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Toward an Aesthetics of New-Media Environments

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I suggest that, over and above the need to explore and understand the technological newness of computer art works, there is a need to address the aesthetic significance of the changes and effects that such technological newness brings about, considering the whole environmental transaction pertaining to new media, including what they can or do offer and what users do or can do with such offerings, and how this whole package is integrated into our living spaces and activities. I argue that, given the primacy of computer-based interaction in the new media, the notion of 'ornamentality' indicates the ground-floor aesthetics of new-media environments. I locate ornamentality not only in the logically constitutive principles of the new media (hypertextuality and interactivity) but also in their multiform cultural embodiments (decoration as cultural interface). I utilize Kendall Walton's theory of ornamentality in order to construe a puzzle pertaining to the ornamental erosion of information in new-media environments. I argue that insofar as we consider new media to be conduits of 'real life', the excessive density of ornamental devices prevalent in certain new-media environments forces us to conduct our inquiries under conditions of neustic uncertainty, that is, uncertainty concerning the kind of relationship that we, the users, have to the propositional content mediated. I conclude that this puzzle calls our attention to a peculiar interrogatory complexity inherent in any game of knowledge-seeking conducted across the infosphere, which is not restricted to the simplest form of data retrieval, especially in mixed-reality environments and when the knowledge sought is embodied mimetically. I suggest that this puzzle calls us to consider what would be a viable logic of virtual discovery.

In recent years there has been an upsurge in discussions of various forms of computer art. Quite expectedly, the recent literature has chiefly focused on the need for, and the ensuing difficulties in, demarcating computer art

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as *sui generis*, that is, on the challenge of arguing that computers provide a new *medium* for art, rather than simply being a new *vehicle* for displaying art. Standard debates concerning the value and the art-status of such purported works of art follow naturally from such attempts to answer the classic ‘what is it?’ question.

I have no quarrel with the current debate concerning computer art as it stands. Rather, in the first part of my paper, I would like to tease out of this present concern yet another concern, which I believe to be more fundamental and, dare I say, more forward-looking.

There is common agreement on the pivotal role of the notion of computer-based interactivity for any complete understanding of computer art. According to Dominic McIver Lopes, ‘computer art works exploit the technology of computing in order to achieve interactivity. [...] Computer-based interactivity is the special feature that distinguishes computer art from digital art and indeed all the other arts’ (Lopes 2010, p. 27).

However, there is a tinge of technological essentialism in Lopes’ underscoring of ‘computer-based’ in the phrase ‘computer-based interactivity’, one which I would like to resist right at the outset. By technological essentialism I mean the tendency to identify the specificity of a medium with its underlying technology. Lopes uses the following working definition for interactivity as pertaining to computer art: ‘a work of art is interactive to the degree that the actions of its users help generate its display (in prescribed ways)’ (Lopes 2010, p. 37); hence ‘a user interacts with a work of art just in case he or she acts so as to generate its display in a prescribed manner’ (ibid.).

I believe that an air of technological essentialism generates some confusion here about the purported newness of computer-based interactivity as designating the specificity of the computer art medium. We ordinarily speak of computer-based interactivity quite literally, as consisting in physical interaction—real or simulated—between the user and her gadget: pressing a button, choosing a link, cutting, pasting, dragging an icon and so on. Yet, as Lev Manovich has pointed out, classical as well as ‘old’ modern media—literary and dramatic narratives, visual and three-dimensional representations, works of music, architecture, and cinema, to adduce the most obvious examples—are all interactive in the sense that they invite or hinge upon cognitive processes of filling-in, hypothesis form-

ation, recall and identification, etc. (Manovich 2000, pp. 55-61). In this sense, computer-based interactivity is not that different from what we have long been familiar with, and restricting ourselves to technological newness amounts to taking a one-sided view of a much richer picture—that of the enmeshment of our minds and lives in the technology. Involved here is a wholly different sense, indeed a wholly different scope of newness.

One should be reminded of the prophetic words of new-media pioneer Douglas Engelbart, who on the brink of the digital revolution advised his peers to transcend technological essentialism. ‘We do not speak of isolated clever tricks that help in particular situations,’ Engelbart wrote. ‘We refer to a way of life in an integrated domain where hunches, cut-and-try, intangibles, and the human “feel for a situation” usefully co-exist with powerful concepts, streamlined terminology and notation, sophisticated methods, and high-powered electronic aids’ (Engelbart 1962, p. 1).

So with regard to Lopes’ starting point there is actually another difficulty, which is broader and deeper. Information and communication technology (ICT), in which computer art inheres, is currently in a state of flux, surging toward and perhaps even past the threshold of what Luciano Floridi identifies in a recent book as ‘the fourth revolution’ (Floridi 2014). According to Floridi, the upheavals caused by the transformative insights of Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud have now been followed by a fourth revolution, associated with the work of Allan Turing, who ‘displaced us from our privileged and unique position in the realm of logical reasoning, information processing, and smart behavior’ (93). Floridi writes:

We are slowly accepting the post-Turing idea that we are not Newtonian, stand-alone, and unique agents, some Robinson Crusoe on an island. Rather, we are informational organisms (inforgs), mutually connected and embedded in an informational environment (the infosphere), which we share with other informational agents, both natural and artificial, that also process information logically and autonomously. (94)

To understand any technology, Floridi reminds us, we need to acknowledge its characteristic of ‘in-betweenness’ (25-34). Any technology is always situated between an interacting user and a prompter—that which prompts the user to interact with the technology. (Note: a prompter

is a patently environmental concept. This will become important as my discussion unfolds.) This ‘in-betweenness’ can be of the first, second, or third order. When technologies are in-between human users and natural prompters (e.g., an umbrella), we may qualify them as first order. Second-order technologies are those relating users no longer to nature but to other technologies; that is, they are technologies whose prompters are other technologies (e.g., an engine which provides energy to other technologies). Third-order technologies, the hallmark of the current revolutionary leap, relate technologies-as-users to other technologies-as-prompters. This is where ‘we, who are the users, are no longer in the loop, but at most on the loop [...] Or perhaps we are not significantly present at all, that is, we are out of the loop entirely, and enjoy or simply rely on such technologies as (possibly unaware) beneficiaries or consumers’ (30).

Against the backdrop of this threefold analysis of the very idea of technology, Lopes’ working definition of interactivity as pertaining to computer art appears to be a truncated conception. There is no reference to prompters at all. Of course, in Lopes’ notion of ‘a prescribed manner’ there is an implicit reference to the artist as prompter. Yet if the artist of a computer artwork stands in the same relation to her creation as that of the computer programmer to her software, or that of an engineer to her machine, then this will not do. When we use information and communication technology (of either the first or the second order) the prompter is either nature or another technology, not the person (or persons) who engineered it. The latter idea sounds a bit like Molière’s famous gag in *The Imaginary Invalid* that opium induces sleep because there is ‘a dormitive power’ in it.

Either way, Lopes’ working definition seems to be distancing itself from the idea of first-order ICT. After all, we visit museums and otherwise artificially circumscribed venues to experience (that is, to use) computer art. Yet there remains ambiguity concerning the notion of a ‘user’ between second- and third-order ICTs. Unqualified, we can see that the revolutionary shift from second- to third-order ICTs would ultimately assimilate computer art, thus defined, into the very fabric of the informational environment to the exclusion of human agency—the user can be a technology and the display can be machine-readable data. But then, is it *art*? And for *whom*?

Of course, this is in itself just a *reductio ad absurdum*. Clearly, Lopes wishes to retain human agency in the loop, and so do we.

Still, if we wish to retain human agency in the conception of computer art, then under the conditions of the ‘fourth revolution’ we must consider the vast changes to the very conception of human life which ensue from the fundamental anthropological fact that ICTs have positioned themselves from the get-go as technologies of the self, deeply affecting the informational patterns in which increasingly larger domains of our life inhere (Floridi uses the catchy term ‘onlife’)—our informational nature, our activities, our memories or narratives. Our *onlife* experience presupposes that we are our own information, and this brave-new-world idea has already had extensive repercussions concerning embodiment, space, time, memory and interactions, perception, health, and education.

So, again: if we wish to retain human agency in the conception of computer art, *and also* introduce the counterpart notion of a *prompter* in addition to that of a user, as necessitated by a proper analysis of the notion of technology, then, under the conditions of the ‘fourth revolution’, the theoretical onus in aesthetics is bound to shift to the onlife experience, to the enmeshment of human life in ICTs, that is, to an aesthetics of new media *environments*, rather than an aesthetics of discrete occasions of what we might call ‘art’ or, alternatively, even unwittingly, ‘technology’. In the last analysis, an onlife conception of computer art is patently environmental.

Given the aforementioned concerns, I draw some inspiration, and also courage, from John Dewey’s famous qualm concerning what he called ‘the museum conception of art’ (Dewey 1980), by which he meant the compartmentalization of the aesthetic so that it was separate from real life, remitted it to its own realm, remote from vital ordinary interests. I suggest that an *offlife* conception of computer art (to adduce an ad hoc antonym to Floridi’s notion of *onlife*), which Lopes’ book exemplifies, is analogous to Dewey’s notion of ‘the museum conception of art’. From the perspective of the ‘fourth revolution’, indeed from the vantage point of those born after 9/11 who belong to so-called Generation Z, an offlife conception of computer art would appear quite constrained, a relic of a receding paradigm. It rests on cultural conditions that have been rapidly eroding over the last seventy years with increasing acceleration and with no sign of abating.

I conclude this part of my paper by saying that over and above the need to explore and appreciate the technological newness of computer art works, there is a need to address the aesthetic significance of the changes and effects that such technological newness brings about, considering the whole environmental transaction pertaining to new media, including what they can or do offer and what users do or can do with such offerings, and how this whole package is integrated into our living spaces and activities.

I proceed now to the second part of my paper: a suggestion for an aesthetics of new-media environments, which I can sketch here only briefly.

In any aesthetics of the new-media environment, a man-made environment must be the object of aesthetic appreciation, an environment which consists in and emerges from a gradual integration of new media. It is what Floridi calls the ‘infosphere’—the ever expanding and converging digital ‘encyclopaedic macrocosm of data, information, ideas, knowledge, beliefs, codified experiences, memories, images, artistic interpretations and other mental creations’ (Floridi 1999, 8) which has been gradually evolving since the 1950s along three fundamental vectors: (a) toward multimedia information and virtual reality; (b) toward graphic and immersive interfaces; and (c) toward integration and convergence of the global network (Floridi 1999, 14-15). According to Floridi,

The infosphere is the whole system of services and documents, encoded in any semiotic and physical media, whose contents include any sort of data, information and knowledge, with no limitation either in size, typology or logical structure. Hence it ranges from alphanumeric texts and multimedia products to statistical data, from films and hypertexts to whole text-banks and collections of pictures, from mathematical formulae to sounds and videoclips. (8)

Minimally, infosphere denotes the whole informational environment constituted by all informational entities, their properties, interactions, processes, and mutual relations. It is an environment comparable to, but different from, cyberspace, which is only one of its sub-regions, as it were, since the infosphere includes offline and analogue spaces of information. Maximally, infosphere is a concept that can also be used as synonymous with reality, once we interpret the latter informationally. (2014, 41)

Significantly, this means that in any aesthetics of new-media environments, aesthetic concerns, properties, and values are essentially wedded to the philosophy of information. Yet, to adapt a stance from Arnold Berleant, such environmental aesthetics does not concern gadgets and data-bases alone. Rather 'it deals with the conditions under which people join as participants in an integrated situation' (Berleant 1992, 12). Thus, aesthetic value is related both intrinsically to the user's experience and extrinsically to the quality of information.

Yet I would like to argue further that the main, most important aesthetic category pertaining to the aesthetics of new-media environments is that of the decorative. That is, my claim is that ornamentality is the ground-floor aesthetics of new-media environments (Guter 2010). This requires some elucidation.

The category of the decorative is ordinarily applied to a variety of patterned artifacts, and also to certain aspects of arts or crafts not normally thought to be necessarily or primarily decorative, such as architecture and furniture-making. In a broader sense, ornamentality need not be limited to the production of particular artifacts as such; it also includes the layout and interrelations of arrays of objects in the design of lived environments. In a yet broader sense, ornamentality also encompasses certain processes involving the transformation of the self, including not only the adornment of the body but also the shaping of one's manners, modes of speech, conduct, feelings, motives, and thoughts (Alperson 1992, 218).

This broad, inclusive sense of ornamentality is capable of broaching the multiform complexities and dynamics summoned and exhibited by onlife experience within the infosphere, wherein narratives are refracted, interlaced, restructured, and restored; environments are constantly being adjusted across the online/offline divide as the virtual trails off seamlessly into the real. Unfolding in time and spread out graphically in virtual space, bits of information, plucked from the onlife flux, are set in elaborate, dazzling designs, traversing a whole range of transformations and dislocations of established media, like precious stones set in a glittering multi-dimensional piece of jewelry. This broad, inclusive sense of ornamentality is ripe for placing the human user in the theoretical limelight and also for accounting for the user's important characteristic of being a world-maker, not just an onlooker.

So why, how, and when are new-media environments ornamental? One answer, taken squarely from ordinary experience, readily suggests itself: at least some of these technologies are conducive to audio-visual styling; hence they serve a clear decorative purpose as fixtures in our everyday lives, both online and off. The activated technology often becomes part of the space in which it inheres in quite a straightforward sense, satisfying the decorative aim of creating or adjusting one's ambience. Such a transitive aspect of the decorative pertains to one of main characteristics of the new media: their dispersal, or the interweaving of such technologies into our everyday experience at the levels of consumption, production, and participation.

Yet there are further reasons to support the claim that new-media environments are ornamental, regarding not just their multiform cultural embodiments but also their logically constitutive principles—namely, interactivity and hypertextuality.

Here I would like to turn to Kendall Walton's theory of mimesis as make-believe, which offers an exceptionally insightful account of ornamentation in terms of the inhibition of participation in games of make-believe (Walton 1990). According to Walton, decorative designs present us with fictional worlds in which other fictional worlds are embedded. This puts us at a certain psychological 'distance' from the embedded world, since we participate only in the first-order game of make-believe while imagining that there is another game we could participate in. In Walton's words: 'We stand apart from the internal fictional world and observe it through its frame' (284).

Insofar as a representation is ornamental, we inevitably find ourselves withdrawn to the point of being merely spectators, rather than participants in a game of make-believe. We oscillate between the tempting fictional richness of the internal world and the overpowering sparseness of the framing world, which consists of 'scarcely more than the work itself together with, by implication, its artist and his creative activity' (287).

We may readily see how Walton's theoretical apparatus can be adapted and deployed for our purposes here. For the sake of argument (admitting that a full-fledged argument is required), let us assume that we may in the present context replace at no significant cost the term 'fictional' with the term 'virtual', which (it would be instructive to recall) simply means 'not

actually, but just as if'.

Most of our onlife experiences can be described quite unproblematically in terms of using props in a variety of games of make-believe, perceptual or other, wherein such props can be, for instance, other network users (real or fake), texts, visual images, pop-ups and interactive graphics of all sorts, computer icons, navigational objects, sound effects, audio-visual clips, live feeds, and other such stuff as new-media dreams are made on. Our various games of make-believe with these props generate virtual truths about the props themselves, about virtual worlds, which they inhabit, and about us, the participants, or rather *users*. Furthermore, insofar as our onlife experiences are exclusively mediated by the human-computer interface, information patently takes the form of a display—whether via words, sounds, graphics, visuals, or even, in certain immersive environments, kinesthetic sensations.

The observation that the new media are conducive to audio-visual styling and hence to decoration readily maps onto Walton's idea that ornamentality is to be explicated in terms of the inhibition of participation in games of make-believe. For styling simply draws one's attention to the way the display is actually produced, hence away from any virtual truth it may generate. This is clearly the case with the radical kind of audio-visual styling which is rampant in the new media.

Furthermore, even in the realm of mere text, we can observe pervasive styling, namely, hypertextuality, undoubtedly one of the key features of new-media technology, which has already lent itself to artistic use in the form of hypertextual poetry and prose. Insofar as hypertextual styling empowers the user to determine the format of the text, thereby deflecting her back to the manner in which the text is generated by the user's own performance of reading, it inhibits participation in games of make-believe.

Hypertextual navigation is an instance of interactivity, which can be defined as the user's ability to directly intervene in and change the display being accessed. Interactivity amounts to a world-building activity, which means that when we digitally interact with the medium, we patently refer back to the features of the medium itself—we are withdrawn to the way the display is actually produced. In this sense, I suggest, interaction in general, and hypertextuality in particular, inhibit participation in games of make-believe.

Taking a step further in my argument, I would like to tap once again into Floridi's important emphasis on computer technologies as technologies of the self, that is, technologies which enable and empower the user to conduct inquiries within and across the infosphere, which are self-generating, self-dislocating, or self-modifying. I would suggest that Walton's dual game-world formation may afford a theoretically fruitful angle concerning one of the most puzzling aspects of onlife experience: a deepening sense of the dissolution of the barriers between the real and the virtual.

It may be instructive to employ here a valuable distinction, introduced by R. M. Hare, between the *phrastic* and the *neustic* aspects of an utterance (Hare 1970). By the phrastic, Hare means the propositional content of the utterance. The neustic is what Hare calls a sign of subscription to the speech-act that is being performed: it is that part of the sentence which expresses the speaker's commitment to the factuality, desirability, etc., of the propositional content conveyed by the phrastic. Simply put, the distinction between the phrastic and the neustic is between the content and the mood or force of a sentence.

My point is this: the features of the medium—which eventually deflects the user back to the features of the actual display, hence inhibits her participation in games of make-believe with its content—perform a neustic function; they deeply affect the mood or force of the content of a given display. Thus ornamentality in general hinges upon the neustic—it concerns not what we say in the sense of coded information, but how we gesture toward ourselves and others. I suggest that this coheres with Walton's claim that decorative designs pull us back to a more 'objective' perspective, which might yield more significant connections with our lives.

Now, as Hamlet says, 'there's the rub'.

If the new media are ornamental in this broad, inclusive, pervasive sense, then, insofar as they are self-modifying, they are ornamental in a sense very different from, let's say, flowery wallpaper or Persian rugs. New-media ornamentality uniquely exemplifies ornamentality without abstraction. A pinkish wallpaper flower may be an abstraction of a particular flower, exemplifying all flowers of its kind yet no one flower in particular. On the other hand, new-media ornamentality, insofar as it is self-modifying, is all about particulars: names, faces, and events—the elements

of a story.

Granting this, we can now put Walton's theory to an interesting use. If, as Walton says, we understand ornamental designs in terms of fictional worlds in which other fictional worlds are embedded, hence experience the effect of standing apart from the internal fictional world and observing it through its frame, that is, a second-order fictional world, which is in a sense more 'objective' or more 'real', then new-media displays—at least when they are mixed-reality displays, not thoroughly fictional—confront us with a puzzle: their internal worlds are inhabited by denizens of the real, which becomes somehow 'less real' by virtue of our withdrawal into a more 'objective' perspective.

Thus Walton's dual game-world formation enables one to explain what is often referred to in rather extravagant terms as a dissolution of the barriers between the real and the virtual in terms of *neustic* uncertainty: that is, uncertainty concerning the kind of relationship we, the users, have to the content mediated.

In ornamentally dense new-media environments, users operate behind what we might tentatively dub 'the veil of ornamentality', echoing John Rawls 'veil of ignorance' albeit in a sense importantly different from the idea Rawls conceived for his purposes (Rawls 1971). Whereas Rawls's original 'veil of ignorance' assumes ignorance of the identity of particular real-life situations, the condition of new-media ornamentality leaves them intact—carefully selected or utterly made-up—to serve as an opening move in elaborate games of self-modifying knowledge-seeking. Yet the very nature of such games—some of their definitory rules, their goals and desired strategies—would become ambiguous if the inquirer's attitude toward her information sources turns out to be ambiguous as well.

This is clearly the case in masquerade environments such as Second Life, for instance, which features extreme malleability of data by users, who can to some extent fabricate immersive environments by digital means. Within such ornamentally dense new-media environments, typically inhabited by various software applications designed to emulate human interaction and commonly involving intense role-playing, the identity of the user is patently rendered ambiguous. Sherry Turkle has forcefully underscored this point: 'In my computer-mediated worlds, the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is made

and transformed by language' (Turkle 1995, 15). In other words, onlife identity is itself ornamental.

Let me sum up briefly.

In the first part of my paper I argued that in the current epoch of ICT it behooves us to discuss such technologies in relation to their appropriate environments. Thus, an *onlife* conception of computer art is patently environmental.

In the second part of my paper I argued that the primary aesthetic category for any aesthetics of new-media environments is that of the decorative. Ornamentality is the ground-floor aesthetics for new media environments. I utilized Kendall Walton's theory of decorative design with its distinct dual game-world formation in order to sketch such an environmental aesthetics and explain the way it is wedded to the philosophy of information. At the heart of my proposition I emphasized a peculiar interrogatory complexity, which is meant to address in sober terms one of the most theoretically puzzling ideas concerning the onlife sphere: the imminent dissolution of the barriers between the real and the virtual. I called this 'neustic uncertainty'. Such complexity is inherent in any game of knowledge-seeking conducted across the infosphere, which is not restricted to the simplest form of data retrieval, especially in mixed-reality environments and when the knowledge sought is embodied mimetically.

My theoretical suggestion may pose an interesting and rather unusual epistemological challenge for aestheticians: to figure out what would be a viable logic of virtual discovery under the conditions of new-media ornamentality. At any rate, this must be an epistemology which focuses not on the classic project of justifying already acquired knowledge, but rather on how knowledge is acquired in the first place. And here, as I have suggested, aesthetic concerns would play an enormously important role.

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