

CODE—the Language of Our Time

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Is the language of the computers becoming the lingua franca of the global Information Society?

Software is omnipresent; digital codes are the materia prima of our modern, global Information Society. And it is precisely its unlimited capacity to be programmed that turns the computing machine into the unique medium that has so successfully and so mightily pervaded all aspects of our life—one that can simultaneously function as an implement of war, economic tool and artistic instrument.

CODE = LAW

Software sets the standards and norms, and determines the rules by which we communicate in a networked world, do business, and gather and disseminate information. Upon closer examination, the global digital network consists not so much of computers and data transmission lines as of mutually compatible communication protocols.

Cyberspace as a social sphere and a new type of public domain derives its uniqueness not as a result of the data that are stored or exchanged within it but rather from the specific possibilities and impossibilities of the program codes of TCP-IP, of the browsers and chat rooms, of the encryption programs. The Internet is no longer a lawless, chaotic, disorganized no-man's-land. It has long since become the target of substantial, systematic efforts aimed at rigorous regulation and control. Not so very long ago, it was above all the interests of the market economy that could function only under controlled conditions; since September 11, 2001, though, it is first and foremost the interests of homeland security that have set the tone. Copyright and privacy are leading slogans in the fight to achieve a knowledge-driven society.

How strong is the socially regulative and normative power of the software monopoly actually?
If code assumes the status of law, which court offers us a forum in which to challenge it? To whom do we go to demand our rights?
Who authors the Codex of Cyberspace?
What possibilities exist to evade it?

CODE = ART

For artistic work, software is a fantastic instrument. In digital simulation, there are no constraints placed upon the imagination and the creative urge. Nevertheless, it is not only the way in which artists work that has changed in the wake of computerization and the programmable model worlds to which it gives rise; far beyond these considerations, the result has been the emergence of a totally new form of art. Digital media art or cyber-art—a hybrid term that has already taken root as a linguistic construction—has established itself as a distinct genre and diversified into a broad spectrum of highly varied artistic practices. Thus, digital technologies have finally instituted optimal preconditions for

the implementation of the idea of art as an ongoing, dynamic process. Fostered by the public attention that has been focused on the so-called Digital Revolution, media art has assumed a fixed place in the art world. Parallel to this triumph, though, an essential discourse dealing with the processuality of media art and the accompanying valence shift from object to dynamic system has retreated into the background.

At present, the dominant concept of data is one that registers a clear analogy to the objects of real space. Data are indeed virtual: they fluctuate in telematic networks, and they can be copied and (re)modeled at will; nevertheless they ultimately remain entities that can be labeled and dealt with. On the other hand, a dynamic system as engendered by an interactive process reacts autonomously to the participants and their environment, whereby it is not merely made public but made publicly accessible. It is used and formed by all participants in their own individual temporal and experiential windows. Such an open dynamic structure can no longer be created in the sense of a work of art; instead, it can only be encoded as a framework.

The enormous speed with which media art has developed and spread over the last 10 years makes it a matter of utmost urgency to take up again and expand this fundamental discourse aimed at producing a media art theory that is in keeping with these times.

What, then, are the characteristics that define the essence of digital media art?

Is it digital data's formability that carries on an updated version of the criteria of traditional arts, or is it instead the dynamics and openness of interactive, cybernetic processes and generative algorithms that suggest an extensive break with conventional attitudes and expectations with respect to the production and reception of art?

How can we go about defining a contemporary digital media art that concentrates on these new practices but does not set aside its conceptual forerunners?

Is art programmable? Can software itself be art, and according to which aesthetic criteria are we to assess this issue?

CODE = LIFE

In the parlance of the Computer Age, code stands for control and programmability. Bioinformatics and digital biology are the names of the "hot new fields" that, in the wake of Artificial Intelligence and neurobionics, are the expected sources of the key technologies of the 21st century. With this vocabulary, mankind is going about the task of working out the genetic foundations of life and propagating a mode of understanding that would have us believe that life is controllable and programmable like the digital code of the computer.

Will we use this genetic alphabet to rewrite the Book of Life or to summon forth a biological Babylon?

A media art that is coherently and consistently conceived will never be limited to the artistic use of technical media. Beyond this, it is always aesthetic research, critical analysis and social critique of our scientifically, technically conditioned view of the world. Media art is inseparable from the technological developments of the age, and that makes it into a laboratory for the future. As a festival for art, technology and society, Ars Electronica sees its mission as providing a platform for an encounter with the art of our time.

Main Entry: code

Pronunciation: 'kOd

Function: noun

Etymology: Middle English, from Middle French, from Latin caudex, codex trunk of a tree, document formed originally from wooden tablets

Date: 14th century

1 : a systematic statement of a body of law; especially : one given statutory force

2 : a system of principles or rules <moral code>

3 a : a system of signals or symbols for communication

b : a system of symbols (as letters or numbers) used to represent assigned and often secret meanings

4 : genetic code, Date: 1961, the biochemical basis of heredity consisting of codons in DNA and RNA that determine the specific amino acid sequence in proteins and appear to be uniform for all known forms of life

5 : a set of instructions for a computer

- code-less /-l&s/ adjective

Function: verb

Inflected Form(s): cod-ed; cod-ing,

Date: 1815,

transitive senses : to put in or into the form or symbols of a code

intransitive senses : to specify the genetic code <a gene that codes for a protein>

- cod-able /'kO-d&-b&l/ adjective,

- cod-er noun

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