Chapter 8

Transposing, Transforming, and Transcending Tradition in Creative Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

How can digital media technologies, contemporary theories of creativity, and tradition combine to develop the aesthetics of computer-based art today and in the future? Through contextualised case-studies, this chapter investigates how games, information technologies, and traditional visual and storytelling arts combine to create rich, complex, and engaging moving-image based artworks with wide appeal. It examines how dramatist and interactive media artist Maureen Thomas and 3D media artist and conservator Marianne Selsjord deploy creative digital technologies to transpose, transform, and transcend pre-page arts and crafts for the digital era, making fresh work for new audiences. Researcher in digital aesthetics, creative cognition, and play behaviour Dr. Phillip Prager examines how such work is conducive to creative insight and worthwhile play, discussing its remediation of some of the aspirations and approaches of 20th-century avant-garde artists, revealing these as a potent source of conceptual riches for the digital media creators of today and tomorrow.

INTRODUCTION

Certain objects can be intentionally constructed in such a way that they are eminently suitable for disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation. They will contain structures that guide attention and contemplation – that encourage it by means of their intentionally designed features of unity, complexity and intensity – and that reward such attention and contemplation. The aesthetic experencer will not have to do all the work herself. The object itself will be structured...
intentionally to invite, sustain and, optimally, reward disinterested and sympathetic attention and contemplation. Such objects, of course, are artworks. (Carroll, 2010, pp. 172-173)

Are digital and interactive technologies changing the nature of the artwork? This chapter addresses the transposition, transformation and transcending of traditional techniques from painting and sculpture in creative digital media, to create artworks whose new approaches to unity, complexity and intensity reward attention and contemplation in new ways. It employs both aesthetic and scientific approaches to the nature of creativity and the impact of interactive works, arguing for a recognition of play and playfulness as a significant component in contemporary electronic art and an acknowledgement of the continuities of both traditional and avant-garde practices in today’s digital environment.

In Creativity and Art: Three Roads to Surprise (2010) Margaret A. Boden notes:

As a practice, interactive art – wherein the form of the art object is partly determined by the actions of the audience (or, occasionally, by non-human forces) – is by now well established. It’s not mainstream, to be sure. But it’s an identifiable genre (Krueger, 1991; Candy & Edmonds, 2002; Ascott, 2003; Whitelaw, 2004). However, there’s no established aesthetics associated with it. […] The nature of the interaction is considered to be at least as important as that of the art object itself. But interaction doesn’t figure as a consideration in traditional aesthetics. Moreover, the artists concerned disagree among themselves about what type of interaction is most interesting and/or most humanly significant. […] A related uncertainty concerns the attribution of creativity, or artistic responsibility, for the artwork. […] Many interactive artists not only insist that the audience are participants in the art-making, but claim that this distributed responsibility has value in itself; so is a factor in their aesthetic creation. (Boden, 2010, p. 210)

Marianne Selsjord’s Gardens of Dreaming (2009) and Marvellous Transformations (2014), and Maureen Thomas’s Vala (2001), RuneCast (2007) and Viking Seeress (2010), the major case-studies considered here, offer an approach which hopefully contributes to identifying the aesthetics of interactive art, including interactivity and participative creativity, that Boden misses. These works draw on the European art and craft traditions of sculpture, painting, carving, metalwork and oral composition, from the Viking Age through the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the 20th-century avant-garde, whose processes they transform for the digital era. These approaches are inherently transferable, and could be adapted for many kinds of original work. The case-studies are contextualised both with reference to traditional arts and aesthetics, and contemporary 3D-games art.

Selsjord and Thomas’s work falls into Boden and Edmonds’ category of “Computer-based Interactive Art (CI-Art)”, where “the form/content […] is significantly affected by the behaviour of the audience”, and the case-studies are presented within this theoretical framework. “With regard to CI-art,” Boden and Edmonds note “perhaps we should speak not of the ‘artwork’ but of the ‘art system’ - where this comprises the artist, the program, the technological installation (and its observable results), and the behaviour of the human audience” (Boden, 2010, p.155). Both Thomas and Selsjord regard 3D digital media, explorable art and narrativity as fresh mediums, capable of giving a new lease of life to traditional practices and enjoyments, whilst contributing innovative potentials of their own.

Working with the computer as both tool and medium requires an understanding of the affordances of software and fluency with the visual and physical languages of interactivity. The interaction situation, interaction devices and interaction itself in the experiences are all viewed here, in line with Boden and Edmonds’ observations, as integral components of the artwork as a whole, and thus of its aesthetic. This approach can be applied more
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