

■■■■■■■■■ **Creating Creating**

Twelve years ago, in 1992, I asserted to a gathering of high-tech artists that mastering new media was a shortcut to fame, but that both the work and the fame would be short-lived because ever-newer media would displace them utterly. Is that still true? Has the emergence of new media slowed down? I would say not. Have digital works become any more durable over time? It looks to me that they're even shorter-lived (a web page has an average lifespan of 100 days, for example).

How about 12 years from now, or 25 years? Can we imagine a slowing down? A further speeding up? Is civilization growing atop an ever-higher tell of dead media and forgotten artists?

Who gains more from the symbiosis of art and new media, the voracious artists or the perpetually emerging media?

For the artist, diving into a new medium is a triple shortcut: one, to novelty; two, to mastery; three, to the frontier of cognition.

Increasingly, over the last century or so, originality has been a prime goal of artists, preferably lifelong originality, where you're continually surprising your audience and ideally yourself. If you're among the first into wet light shows, electronic music, adventure computer games, virtual reality, or artificial life, you get a free ride on the novelty of the medium. There's no tradition to overcome. Invention is already manifest in the medium. All you have to do is play, and it looks like invention. Often it is.

There's also no previous masters to equal or surpass. After only a few weeks of delving, you're the master. (Try doing that with a violin.) The medium might even become synonymous with your name for a while.

And you're not Thoreau exploring some pond. You're Cabeza de Vaca exploring a continent, freed to magic by your circumstances, with discovery waiting in every direction. And it's discovery not just for you; you're exploring for all humankind. The cutting edge of new media is the cutting edge of human cognition, which is the edge of what it means to be human.

You get to inhabit a new version of the parable of oil paint in tubes. Painters once prepared and mixed their own oil paints. Then pre-mixed oil paint in metal tubes was invented. It didn't seem like a major advance in technology, but suddenly a generation of French painters could leave their studios and go outside and squeeze paint on the palette like toothpaste. Their joy of release—both in subject and medium—we know as French Impressionism. This is sounding like one of those motivational speeches that I usually refuse to give. One time, though, I was offered such a handsome fee that I agreed to speak to a sales representatives' and buyers' retreat for Prime Computer on a Caribbean island. Prime makes minicomputers. This was about 1985. I was supposed to deliver a rave-up about the joys and boundless future of computing. Instead, I said that just as minicomputers had put mainframe manufacturers out of business, personal computers were about to do the same thing to minicomputer manufacturers, and I asked what Prime was going to do about that. Here's what they did about it. They complained about the speech to my speaker's bureau, which dropped me. And Prime went Chapter 11 last year.

So—to keep my Cassandra string going—who's going to put new media artists out of business? The process itself. All that "cutting edge" business cuts both ways—it's a knife that's all blade, no handle. You may master a lovely new media continent, but there's always another, and your investment in the present means you'll probably miss the next one. Soon you're a has-been at 24. Maybe you can get work doing ads, but you had better hurry.

It's the paradox of novelty: nothing gets old faster. Quick win, quick lose. Some people do art for immortality. You have to give that up if you're going to work in cutting-edge new media. Everything is written on the wind. As we say of the Electronic Frontier Foundation's newsletter, "Printed on 100-percent recycled electrons."

Never mind the artist's ego and career, what about art itself? How does a culture get any aesthetics, grounding or continuity from art forms with the longevity of mayflies? Does anything lasting escape from the black hole of accelerating technology?

As a young artist, I would have had a quick answer: "Hey, the metamessage is change. That's what it's all about." Ooo, profound. To claim that the crippling limitation of one's art is its real message is pretty pathetic.

These are serious questions. Has technology swallowed art, and so is art gone now? Or are we so inside technology that from here it's all art? Or is that confusing art with artifice?

The art I care about is usually at guerrilla war with artifice, employing and subverting the artificial to reawaken the real—jack back out into "the total animal soup of time." (I think that's Allen Ginsberg.) We keep making more and more splendid mirrors with these sophisticated technologies. I remember something I saw scribbled on a whiteboard at the Media Lab at MIT: "Art is not a mirror. Art is a hammer."

Enough about art. What about media? What does it gain from the cyber-artistic symbiosis? When I worked at the Media Lab the deal was very clear. The Lab was not there for the artists. The artists were there for the Lab. Their job was to supplement the scientists and engineers in three important ways:

They were to be cognitive pioneers.

They were to ensure that all demos were done with art—that is, presentational craft.

And they were to keep things culturally innovative. Having real artists around was supposed to infect the place with quality, which it did.

Inventors often lose interest in a nifty new concept once it is proven. Artists are perfect to pick up the ball at that point. The white-light holograms you see on your credit cards were invented by Steve Benton when he worked at Polaroid. Some New York artists begged the original technique from him and proceeded to push it—and him—toward something really dazzling. They opened a holography museum in New York and eventually they got enough publicity so that holograms wound up on the cover of National Geographic, on toys, and on money.

White light holograms are now a mini-industry. Those original hologram art pieces in New York, and the artists, are long forgotten.

What is the lesson? It looks like "media wins, artists lose." All high-tech art becomes effectively anonymous and ephemeral. As an artist you might as well be a gothic cathedral sculptor, honored for your very namelessness, or a Navaho sand-painter, admired and forgotten along with your fleeting work.

Have any new-media works escaped the black hole of accelerating technology? I can think of two. If you go to the Computer Museum in Boston you will find a huge minicomputer so ancient it has a round screen. This is the original Digital Equipment PDP-1, from 1961 or so. The machine is up and working. On the screen you can see tiny spaceships dashing around. The machine is playing the original "Space War," devised by Steve Russell and half-a-dozen hacker friends. That game was so brilliant and addictive, it swept through all the computer labs in the world in a matter of weeks. In many respects, "Space War" has still not been surpassed even 30 years later.

Another survivor dates from 1978 and also came out of MIT. This was the Aspen Movie Map—a computerized way to drive around Aspen, Colo., in space and time via an enhanced

videodisk. It was done by people at Nicholas Negroponte's Architecture Machine Group. The Aspen Movie Map was one of those landmark demos that got around to all the conferences and inspired a generation of innovators and artists—in this case about multimedia where the author of the work becomes the user.

These examples have several things in common. For one, they were highly collaborative. Two, they pushed a new technology beyond what anyone imagined possible into something dramatic, whole, and full of promise. Three, they were—fundamentally—not works, but tools. "Space War" was a game, nothing without players, and never the same from game to game. The Aspen Movie Map was not a tour of Aspen; it was Aspen. The tour was what you did with it.

In each case, new media were inspired into existence. Computer games and interactive multimedia are whole worlds that came out of those generative moments, and worlds sometimes remember their origins. Creating in new media always has that deeper possibility. You might be creating a medium itself. You might be creating creating. That's worth risking anonymity for.

Stewart Brand ■■■■■■■■■■

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Vor zwölf Jahren, 1992 also, behauptete ich vor einer Gruppe von Hightech-Künstlern, dass man durch Beherrschung der neuen Medien zwar auf raschestem Weg zu Ruhm gelangen könne, dass jedoch Werk und Ruhm nur von kurzer Dauer wären, da immer neuere Medien an ihre Stelle treten würden.

Trifft das heute noch zu? Oder hat sich die Geschwindigkeit, mit der neue Medien auf den Markt kommen, verlangsamt?

Ich glaube nicht.

Sind digitale Kunstwerke mit der Zeit beständiger geworden? Ich habe den Eindruck, dass sie sogar noch kurzlebiger geworden sind – eine Webpage z. B. hat eine durchschnittliche Lebensdauer von 100 Tagen.

Was wird aber in zwölf Jahren sein, oder in 25 Jahren? Ist eine Verlangsamung vorstellbar? Oder eine weitere Beschleunigung? Gedeiht die Zivilisation auf einem ständig wachsenden Berg toter Medien und vergessener Künstler? Wer zieht den größeren Nutzen aus der Symbiose zwischen Kunst und neuen Medien: die unersättlichen Künstler oder die ständig neu entstehenden Medien? Den Künstler führt das Eintauchen in ein neues Medium auf schnellstem Weg zu drei Zielen: zu Novität, zu Virtuosität und an die Grenzen der Wahrnehmung.

Während des vergangenen Jahrhunderts begannen Künstler verstärkt, als wesentliches Ziel Originalität, im besten Fall lebenslange Originalität, anzustreben; man wollte das Publikum und – idealerweise – sich selbst kontinuierlich überraschen. Ist man einer der Ersten, die mit Wet-Light-Shows, elektronischer Musik, Computer-Abenteuerspielen, virtueller Realität oder künstlichem Leben arbeiten, so wird man automatisch zum Trittbrettfahrer der Novität des jeweiligen Mediums. Es gilt keine Traditionen zu überwinden, die Erfindung manifestiert sich im Medium selbst. Es gibt auch keine alten Meister, an denen man sich messen bzw. die man übertreffen muss. Man vertieft sich nur wenige Wochen in sein Fach, und schon ist man selbst ein Meister. Es könnte sogar sein, dass der eigene Namen eine Zeit lang als Synonym für das Medium selbst gilt.