip Auslander has argued that, particularly for recorded performances, Benjamin's assertions about the relationship between reproduction and aura need re-examination,

“...aura is not a characteristic of the object but an effect of the beholder's historically conditioned perception of the object.” (Auslander 2009).

He goes on to suggest that the auras of recorded performances contain both elements related to the historical present and transformed traces of the point at which the work was produced. I would suggest that interactive digital art can usefully be considered as a performative form and that such art may indeed generate contexts which reflect both the point at which the work was encountered but also, in some cases, the moment and means through which the work was originally realised.

Digital Contexts

It is now necessary to consider what a specifically digital context might be, whether potential dangers and opportunities might emerge and further, how any such digital contexts might be generated and validated in a post-physical age.

Digital technology and the specific means of production can easily, perhaps inevitably, provide another contexts for the activity of digital artists. Most, perhaps all, practitioners would to some extent follow Marshall McLuhan in conceiving technology as an essentially enabling, even liberating, extension of the human body.

“Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, ...we approach the final phase of the extensions of man - the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society” (McLuhan 1994:19)

However, there is another view that cannot be ignored when exploring the contexts of a body of work which has technology at its core. For Foucault, technology was not a neutral tool providing opportunities for artists, but a system for exercising power and control; a set of constraints which necessarily encoded ways of thinking and acting congruent with the controlling power³.

“...technology is the essence of power in its most insidious forms – discipline as that which not only regiments and normalizes the body, pervading it so deeply that it creates, as an instrument of its power, the

³ For a detailed and thorough examination of this view of technology that concentrates on digital technology, see Schiller 1981.

very facet of ourselves that we are inclined to consider most our own and the least tainted by domination – our self.” (Behrent 2013:87)

This aspect of the relationship between power and technology has been identified as a specific weakness of much digital art, an unconscious paradigm of approval, a contextualising assumption through which artists expect their work to be experienced:

“The inherent technological utopianism of Digital Art is irresponsible, naive and dangerous.” (Fuller and Morrison 2004)

However, it can be argued that technology is both threat *and* opportunity for those making digital art. Indeed artists working in all media both physical and digital have often used the symbols and objects of power in ways that subvert and critique the ways power is exercised⁴. If digital artists are excited and stimulated by the possibilities they are given by digital tools, they also have the artist’s habits of dissent and creative invention which may help them evade the constraining effects of technology.

Digital contextualisation practice

The near-arrival of ubiquitous connectivity and the gradual availability of networked data sources employing semantic tagging provide the potential for a dynamic context-producing mechanism which following Auslander’s idea of the point of contact being part of the basis for the work’s aura, can provide that instant of experience with some of the contextual content that static physical artefacts could employ (i.e. elements whose associations and significances lie outside the work, and which locate it in a social and cultural context).

One obvious example of the way that digital networked technology can help provide a context for artefacts is the *Remember Me* project (De Jode et al 2012). Here those donating articles to second-hand shops were asked to provide details of the object’s history and significance. This information was then placed in a database and the article tagged with a code allowing a buyer to discover an item’s history.

The author’s *You Here Now* (2013) employs a different approach. In this work, part of an ongoing research project into exploring contextualisation in interactive digital art, the websites of local news organisations are trawled for images which are then downloaded and cut up into small sections, each of which is stored with its average colour value in a large dynamic database. When a user standing in front of the installation, their portrait gradually emerges ‘painted’ in images drawn from that day’s news. The preoccupations of the host society form the context for an image which necessarily reflects the moment of experience.

Further projects will use software tools which use real-time data about social media concerns, word associations and audio playback to inform the moment to moment experience of interactive and performative digital art.

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⁴ In the field of digital art, one could mention the organisation Furtherfield (<http://www.furtherfield.org/>) and the artist Stanza (<http://www.stanza.co.uk/>)

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