

Lev Manovich

Media, Software, and Meta-media

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Media, Software, and Meta-media

By Lev Manovich

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Abstract

What is the relationship between the computer's contemporary identity as a simulator for all previous media, and its "essence" as a programmable machine? Is software art the only real "avant-garde" of new media, or is the more "impure" practice of remixing older media with software techniques equally innovative?

Abstract for a Talk

Digital computers enable new cultural techniques and forms such as interactive graphical user Interface, large-scale databases, navigable space, simulation, and dynamic data visualization. At the same time, they radically change conventional media it turning into something I call "meta-media." A meta-media cultural object contains both language and meta-language – both the original media structure (a film, an architectural space, a sound track) and the software tools that allow the user to generate descriptions of this structure and to change this structure. Put differently, by combining interfaces and formats of traditional media with the new information representation and manipulation techniques which come from software, we arrive at new media forms. These forms respect the conventions of old media while offering us new ways to represent reality and human experience.

If you think that meta-media is a conservative phenomenon which "betrays" the movement of computer culture to develop its own unique cultural techniques – Artificial Intelligence, Artificial Life, simulation, etc. – you are wrong. Since the late 1960s modern computing has been grounded in Alan Kay's concept (influenced by previous work on human computer interface, most importantly Sutherland's 1962 Sketchpad software) of a computer as a "personal expressive media." After he arrived to Xerox PARC, Kay directed the development of a word processor program, a music composition program, a paint program, and other tools that redefined the computer as a simulation machine for old media. So while the routine use of computers as media simulators did not become possible until the 1980s, the paradigm itself was already set around 1970. In summary, the computer's ability to

simulate other media (which means simulating their interfaces and "data formats" such as written text, image, and sound) is not an after-thought -- it is the essence of a modern post-1970 computer.

The fact that today meta-media -- rather than other seemingly "truly" original computer techniques -- is in the center of computer culture is not accidental. The logic of meta-media fits well with other key aesthetic paradigms of today -- the remixing of previous cultural contents and forms of a given media (most visible in music, architecture, and fashion), and the second type of remixing -- that of national cultural traditions now submerged into the medium of globalization. (In the first approximation, the terms "postmodernism" and "globalization" can be used as aliases for these two remix paradigms.) Meta-media then can be thought alongside these two types of remixing as the third type: the remixing between the interfaces of various cultural forms and the new software techniques.

In my talk I will illustrate my concept of meta-media by showing and discussing a few of the classics of new media art done during last five years.