21C3: The Usual Suspects

Digital Prosthetics: Numbness, Institutionalisation, and the Revolutionary Demands of Hacking

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Conflicting Themes/Forces

1. **Digital media prosthetics** [McLuhan]….copy and paste & P2P, curiosity culture [Leadbeater], play ethos [Rushkoff; Rifkin; Huizinga; Sallins], protean consciousness [Lifton]

2. **Institutionalisation**….capitalism as a social system constantly enlarges the space within which rational decision-making applies, thus, it'd eventually learn to replace the human carrier of innovation – the entrepreneur [Schumpeter; Rosenberg]…. → Law is the quintessential institutionalised mechanism

3. **Imperatives of (corporate planning and) sophisticated technology production**…centralised control over technology and market … semi-autonomous cognitive labour is vital for industrial and post-industrial capitalism [Galbraith]

So far, leading to…

- Shared lived experience forced to undergo a process of commodification. But at what cost?

- **From culture to cultural production**: "today, we're all on the market for a paid-for lifestyle" (in housing and brands, we trust) Entertainment industry (*incl.* tourism, health-care) is expanding fast…*hollywoodisation* of network production, and doing business & working redesigned as a performing act [Pine & Gilmore; Kao; Peters; Kotlin; Malone & Laubacher & Nonaka]

- In retrospect, all those changes combined are unveiling the new face of commercial reappropriation: cultural capitalism → when ideas become property & the commons are enclosed in the marketplace [Negri and Hardt; Dubord; Soderberg]

The commodification of shared lived experience

Video games : a striking example

from the death-online dept.

An anonymous reader writes *"Here's a picture of Warsingers funeral. Warsinger was an in-game persona in the rather good MMORPG Dark Age of Camelot". and generally well-liked. The real person behind Warsinger was a 32-year-old with heart trouble, who really died. So the players on his server organized an in-game funeral.At the funeral, players from the three realms of Camelot, who normally kill each other gleefully on sight, stood in the shape of a heart (check the pic above); the two figures in the center of the heart are Warsinger's real-life sister and girlfriend."*
[http://slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=02/09/05/230204&mode=nested&tid=127]

Picture still available online at
http://www.tbray.org/ongoing/When/200x/2002/09/05/-big/heart.jpg

Communication is inextricably linked to culture: when the capacity to communicate can only be rented with hard cash, not much of free culture is to be expected

When a critical part of shared lived experience has migrated in the simulated universes inhabited by digital communities, and our last hope for inner meaning lies in the non-spatial dimensions of cyberspace, then we're no longer humans…we've become something else, and unfortunately, whether we like it or not, commercial entities are ahead of us in homesteading the noosphere.

"being a cyborg is not an option; it's a 21st century condition"

Commodifying human relationships

- **Marketing for the 21st century**: Mass customisation, personalisation, from customer acquisition to customer retention, customer lifestyle value, infomediaries [Hagel III & Singer]

- Commercial communities spring up in physical space (ie. commercial-interest developments, from the agora and the public square to the shopping mall) and cyberspace (electric minds…echo chambers….orkut..???)

Two concerns: *1*

"If the capitalist system continues to absorb large parts of the cultural realm in the form of commodified cultural products and experiences, the risk is very real that culture will atrophy to the point where it can no longer produce enough social capital to support the economy" [Rifkin 2000: 245]

Two concerns: *2*

"When human thought becomes such an important commodity, what happens to ideas that, while important, may not be commercially attractive? Is there any room left for noncommercial views in a civilisation where people rely on the commercial sphere for ideas by which to live their lives?" [Rifkin 2000: 55]

Social Response

→ Strive for balance (ie. Fair use) ? Or contemplate the beginning of the most violent struggle (the collapse of patents will signal the collapse of the entire property system) ?

The threat of dynamic technology

- The myth of neutral technology & pure science [McLuhan; Jaubert & Levy-Leblonde]

- Why the future doesn't need us [Joy]

- Is *relinquishment* an option? Even if it were desirable, it is hardly feasible

- Were are we now? Technology licensing. The case of the GNU GPL. Is though digital freedom adequate without catering for human rights and environmental sustainability? Is that a logical fix to our problem?

- Hacktivismo Enhanced - Source Software License Agreement (HESSLA) and Common Good Public License [cgpl.org]….fighting imaginary system with imaginary arms

"I touched with my own hands the first bomb that hit Nagasaki…I tasted a feeling of deep guilt during the preparation of this crime against humanity. How did it happen, I was thinking, that I went on to make my contribution to this? But it did happen! And it happened because I then believed in the wrongly held assumption that the advancement of science should be pursued for the sake of science. This very philosophy constitutes the poison of modern science. And because of that assumption, which makes us draw a line between science and social life and human beings, I came to work on the atomic bomb. We thought that as experts we should be dedicated to "pure science" and that everything else should be left to politicians. I am ashamed to confess that it was the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing that made me get out of my Ivory Tower, the one I had built for science, and made me realise that there is no such thing as pure science, and that science has no mission and no purpose other than serving the interests of humankind."

[Joan Hinton, representing Europe at the Asian Countries Panel in October 1952. Joan Hinton had taken part in developing the first atomic bomb in Los Alamos. The above is quoted in Georges Politzer, Elementary Principles of Philosophy, 1976.]

Grounds for hope: useful, socially-conscious technology

- Innovation at the edges of the network, the principle of the stupid network [Lessig, Isenberg]

- Augmented social networks, digitally-empowered multitude (ie. From Openmute and Indymedia to Smartmobs)

- P2P, libre software/hardware (ie. Gnubook.org, Simputer.org)

- The radicalisation of the technology developer/user/artist

Thank You

Particle Accelerator. Author: Paul DeCelle

Appendix 1: proposal

I'd like to propose a session/discussion on how digital media prosthetics, institutionalisation (in particular the manifestations of copyright and patent law which lurk behind vested interests in controlling the transition to a vastly powerful new world), and the imperatives of corporate planning have come into a conflict so fierce that shared lived experience, increasingly, is forced to undergo a rapid process of commodification. This struggle, which can no longer be defined through the lens of geography or class alone, in turn, points to a not that distant future in which commons-based peer production/consumption is exploited within a context of intense social taylorism and digital fordism with the ultimate goal to turn culture into a paid-for experience, and hence moving the terrain of struggle away from the surplus value of labour to the "legitimacy" of knowledge sharing and pervasive networking, and how the latter can be monetised and controlled in accordance with anarcho-capitalist agendas. Obviously, the question which we ought to pose to ourselves is how the revolutionary demands of hacking can be guided, assembled, and reproduced so that this process of commodification is consciously resisted by technology developers and users alike, artists, and all those whose creativity and desire for socially-conscious technological innovation and emergent social cooperation have been enhanced by the digital condition we're increasingly in the centre of.

Appendix 2: Select bibliography

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- Hagel III, J. & Singer, M. Net Worth
- Huizinga, J. Homo Ludens
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- Lifton, R. The Protean Self
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- McLuhan, M. Understanding Media
- Negri, A. & Hardt, M. Empire
- Peters, T. Liberation Management
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- Rosenberg, Exploring The Black Box
- Rushkoff, D. Open Source Democracy
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- Soderberg, J. Unwilling Revolutionaries, *Hyper(+)drome.Manifestation*
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