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Bodytalk Essay

Body, the Romantic Self, and the Internet

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Most people know the feeling of getting absorbed on-line. Hit some keys, get a response, hit again, another response, again, again, again — until one loses track of time. The little responses the computer offers — some numbers, an error message — do not resolve things. Rather, they are just enough to invite the user to try again, ever in anticipation of getting it right, of finding what's next.

Felt experience can be thought of as generated by the interaction of embodied phenomena with cultural contexts. Ingesting peyote buttons, for example, can be experienced by American college students as a form of entertainment, or by Southwestern Native American shamans as a connection with the ancestors. Similar physiological stimulus, different experiences. The same is true of the compulsive experience of interacting with a computer. Computers exist in cultural contexts, in the equivalents of shamanistic rituals or college dorm rooms, and people give meaning to the feeling of the technology accordingly.

Of course there's more to computers than what they feel like. But for any technology to be integrated into society, it has to be given meanings that can relate it to dominant social values, to everyday life, and to bodily experience. How those embodied meanings are configured then plays a role in the reception and further development of a technology, thus becoming a condition of a technology's social existence. This brief essay outlines that process as revealed in a larger study of the long arc of the emergence of the Internet in contemporary society (Streeter, in press).

Thankfully, the cyberspace fantasy that digital technology transcends the body, that one can and should leave meatspace behind in a disembodied virtuality, is no longer so popular. Whatever Web 2.0 is about, it seems to involve people with bodies interacting with one another. But in another sense, cyberpunk fantasies about escaping the body were just an emphatic projection of a problem that still nags much of the thinking about what goes on when people communicate across distances of time and space, whether via the printed page, or via Facebook. The original Enlightenment project tended to imagine that, in the fixity of science and the printed word, one could discern a form of rationality grounded in the cogito, in a genderless, raceless, abstract liberal individual, where selfhood is reduced to pure mind, an idealized point, an origin without cause, a condition where the body should not matter.

The first generation of computers, the giant batch-processed mainframes of the 1960s, were often imagined as tools for enacting this bodiless understanding of individuality. The big mainframes were out of sight behind closed doors, which helped people to imagine them as existing in realms of pure

abstract rationality, and thus as tools that could fit human affairs into a rigid, mathematically predictable grid, tools that could conquer human uncertainty. The fantasies attached to that theory ranged from the poignant to the terrifying: from the idea that computers could end inner city strife, for example, to the idea that they could be used to win global nuclear wars.

But the computers we use today are not so much descendants of those 1960s mainframes as they are a particular kind of reaction against them. While most of the computer managers in the 1960s were imagining those things behind closed doors as the embodiment of instrumental reasoning, small numbers of computer engineers were actually interacting with the machines and experiencing the compulsive draw of that interaction.

They liked being drawn into the machines, and they wanted more of it, so they wanted computer-connected screens and keyboards of their own. What they were finding was that, far from being predictability machines, there is something tantalizingly unpredictable about computers. You try something, get something unexpected, try something else, get another result, and so forth, until it becomes a steady, ongoing interaction, a process in which one goes in unintended directions. Part of the pleasure is that it's a safe, limited unpredictability, more akin to reading a story about a dangerous mountain climbing expedition than to actually climbing the mountain. But the people who invented the small, distributed, interactive computers that we all have on our desks wanted more of that experience of safe unpredictability.

One of the first broadly organized reactions against Enlightenment rationalism was Romanticism. The early 19th century romantics were attracted precisely to those aspects of life that are not predictable. The romantic thinkers were fascinated by language, art, fiction, and history, because those are all historically contingent and driven by systems internal to themselves, by immanent processes that will travel paths that cannot be predicted in advance. And, perhaps above all else, the romantics were fascinated with a particular view of the self, the self that Emerson (1990) described as "that science-baffling star . . . without calculable elements [which are] at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity" (pp. 160-161). The self is not rational and calculating, it is expressive and processual.

Beginning in the 1960s, some of those engineers who wanted direct interaction with computers began to draw on romantic tropes, usually borrowed from the 1960s counterculture, to construct justifications for their alternative designs, and popular writers like Stewart Brand, Ted Nelson, and eventually Steven Levy joined them to elaborate on these visions. Many of the efforts to justify the open interactivity of the Internet occurred in contexts where bosses or colleagues were proposing to use computers imagined as predictability machines to manage their way out of human dilemmas: to somehow control the horror of nuclear warfare, to industrialize secretarial work, or to turn school children into studious and obedient users of electronic encyclopedias. These approaches will not work, the arguments went, because people need to express themselves, because people want and need spontaneity, creativity, or dragon-slaying heroism. That, it was said, is why we needed small computers instead of mainframes, why we needed the open, end-to-end distributed networking of the Internet instead of closed corporate systems, why we should have invested in dotcoms, why we need open source software.

The pleasures of the limited unknowability of interacting with computers became mapped onto romantic values, values that celebrate being involved with something beyond the bounds of fully predictable, calculable rationality. The experience of drifting while, say, Web surfing, offered an experiential homology to the romantic sense of personal exploration, a self-shaping process that unfolds according to its own logic, and that cannot be mapped to some external grid. Someone working with computers might then find it sensible to reinterpret the act of computing as something other than instrumental — to see what they were doing as expression, exploration, or art; to see themselves as artist, rebel, or both; and to find communities with similar experiences that would reinforce that interpretation. In a life punctuated both by periods of losing oneself in a machine and regular encounters with misguided instrumental reasoning, finding oneself as a unique, expressive individual could mean finding others who also liked to think of themselves that way, whether they were dotcommers recommending the plunge into Internet startups or open source advocates calling for contributors to the Linux kernel. The compulsive pleasures of computing have been thus mapped onto romantic discourses and then folded back into the construction of the Internet itself. We now optimize our computer networks for instantaneous response and rich visual experiences, so as to invite constant interaction, rather than to, say, allow for clear, easy distribution and retrieval of well-ordered information.

The limits of Internet romantic individualism are nicely summed up by reference to what one feminist critic of cyberspace fantasies called the "diaper fallacy":

> Making babies is fun. Considering the reality of how many times you will really have to change their diapers . . . is not . . . It's much more fun to think Grand Abstract Thoughts . . . than to be bothered to think about who wipes the noses and picks up the garbage and absorbs the collateral costs and damage for the outfit. (Borsook, 1997)

Now that the romantic tradition of anti-tradition has become part of the material infrastructure of the modern world, we need to cultivate a sense of the Internet-using body that is not just an essential self, an Emersonian font of unfolding truth, but an interconnected, messy, sticky, frustrated, historically embedded body, one with blurry boundaries and awash in the sociology of forces like gender, reproduction, and ethnicity. Short of such recognition, we are hide-bound to defeat the very qualities of democracy or openness our romance envisions.

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