

Collaboration and New Media

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New Media and Collaboration

For the period of time that New Media art has been in existence, whether under the banner of Art and Technology, CyberArts, or New Media, collaborations have been a highly visible avenue of production. Within the greater New Media genre, there are numerous collectives, such as *Jodi.org*, *Entropy8Zuper*, *Etoy*, *Sito.org*, *Beige*, *RTMark*, *Institute for Distributed Culture*, *Institute for Applied Autonomy*, *Critical Art Ensemble*, *The Yes Men*, *LEMUR*, and many others. And although it's quantitatively hard to prove, one may even be led to consider whether New Media's origins in technology and computation, and coevolution with digital networks such as ARPANet, have created a native culture from which collaborative artworks are a natural extension.

Can one say that the collaborative impulse in New Media is a direct reflection of its cultural underpinnings and technical evolution? Surely, the collective or networked culture was forecast at least forty years ago by McLuhan, with his pronouncements of the Global Village, which presciently sounds like forms of 21st Century Social Media. But is New Media, and its native culture, specifically conducive to collaborations? In this essay, we will examine the cultural conditions of New Media, its necessities, its problems and benefits. In addition, we will examine some models of collaboration that the author has participated in with various groups in order to compare different ways in which New Media artists create together.

The Theories of New Media Networks

Practically and theoretically, the foundations of New Media culture are deeply rooted in the evolution of electronic networks preceding the Internet. Of course, McLuhan foresaw the communal nature of the future communications nets through the Global Village, in which "we cannot but know about one another"[1], because of our televisual involvement in the networks. Although McLuhan was hypothesizing future television, which could equate to the webcam, his pronouncement also hinted at spaces like MySpace, Wiki, and Access Grid. Again, although he was considering telephony, teletype and television, his thought was clearly a vision of media as a social space. McLuhan's Global Village, in many ways, may have been similar to Web 2.0, with its emphasis on social interactions and content generation in online spaces, but what seems to be not important in his thought is the *social*, that is, the extension of the human organism and its community through the nets.

Deleuze's metaphor of the rhizome is also a well known metaphor in the development in our understanding of the interconnectedness of 'wired' individuals and their interactions with one another and their media. In *Rhizome Versus Tree* [2], Deleuze posited that networked discourse follows the massively enmeshed, but non-hierarchical undifferentiated social structures like the root systems of strawberry plants. For some, this is a metaphor for a shallow, quick, rapidly moving strategy in which engagement with the subject is far less than with previous forms. That is, while the previous hierarchical form of social structure (pre-networks) is built around protocol and privilege, the rhizomatic culture privileges the ad hoc and collective. One prime example of rhizomatic media might be Wikipedia [3], with its ever-changing structure and content, defined by its users. Although this is a very cursory analysis, the rhizomatic social space represents a holistic, and possibly intrinsically collaborative environment. In this social milieu, the interdependence (or at least interaction) between disciplines is 'written into the operating system' of culture.

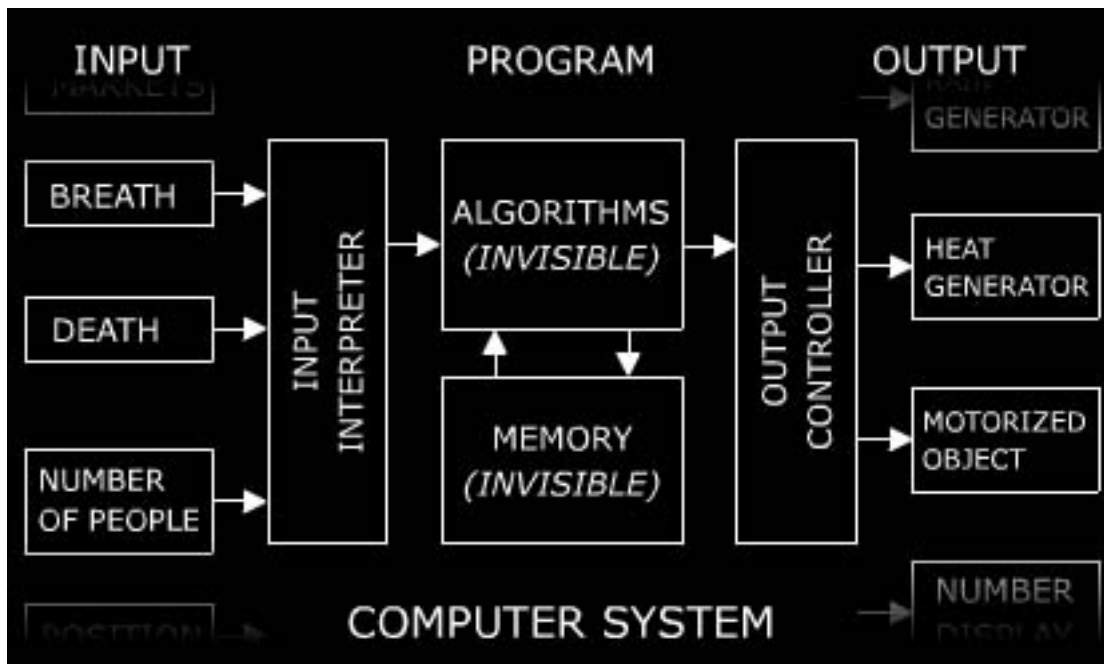
And lastly, Jean Baudrillard, in *The Transparence of Evil*, [4] puts forth the idea of cultural transparency, where cultural attributes of different genres expand to ubiquity throughout that given milieu. In a media saturated society, sports become politics, politics become pornography,

art becomes war, war becomes a video game, and capitalism becomes sport, ad infinitum. Baudrillard argues that this is due to the fact that media saturates, transmits, and conflates entire categories to the point where all points in culture become inextricably linked. This infiltration includes all areas of engagement of the arts, sciences, and humanities. This mandates that in the massively networked age, not only are we 'next door' to one another (McLuhan), or massively interconnected (Deleuze), our disciplines of research creation, and discourse unavoidably permeate one another. From this, is it any surprise that New Media artists collaborate? Therefore, it seems sensible to consider collaboration as a possible default position in networked culture, and to one degree or another, it seems to be unavoidable. Through McLuhan, Deleuze, and Baudrillard (among others), one can argue that the analysis of and creation within electronic and contemporary culture might encourage an enmeshing of people, projects, and disciplines which is indigenous to its culture.

The Necessities of New Media

One of the defining aspects of much New Media is the scope of disciplines, including engineering, computer science, as well as the arts & humanities, that are involved. The necessity for interdisciplinary collaboration has historical precedents, such as Rauschenberg, Kluver, et al's Experiments in Art and Technology [5]. EAT brought artists and engineers together to explore the applications of technology to fine art, initially resulting in *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*, a 1966 event in which 10 artists and 40 engineers explored the possibilities of technological art. However, the symbiosis needed for art/tech collaborations were evident. As Kluver said, "It became clear that achieving ongoing artist-engineer relationships would require a concerted effort to develop the necessary physical and social conditions." [6] While this alludes to more to bridging C.P. Snow's divide between the "Two Cultures"[7] of the arts and sciences, it also declares the necessary symbiosis amongst the disciplines in creative enterprises. EAT also further formalized a tradition of technology's influence on art and the interdisciplinary nature of technological art through the establishment of the EAT network. It's very much worth noting that what began as an experiment of roughly fifty individuals became a community of thousands, validating the cultural relevance of interdisciplinary collaboration in technological cultural production.

Another example of the necessity of interdisciplinary action in computational art is also illustrated by Jim Campbell in his "Diagram for Computer Art"[8], an update of the classic diagram put forth by A. Michael Noll in his essay, "Computer as Medium"[9]. Campbell's expansion of the ubiquitous von Neumann system infers any sensible input as data (including death) for an interactive work. In addition, the data remapping that Campbell illustrates the computer performing has output devices as fanciful as "Rain Generators"! Could it be assumed that it would be an exceptional individual indeed who could engineer microprocessor art, contextualize it, and be a rainmaker as well? Perhaps it may appear so, if Clarke's Third Law, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." [10] is any indicator. However, Campbell, taken in context with Clarke, does not illustrate the artist as prodigious, solitary individual, but an artist with a robust technical and collaborative network, if even only for technical support. In so doing, we can see that from our archipelago of art and tech practitioners like EAT ('66), Noll ('71), and Campbell (99), that few individuals have all the skills for new media pieces, mandating larger or smaller collaborative networks.



The Benefits of Collaboration

We have been discussing the necessity of collaboration, but are there precedents from which we can draw inferences regarding the benefits from collaboration as sustaining force in cultural milieus? Joline Blais, in her 2006 essay, *Indigenous Domain: Pilgrims, Permaculture and Perl* [11], she makes arguments for ideas of "Permaculture" (creation of wealth without doing damage), in global culture as a whole, and digital culture in specific. In the essay, she mentions that Indigenous cultures, these practices offer 'free cultures' of catchment, circles, and care. These include the importance of the gift economy, value of the process of creation, and the collection (catchment) of free assets for collective benefit. These can be expressed in everything from water basins in the physical to the Open Source movement in the digital. Of the three concepts, what is most interesting is the notion of catchment, especially in context with the work done by Jon Ippolito and Blais et al, *The Pool*[12]..

The Pool is a project created by University of Maine faculty Joline Blais, Jon Ippolito, Mike Scott, and Owen Smith, which is an online 'catchment' of assets, texts, skills and resources for the stimulation of communal weal. The project, in all of its three iterations, looks at different aspects of the collaborative interactions, social willingness, and intellectual property. These translate to collaboration, the defocusing of attribution and licensing, and ironically, student hesitation to this release of effort and resource. To derive some sort of metric from these interactions, the team has created tools to follow the social structures in the project, such as the associative interaction mapping tool, the Social Grapher. Within the Grapher, the *Pool* facilitators are able to look at degrees of integration between users (rather than separation) and the degree of collaboration that students employ during their wading about in The Pool. An interesting point is that while many of the students, while being wary of issues of intellectual property in that many have only one participant in projects (as seen in diagram 1), students still seek community with others. This is shown in diagram 2 illustrating three degrees of connection, as generated by the Grapher. Although this is one project instance in the study of digital sociology and collaboration, one conclusion that could be derived is that although contemporary culture encourages protection of intellectual capital, the individual still seeks collective action in a robust way.

human existence. This is not to say that competition is not part of the development of the human species, nor was Hobbes in his *Leviathan*[16] was wholly incorrect about human existence being “nasty, brutish, and short”. What is suggested is that cooperative interaction has figured far greater in the social and biological development of the human species, and that cooperation is the norm, rather than the exception. From this, it would be interesting to consider whether, in the long run, the community mural (or possibly even graffiti wall) would actually turn out to be the true gesamtkunstwerk

Collaboration – 4 Flavors

This discussion has analyzed some of the pragmatic, theoretical, historical, and even possibly biological foundations of New Media collaboration. But what is as important as the theoretical is the experiential record of this mode of production. There have been many different collaborative models within New Media art collectives, far more than those discussed here. It could even be hypothesized that each collective project has its own specificities unique to it, and it alone. Regardless, from considering various examples, we can derive some understanding of the correlation between our preceding discussion and extant praxis. What follows are encapsulations of different collective methods that the author has studied or been part of, and offers them as embodiments of possible exemplars of the principles stated earlier in this essay. In these brief analyses, we will consider the various groups’ production models, their benefit sharing, and attribution distribution schemas.

The Strange Case of RTMark – The Monolith

RTMark [17], an anonymous online collective of anti-corporate activists who came forth to challenge corporate power through subversion of liability displacement in the 1990’s, maintained its cultural opacity throughout all of its operations through utilization of the corporate veil. Going by names like Frank Guerrero, Ernest Lucha, Max Kauffmann, and Candida Lucida (plus an army of other names), the amorphous group marshaled various resources through the participants’ complimentary backgrounds. In addition, the very structure of *RTMark* as cultural mutual fund & subversion clearing house, created a network in which the ‘company’ acted as channel for ‘blacklisted’ cultural production through which few or many could be enlisted at will. This faceless, obfuscating monolithic corporate structure was also perfect for the *RTMark* collective, as it focuses/focused the attention on the work, and not on the possible individuals who may or may not have worked on it. The structure, was/is/could be adept in its conceptual displacement of the participants from their cultural (and possibly legal) transgressions, but also creates a ‘mythology’. This legend is of the entity that may be everywhere or nowhere, extant or not, in legion, numerous or small. The methods of attribution were/are brilliant in themselves as while artists involved could not exactly ‘claim’ involvement except in inexact terms, the *RTMark* collective was everywhere; a playful cultural insurgency before that age post-millennial panic. In many ways, *RTMark* serves/d as Duchampian catchment refuge for dissension, subversion, and critical intervention. Therefore, *RTMark* was everyone, yet no one, allowing it to be wherever it needed to be.

Second Front – Hub with Spokes

Second Front [18] is the name of an avatar-based performance group in the online world called Second Life. Founded by Jeremy Turner (Vancouver, aka Wirxli FlimFlam), Doug Jarvis (aka Tran Spire), and the author (aka Man Michinaga) in 2006, each in the group has had an interest in Virtual Reality for a number of years, and came from the tradition including artists such as Char Davies, Jaron Lanier, Greg Little, Cynthia Rubin, Margaret Dolinsky, and others. However, although the artists had discussed a collaborative for some time, there had not been a venue that seemed to have the right confluence of mainstream recognition and usability of tool to seem worthwhile. However, with Second Life’s recent popularity (including the 2007 Postmasters showing of 0100101110101101.org’s *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* [19]) provided an impetus for a free-form online venue for performance for larger audience than other VR-based online spaces, such as There.com or OnLive Traveler.

The collaborative method of *Second Front* is based on a procedural method using a listserv. For instance, ideas are thrown out to the group, and the 9-12 members democratically refine the concepts. For major activities, like script finalization, Web development, PR, and so on, individual members take initiative in creation and then vet the results through the listserv. Over the first six performances, the 'flat', democratic method has worked with no difficulties, as the members have related that they feel that they have a good consensual social contract.

As mentioned earlier, credit distribution is an important component of artistic production, and in many cases, artists will create derivative works from collaborations. How does one credit the artists who have helped in the singular works of artists in such a collaboration? In the case of *SF*, there are two important points. All of the *SF* videos, graphics, etc., are licensed under Creative Commons Attribution licenses, for free use as long as proper credit is given. From this, individual artists are then free to create derivative works given the provision that they also credit the group, i.e., "Penny Browne & Second Front". This method, while different than the *RTMark* monolithic form of crediting, still distributes credit widely as both the artist and collective are recognized. In many ways, *Second Front* acts as a catchment from which the constituent members contribute, share, pull into the individual works, and then return the shared benefits to the collective.

The Gears – Clevelander Z

Clevelander-Z [20] is an installation-based surveillance collective founded by ex-Clevelander Laura Rusnak at Bowling Green State University in 2005. *C-Z* (as they like to be called) came together over discussions revealed common sensibilities regarding social justice and the society of surveillance. What is unique about the constituency of *C-Z* is the complimentary nature of the skills of its members. Where most of *C-Z* have a baseline of mutual competencies (flash, electronics, familiarity with theory, conceptual sensibilities) in most of the other's areas, the formation of the group realized a near-dovetailing of expertise (i.e. hardware vs. code, Imaging vs. Design), creating a highly efficient collaborative unit. The unusual aspect of the collaboration is that many groups have specialized participants that may or may not be able to perform installation duties, talk, etc. The *C-Z* collaborative (as of 2007) has bodies of expertise that mesh through a baseline of common knowledge. This meshed complimentary configuration creates a highly useful parity in regards to presentation of the material.

In regards to accreditation, *C-Z* operates similarly to *RTMark*, except that it is not anonymous. The works that the participants attribute to *C-Z* are wholly collective in nature, making no distinction of role. In many ways, this is another form of collective catchbasin in regards to cultural production, and *C-Z* considers this an effective and beneficial model.

The Organization – Terminal Time

Lastly, another collective that had an interesting collaborative model was that of Domike, Mateas, and Vanouse's interactive history documentary, *Terminal Time*. [21] This audience-driven, real-time historical documentary consisted of hundreds of movie and text clips, minutes of animations, and an extensive AI engine, requiring the efforts of 'guest artists', tens of production assistants, and hundreds of participants. The role distribution varied from videography, editing, writing, programming, interfacing, sound, and programming the interfacing and AI. Therefore, *TT*, of all of these examples, is probably unique in its scope as a singular project, and more like a small movie than a New Media project.

From this, the organizational structure of *TT* appears much more reflective of a traditional media production. In the closing credits, the structure is apparent; from the principals, additional collaborators, production assistants, actors, and so on in a traditional media production hierarchy, possibly even illustrating a set of concentric rings of involvement. Phenomenologically speaking, *TT* offers an insight into the confluence of New Media, industrial models, and traditional media production. As with many projects involving numerous participants, resources of all categories become an issue, and productions of the scope of *TT* may demand hierarchical organization. This begs the question as to whether larger new Media projects with numerous categories of interdisciplinary specialization and levels of expertise require traditional models in order to

function within existing institutional and foundation funding models. This is merely an idea that this author wishes to suggest, but is also curious as to how support models might work at larger scales.

Conclusion:

Throughout this discussion, we have considered the cultural origins, the necessities, and benefits of collaboration in the New Media cultural milieu, as well as four models of artistic collaboration and legitimation. As a caveat, this is not to say that there are far more, as there are models used by many of the names mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, and those mentioned here are ones chosen for ones of familiarity. By following the trajectory of cultural roots, disciplinary scope, resource requirements and the distributed nature of contemporary culture, one could argue that New Media could be an outgrowth of distributed culture. From that rhizomatic, interdisciplinary milieu, the collective gesture makes sense as a form of cultural expression, and thus the discussion of New Media and collaboration is a logical progression of contemporary art discourse. As genres such as Social Media continue to develop, the nature of collaboration may change radically in the coming years. If Clippinger & Bollier are correct, collectivism in New Media may reflect the return of the commons and possibly even the nature of human neurobiology. But what seems to be a remaining factor in contemporary New Media is the element of group action, whether in creation or participation, and this in itself could be an interesting field of study in the coming years.

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