

Questions by Daniel Palmer [Australia]

Answers by Lev Manovich

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Q. **Why the language of 'new media'** - which would seem to be an historically variable term - and not, for instance, 'digital culture'? Early in the book you note that your method might be called 'digital materialism' (p.10). You also write that you want to avoid the general term 'digital' in the book (p.52), but it's hard to find a page where the word doesn't appear. I ask this terminological question, because you are so careful about defining the terms of the discussion.

A. I decided to use “new media” because this term is standard one used both in the field and in popular media. At the same time, the term is open enough, a kind of a placeholder, and I like this open character. Historically, I think it appeared around 1990; its emergence marked the shift from understanding computer as a tool in the 1980s to a new understanding that computer also came to function as a new medium (or, more precisely, a number of mediums: virtual space, network, screen-based multimedia, etc.)

Q. Your book starts with scenes from Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*, and ends with a chapter called 'What is Cinema?'. A spool of film appears on the cover of the book. Why are **cinema** and the photographic so central to your understanding of new media?

A. There are a few answers to this question. Cinema has been the most important cultural form/medium of the twentieth century; so it natural that new media both inherits many conventions from cinema (similarly to how cinema itself inherited conventions from previous nineteenth century forms, in particular a novel) and also contains a promise of replacing cinema as the key new form of the twenty first century. Methodologically, I find that theory of cinema is more directly relevant to new media than, say, literary theory, because, as new media, cinema is a cultural forms heavily based on technology; and the evolution if film language is closely linked to the technological developments and changes in cinema’s industrial mode of production. Finally, I was originally attracted to new media in the early 1980s (which was then called “computer graphics” and “computer animation) because I saw in it the promise of being able to do films without big budgets, lots of heavy equipment and big crews – something which tools like DV cameras and Final Cut Pro running on a Powerbook has finally made possible, although it took about twenty years!

Q. What are the advantages of a **formal analysis** of media, as against, say, empirical studies or philosophical speculation?

A. New media artists, designers as well as museums and critics need terms to talk about new media work. We can talk about a painting using such terms as “composition,” “flatness,” “color scheme” etc.; and we can talk about a film using such terms as “plot,” “cinematography,” “editing,” “camera movements.” With new media, the discourse so far focuses on two extremes: either purely industrial terms such as “Flash animation” or “JPEG image” or “VRML scene” (which all describe software used and don’t tell you much about the work’s poetics and the user’s experience of it), or rather abstract theoretical terms which were all created during the previous historical period (between 1968 and 1989, i.e. between student revolution of 1968 and the Fall of Berlin Wall and the end Soviet Communism) such as “rhizome,” “panopticum,” “simulation.” I would like to help develop a vocabulary, which will fill the gap in between these two extremes.

The focus on my work is on trying to come up with new terms, which can be used to talk about the works – both their formal construction and also the interaction between the work and the user. So, to be more precise, my analysis is not strictly formal as it also concerns with what literary theory has called “reader’s response.” In other words, I am also interested to have terms to talk about user’s experience of new media.

Q. One of the distinctions you make in the book is between the **database** and narrative as competing symbolic forms. What is the significance of this contemporary shift to the database?

A. The shift to the database can be understood as part of the larger shift from a traditional “information-poor” society to our own “information-rich” society. Narrative made sense for cultures based on tradition and a small amount of information circulating in a culture – it was a way to make sense of this information and to tie it together (for instance, Greek mythology). Database can be thought of as a new cultural form in a society where a subject deals with huge amounts of information, which constantly keep changing. It maybe impossible to tie all together in a single (or a set of) narrative but you can put it in a database and use a search engine to find what you are looking for, to find information which you are not aware of but which matches your interests and finally to even discover new categories. In short, a narrative is replaced by a directory/index.

Q. In your fascinating archeology of the 'real time screen', a central opposition that you arrive at is that **the screen** keeps alternating between the dimensions of 'representation' and 'control'. The subject is forced to

oscillate between the roles of viewer and user... as in the case of an 'interactive narrative', between following a story and participating in it. How might this understanding assist artists and designers of new media?

A. I think that the opposition 'representation' – control' provides a practical challenge to artists and designers of new media. There are two dimensions, which can be distinguished here: spatial and temporal. Spatial: How do you combine controls with a fictional image flow. For instance, how do you integrate menus and hot spots in an interactive film screen? (This is often done by not having any menus on the screen but by allowing the user to control the program through the keyboard). Temporal: how do you combine immersive segments and control segments. Typically the way this is done so far in computer games and other interactive narratives (for instance, in a very interesting "Blade runner" game from a few years ago) is that an immersive section is followed by an interactive section, to be followed by another interactive section. More successful are the games where the two modes co-exist, such as in first-person action games such as Mario, Tomb Rider, etc. You are the character and you continuously control it through a mouse or a joystick.

There is another way to think about this opposition, since we are talking about computer games. Traditional "noninteractive" narratives (books, movies) are more concerned with representation and narrative immersion, what can be called "narrative flow." In contrast, all real-time games, from tennis to "Unreal" require the user to exercise continuous control. So the challenge and promise of combining a traditional narrative form such as a movie with a game is how to combine the two logics of narrative flow and real-time control into a new aesthetics.

Q. At one point you suggest that the computer is the ultimate and omnipresent Other of our age, and you say that the space of new media becomes "a mirror of **the user's subjectivity**" (269), but for the most part you do not theorise the subjectivities enabled by new media. Indeed, in general your 'users' seem remarkably at peace. Are they?

A. It is true that in "The Language of New Media" I am more concerned with formal analysis of new media works and their historical formation than with users' subjectivities. I am hoping to deal with the latter topic in more length in my next book "Info-Aesthetics," where I want to think through the common types of behavior/subjectivity in our culture – information access (for instance, Web surfing), information processing, real-time telecommunication (talking on a cell phone, chatting online, and so on.

Q. Can you elaborate on the link you make between **the post-industrial mode of production** and 'variable media'?

A. Post-industrial mode of production uses computer-based design, manufacturing and distribution to enable massive customization. This involves constant updates of product lines; large sets of models/variation for a single line of products (think of hundreds of different sneaker design as can be seen in Niketown and similar stores), and the idea that a given product can be customized for an individual customer. Manufacturing involves materials, i.e. "hardware"; since new media is all "software," in new media computers enable more radical and more thorough customisation than in manufacturing. For instance, the user of an interactive site can select her own trajectory through it, thus in effect automatically "customizing" a work for herself. Or, when you visit a commercial Web site, its engine can automatically pull the information about your previous visits and your location to put up a customized version of the site for you, including which language version you get, the ads displayed, etc.

Q. What is the best **new media art work** you have seen recently? Are there any current directions in art or popular culture that are of particular interest to you?

A. I am interested in all directions in popular culture and their interactions: dance culture, music, fashion, Internet culture, computer games, graphic and industrial design. I am trying to educate myself about electronic music because I am convinced that the logic of digital media historically has always manifested itself in music before visual culture. In part this is because visual culture, in particular popular visual culture, is often representational, i.e., photographs, illustrations, movies etc. all represent visual reality which puts limits on how images may look like. So it is in music that many key new ideas of digital media revealed themselves first: algorithmic composition, sampling and mixing as a new form of creativity, online distribution of culture (i.e., MP3s on the Internet.)

As far as new media art is concerned, I am very impressed by the software by Lisa Jevbratt which currently forms the basis of the online exhibition "Mapping the Web Infome"

(<http://www.newlangtonarts.org/netart/infome>)

Lisa invited a number of people (including me) to use her software to create their own Net crawlers and to visualised the data they collect. In her words, "Just as the Human Genome Project strives to map the mysteries of the body's DNA, "Mapping the Web Infome" develops ways of representing the master plan behind the codes that created the Web. The newly commissioned net art project deploys software robots as cartographers of the continually changing Internet and the resulting images chart the hidden relationships that lie beneath the screen's surface."

Q. Is net art dead?

A. If we understand net art as an artistic and cultural practice which focused on a modernist analysis of early World Wide Web (1994-1998), it is dead. As an institutional label for new media art as a whole, it is very much alive and gaining more and more recognition. What I don't like is that museums, art galleries, media and other cultural institution often use the term "net art" as a stand in for "new media art" (or "digital arts") as a whole. As a result, the attention goes to net projects while many other distinct digital practices such as interactive computer installation, electronic music, interactive cinema, hypermedia, etc. are ignored. In short a particular practice is used as a stand in for the field as a whole. It happens in part not only because net art is the cheapest practice for museums to exhibit but also because we still do not have any real alternative to an aesthetic theory based around the idea of mediums. So now along with painting, sculpture, art on paper, film, and video we now have "net art," i.e.. "at which uses the medium of a network."

Q. What are your current projects? Do you have any future artistic projects?

A. I am currently working on a new book entitled INFO-AESTHETICS (www.manovich.net/IA). I am also planning to shift more of my energy towards artistic projects. The projects in development include SOFTWARE FOR THE 20TH CENTURY, a set of three imaginary software applications and MACRO-CINEMA, a set of digital films (www.manovich.net/projects_00.htm). The last project will be exhibited as an installation at Cinema Future exhibition at ZKM (Fall 2002).