

The Memesis Network Discussion

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People nowadays seem to be unhappy with the static form of many festivals. Although meeting "in real life" is still favourable, there is the need to use the available tools of communication in order to change the traditional, one-to-many-type of conference. With the opening of the Ars Electronica web site on March 1st, 1996, we had the opportunity to extend the "real life conference" with a lively discussion on the Net in the months before the actual event. The idea was to set up a permanent platform which would also function after the festival as a starting point for further debates. After having structured the various streams of information, we wrote an Introduction, in which we explained the goals of such a net-based forum: "We would like to get away from the usual panels and presentations and see the get-together in Linz, between September 2—6, 1996, as a place to continue and round up ongoing discussions. Of course it is not that easy to simply blow up the entire concept of the "conference" and its rituals. At least certain hierarchical ("one to many") modes can be changed through an open discussion in the preparation phase of the festival. We would therefore like to invite everyone interested in this year's topic and new media in general to participate in the discussion between the artists and critics we invited to send a first statement."

In this summary of the first six weeks of the discussion on the Net, you will find a personal, subjective selection of quotations from the numerous contributions, which were posted both by invited speakers and the general audience, in as much as they have access to the Internet. The discussion can be followed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.aec.at/meme/symp>) and also by subscribing to a mailing list, which would send all the contributions as e-mail.

On April 15, 1996 the network discussion on this year's theme, "memesis", started with two documents, in which the goals of the discussion were made clear. I, being the presenter, opened, stating that: "So far there is not much experience and expertise in the orchestrating of net-based public debates on technology. At this stage we are leaving the era of introductions on the nature and the implications of new technologies (and the role of artists in this process) and find ourselves in the middle of controversies around topics like copyright, privacy, war on standards, cultural biases, public censorship and other 'old patterns' in 'new media'."

In recent years we have seen a wide use by artists of apparently harmless notions which have their origin in physics and biology (chaos, virus, artificial life). The cyborg, too, has a scientific background like this. To start a discussion so many months in advance was an attempt to break down the old consensus of the pioneers and show that media-art festivals like Ars Electronica from now on should be more than just a trades fair for computer-related art concepts. The Net seemed to be a perfect tool for vitalizing the static form of conference presentations. The "Memesis Statement", written by Gerfried Stocker, was posted to initiate a discussion process, "stimulating different lines of approach to the topic, and polarising opinions." The aim was not to dream up new utopias, but to develop a critical and reflective approach to the current situation, with its renewed promise that much vaunted visions of the future will finally become reality.

In order to achieve this, the "Memesis Statement" took some provocative positions: "Complex tools and technologies are an integral part of our evolutionary 'fitness'. Human evolution is fundamentally intertwined with technological development; the two cannot be considered apart from another. Humanity has co-evolved with its artifacts; genes that are not able to cope with this reality will not survive the next millennium."

Let us not try to reconstruct the following discussion in a chronological order. Richard Barbrook took the manifesto for what it was and wrote a similar, bold response. "The major error in the "Memesis Statement" is its use of dodgy biological analogies. The discovery of evolution was one of the key intellectual moments in the development of modern society. By offering a rational understanding of the origins of humanity in nature, it destroyed the intellectual basis of revealed religion. However, problems arise when the relationship is drawn in the other direction, when natural evolution is used to explain social development. In this century, millions of people were shoved into gas chambers because it was believed that they possessed 'genes that are not able to cope' as the "Memesis Statement" puts it."

The scientific meme researcher Francis Heylighen from Brussels responded to this critique in the following way: "Hitler was a Christian, so religion leads to the gas chamber. Stalin was an atheist, so atheism leads to extermination etc. The fact that some people at some point have misused an idea does not in any way prove that the idea is wrong or evil." Heylighen then elaborates on the term "evolution": "The essence of the meme idea is that evolution no longer takes place on the level of the genes, but on the level of culture. The fact that memes evolve according to principles of variation and selection very similar to the principles governing Darwinian evolution of genes does not in any way lead to Social Darwinism in its old sense."

Douglas Rushkoff ("just an American who has probably watched far too much TV and spent a bit too much time online") disagrees with the "negative fuss about memes": "It just boils down to a deep-rooted fear of the human spirit. We seem to fear that, left to our own devices, we will rape and pillage one another. Unchecked, the cautious social theorists warn, human beings will drive relentlessly towards fascism. Social scientists were taught that the masses, too stupid and easily swayed towards social policies as destabilizing as Nazism, must be led by a benevolent elite. They see society as an ocean that must be contained; they don't realize that their social theories are like the temporary plugs in a dike that will never hold up against the tide. And like the sad social theorists, the fundamentalists developed their own mind-control techniques. They believe that, deep down, people are sinful. If we were allowed to roam free, we would have no choice but to succumb to our basest desires."

According to Rushkoff, the Internet is designed to promote global awareness. Evolution doesn't always favor certain individuals over others. "Those who fear memes and evolution really just fear progress. That's why so many well-spoken social theorists hate us pro-Internet, California-style utopians. If we attempt to slow the transmission of memes through culture, we will surely weaken and rot like the overly inbred royal families of centuries past. But I suppose I shouldn't worry. The anti-evolutionists are fighting a losing battle. Since their memes don't ultimately promote anything but social decay, they will surely perish in the long run."

What will Richard Barbrook's answer be? We don't know yet. In his first critique he stated: "It is precisely our refusal to accept our biological destiny which makes us more than insects. Unlike our fellow species, we can transform ourselves through thought and action."

But let's go back to Barbrook's "fundamental" critique of the "Memesis Statement": "If memes 'replicate themselves', what are humans doing in the meantime? We're not the blind objects of genes or memes. We are the subjects of history even if it is not always in circumstances of our own choosing. The Net is a creation of human labour. Someone has to dig holes in the road to lay the fibre-optic wires. Someone has to write the software to enable people to use the Net. Without human activity, the Net is nothing but an inert mass of metal, plastic and sand. We are the only living beings in cyberspace."

The "Memesis Statement", again, says: "As an analogy to the building blocks of biology, the genes, memes describe cultural units of information, cognitive behavioral patterns that propagate and replicate themselves through communication. From the "bio-adaptor" language as a proto-meme to the 'info-sphere' of global networks as the ultimate habitat for the human mind."

Richard Barbrook does not believe that there is such a thing as an autonomous entity, located inside the technology. "The "Memesis Statement" regards machines and information as autonomous things outside our control. Yet, in reality, both technology and culture are expressions of the social relationships between individual humans. It is human activity which is crystallised into machines and information, not memes which create 'mass crystals'. Crucially, the statement ignores one of the central questions of modernity: how are the rewards of labour to be divided among the different groups involved in the social production of machines and information? Ah, but the social question is so unfashionable nowadays ..."

Tom Sherman also stresses the social aspect of the use of technology. Based at the School of Art & Design in Syracuse (NY), he reports from a "burned-out, totally out-of-date industrial city in the rust belt of the American northeast", and he comments on what is going on around him: "You don't hear a lot of evolutionary analogies in factory lunch rooms or college coffee houses these days. The talk is about survival and how tough a place the world has become. People are forming relationships with machines, not necessarily because they're attracted to machines, but because they are desperately trying to get connected and/or stay connected with other people, particularly with those who can help them survive."

In this context the Web, for Sherman, is becoming a "electronic talent database or tourist bureau full of resumes and brochures and maps." He compares this "indexical domain" with today's modern office: "Same software, same information handling methodologies; but no regular paycheck, no healthcare, no social security net. The Web is The Office for freelancers. Artists, that endangered species, when connected with/by computers, sit at a desk and look very much like office workers, telecommuting home-office workers. These are the new industrial labourers."

And, a few weeks later, Tom Sherman resumes: "Wanting badly to define ourselves at any cost, we try to figure what kinds of memes work best in particular technological spaces. We'll wear the damndest memes, just because they flourish in a system. Apparently we enjoy indulging in evolutionary analogies, playfully trading strong opinions about the mind's responsibility to the body, wondering whether our meme pool is stagnant, expanding or collapsing, and visiting and trashing the cultural ruins of Silicon Valley."

Herbert Hrachovec, philosopher in Vienna, contributes by saying "the printout of my neural reactions is not my neural state", in a reference to Kathryn Bigelow's film "Strange Days". "Cognitive behavioral patterns that propagate and replicate themselves through communication used to be called 'topoi', 'habits' or 'clichés'. They were thought to be social constants, stable but subject to alterations at the margin. This feature is lost in talk about 'memes'. They seem to be scientific constructs that can be handled like cellular tissue."

Suddenly, a report came in from the streets of San Francisco, from Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. For them, "memes are just another word for nothing left to (digitally) lose", to borrow a phrase from the song "Me and Bobby McGee", and in Ars California words are always too slow". "Memetic flesh? That's certainly not a sociological rhetoric of evolution or devolution, but something radically different. It's neither future nor history, but the molecular present, a

floating outlaw zone where memes fold into genes. In SF, memes have abandoned the art academy, becoming popular culture for the 21st century. Memetic as daily life in cyber-city, the kind of place where the virus of the tech future digs its way under the skin, like an itch or a sore or a viral meme that just won't go away."

They discover the "art of dirty memes", unofficial outlaw art that's practiced in hidden warehouses, storefront galleries and ghetto schools. "Dirty memes? That's what happens when memetic engineering escapes into the street of cybercity, and its scent is picked up by viral artists. Neither technotopian, nor technophobic, memetic art in the streets of SF is always dirty, always rubbing memes against genes, always clicking in (our) memetic flesh."

A little later, the Krokors submit a digital postscript: "Memetic flesh means that under the relentless pressure of the will to virtuality, the boundaries between memes and genes, between culture and biology, becomes permeable and fluid and mirrored and instantly reversible. Memetic flesh is about the 'anxious meme'. To date, the debate on the Ars Symposium has recapitulated the history of high modernism. Indeed, the terms of the debate with its recycling at the level of memetic engineering of earlier debates between tech mysticism and tech realism, doesn't disturb the still waters of modernism at all because it just confirms the impossibility of breaking out of the cycle of hyper-(memetic) idealism and hyper-(social) realism. A beautiful museum of the modern mind. Memesis as Mimesis."

The cyber-feminist group VNS-Matrix posts their "Bitch Mutant Manifesto", command line poetry for seduced on-liners, digital addicts: "Read only my memories. Upload me into your pornographic imagination. Write me. We are the malignant accident which fell into your system while you were sleeping. And when you wake we will terminate your digital delusions, hijacking your impeccable software. SUCK MY CODE. The limit is NO CARRIER, the sudden shock of no contact, reaching out to touch, but the skin is cold ... I become the FIRE. Flame me if you dare."

In the meanwhile, several participants reacted to the "Memesis Statement" and Richard Barbrook's critique. Simon Penny reacts to the original "Memesis Statement": "Humanity has NOT co-evolved with its artifacts in any biological sense. Survival into the next century depends not on whether genes will 'co-evolve with ... artifacts' but whether they can survive the effects of those artifacts. The 'future of evolution' qua biological evolution is only brought into question by the cancerous proliferation of one particular species, homo sapiens."

He advises us to think twice before our mind considers moving out to take up residence on the Net. Global networks as the "ultimate habitat for the human mind"? "It baffles me that this rhetoric of 'transcendence via the Net' did not die a quick death a decade ago. Doesn't anybody realise just how corny and retrograde the notion is? It is just one facet of a general argument against the body, which has been an ongoing characteristic of western philosophy and Christian theology. William Gibson's Cyberpunks proclaimed 'the body is meat' but they did not pause to note how similar their position was to that of St. Augustine."

Robert Adrian (Vienna) also comments on the "modern" notion of evolution, as it is used in the "Memesis Statement". It might as well be other people's evolution, not ours ... "Evolution is treated as a one-way street ... always better, always improving. But the concept of evolution is not about 'progress' but about adaptation. This means that a species may be perfectly specialised for a specific environment but is utterly helpless should the environment change ... In the future the world may become a very uncomfortable place for societies of high consumers. Presumably the memes/genes that survive into the next millennium will be those

of the electronically endowed. That is, members of the electronic master-race. But there is not really much support for the assumption that because industrial culture has created this technology, it somehow OWNS it."

The artist Perry Hoberman isn't very happy with the "demolition derby". According to Hoberman, "the concept of meme has been subjected to such extreme mutation that its progeny have almost become unrecognizable." He therefore introduces into the discussion two "misshapen mutant memetic children", the Living Meme and the Imposter Meme. "The Living Meme is cross-bred with the rhetoric of (strong) Artificial Life and Artificial Intelligence and the wide-eyed notion of global networks achieving both autonomy and consciousness. The Living Meme is ready to run the whole show. The Imposter Meme on the other hand is always found grossly wanting and has been taking the rap here for just about every social ill of the twentieth century. A front man for Social Darwinism and Final Solutions, the Living Meme and the Imposter Meme are in fact obviously identical good-and-evil twins."

Hoberman proposes to return to the original definition of memes, coined by Richard Dawkins in "The Selfish Gene". "The meme is presented there neither as the building block for some eventual autonomous realm that would supplant biological evolution, nor to imply that the direction and development of human culture are completely out of our hands. The meme is posited instead as a unit of cultural transmission, analogous to the gene. If we are going to use a term, we ought to have a reasonable understanding of it."

According to Roy Ascott, we should take meme as a metaphor. But there is no truth behind a metaphor. Ascott is in favour of a "pragmatic approach". "Is the metaphor of meme useful to artists? The answer is yes. Is the idea of a meme space, understood as a kind of collective intelligence, a community of mind, useful to artists? Yes, it is. The whole collaborative enterprise in art is based on the idea of shared consciousness. It is the field of consciousness which artists now wish to explore. It is telematic consciousness which presents the opportunity and challenge to art as it moves beyond its lumpen concern with the surface appearance of the world. Can we speak yet of a memetic aesthetic replacing the old mimetic art? It depends. The meme metaphor falls flat considered in relation to the old biological processes of cognition. But in its post-biological context assimilated, transposed, transmitted and transformed by the processes of human cyberception, the meme metaphor acquires considerable potency."

Simultaneously, as one of the last in this "first round" of network discussions, Manuel DeLanda goes further with the idea of the "non-generic replicator". In this, he criticizes Dawkins: "Dawkins adopted the term meme because the mode of replication he had in mind was imitation. Yet, the sounds, meanings, and syntactical constructions of human language (and most of the other replicators that make human societies work, such as contracts, laws etc.) are not entities that replicate through 'imitation' but institutional norms which replicate through 'obligatory repetition'. I personally would restrict the term meme to apply exclusively to patterns of 'behavior' transmitted through imitation, such as bird songs or tool-use in apes, or fashions and fads in humans."

But besides replicators, there are also interactors: in biological terms enzymes and in human society "speech acts", as DeLanda suggests. He warns us to be precise and take terms like meme literally, with proper technical care. "The point is that unless we are very specific about both replicators and interactors when talking about non-biological fields, we risk falling into mere metaphor. Not that metaphors are useless, they are not. But the point that Dawkins is

trying to make is precisely that the relation between memes and genes is not one of metaphorical analogy but of 'deep isomorphism'."

P.S. While this text is being prepared for publishing, the presenter is also trying to focus the discussion on the other topics the "Memesis Statement" pinpointed: cyborg theory and media memory.