The Futures of Digital Media Arts and Culture

In the early 1990s, the very term ‘digital’ was novel. Yet over the past several decades it is apparent that applications and innovations in e-mail, the Internet, mobile media, complex data systems and computational practice, video games and networking software have become an essential and dynamic part of contemporary art and culture. Increasingly, research in new media (and ‘newer’ new media) interprets the arrival of these emergent forms, addressing the sometimes unexpected social, cultural and aesthetic uses and implications of developing digital technologies and interfaces.

The eleven papers presented here from the perthDAC (Digital Arts and Culture) 2007 conference offer a broad spectrum of perspectives on the future of digital media art and culture, speculating on recent trends and developments, presenting research outcomes, describing works in progress, or documenting histories and challenging existing paradigms of digital media use, creation and perception. They range in topic from the participatory culture of Web 2.0, video art and electronic literature, biological art and emerging art practices in online environments, to the compound relation between art, data and computation, the gendered poetics of game space and evolving character of game culture.

In his paper Axel Bruns identifies a unique type of media experience to emerge from the user-led Web 2.0 environment – that of produsage. As he insightfully notes, the boundaries between media producers and consumers are currently breaking down to enable ‘the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement’. Jim Bizzocchi’s paper also considers an emergent aesthetic and cultural phenomenon – ambient video – which includes video art works and living video paintings that reside on buildings, the walls of our homes and offices, and in an increasingly array of public spaces. Such artworks, he argues, play ‘in the background of our lives’, yet paradoxically they must be at-the-ready to reward a glance or more sustained contemplative gaze; Bizzocchi reflects upon the creative and receptive implications of such a phenomenon. The artistic potential of online virtual environments such as Second Life is the topic of Caroline McCaw’s paper; she adopts her own Second Life avatar in a deep engagement with the work and ideas of DC Spensley (aka Dancoyote Antonelli in Second Life). In discussing the relation between this new aesthetic space and the values and methods of traditional art practices and histories, McCaw suggests that at the very least emerging art practices in online environments invite us to critically examine ‘the way we think and talk about art’.

Simon Penny examines the ‘theoretical crisis’ that exists at the nexus of computational technologies and artistic endeavour, where the rationalist Cartesian values of the hardware/software binary are antagonistic to the creative aims of the artist. He argues convincingly that such a crisis ‘demands the development of a critical technical practice’. The legacy of Cartesian dualism embedded in our understanding and interpretation of language, computer code and the physical world is also the focus of Kenneth Knoespel and Jichen Zhu’s paper. They suggest that the notion of ‘continuous materiality’ can effectively capture
the complexity of the relation between materiality and immateriality, and they effectively deploy this idea through the diagrammatics and design morphology of architectural practice. On a connected yet divergent theme, Fox Harrell makes the case that when computational systems are made to intentionally and critically engage with cultural values and practices – for example, in the representation and manipulation of semantic content – new, invigorated and expressive computing practices can result. In this context he describes the GRIOT platform which implements interactive and generative narratives ‘deeply informed by African diasporic traditions’. In ‘Art Against Information’, Mitchell Whitelaw examines the way in which artistic practice might break away from the representation of information; he suggests that data art can effectively work to separate ‘information’ and ‘data’, to create ‘figures of data as unmediated, immanent, material and underdetermined’, and speaks of the importance of critically reflecting on the potential of such practices.

Scott Rettberg explores the legacy of the Dadaist avant-garde upon contemporary new media artists and digital writers, arguing that there is a close correlation between Dada ‘anti-art’ practice and the methods deployed by new media artists and digital/electronic writers. Such an association, Rettberg claims, can be used to critically contextualise the properties and artifacts of contemporary new media literature. Brian Degger considers another arena of cutting edge artistic practice, the sometimes controversial arena of mixed reality and biological arts which are deeply enmeshed in technoscientific and biotechnological innovation and experimentation; in his paper he deliberates upon issues of access, affordability and technology transfer through the work of SymbioticA, Blast Theory and FoAM.

Finally, two of the contributions chosen for this special issue attend to aspects of computer game culture and game space. In ‘A Game of One’s Own’ Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie and Celia Pearce critique the predominantly male sensibility of game space in first-person shooters and massively multiplayer games. Via feminist writings and literature, contemporary game studies and Bachelard’s theory, they explore the possibility of rethinking and re/desgendering the spatial poetics and cognitive models at work within the ‘virtual playgrounds’ of computer games. In his article Jaakko Suominen turns to an interesting emergent phenomenon in game culture – that of retrogaming. Retrogaming can include the appropriation or remediation of older games, devices and applications into present-day games, or more broadly the nostalgic collection and playing of first and second generation games and consoles. Suominen investigates both the increasing popularity of such practices, and the way in which the culture and content of retrogaming becomes incorporated into the latest game devices and gameplay.

We hope that you find this to be both a thought-provoking collection and a worthwhile sampling of the PerthDAC 2007 conference.

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