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Imaginative Rationalisation and Speculative Archiving

Thoughts about language in media art database archives*

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Abstract

In contemporary discourse, speculation generally refers – in a negative context – to risky or hazardous business transactions and to statements in everyday language that cannot be proven. In philosophy, speculation is a way of generating knowledge when traditional methods reach their limits. In its original sense, speculation means “observation”, a Latin interpretation derived from the Greek word *theoria*. This notion of the term is quite the opposite of its current predominant use.

The meaning I prefer comes from my grandmother. She was Bohemian – geographically, not in her lifestyle. She was a farmer and a very practical person. Instead of saying “I have to think about something”, she would say “I need to speculate about it”. This was combined with gazing at the ceiling as though she could see and compare different scenarios there that she could zoom in and out of, rewind and fast-forward, examine, change and rearrange in every detail. By imagineering and envisioning future options, she could pursue a train of thought and evaluate its effects. It was an iterative approach to arriving at a certain kind of experience and security regarding the option on which to base her next actions, a combination of rationalisation and creative thinking that is comparable to what we now call action research.

Keywords

archiving, speculative approaches, digital art, categorial schemes

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Racionalización imaginativa y archivo especulativo

Ideas sobre lenguaje en las bases de datos de arte multimedia.

Resumen

El discurso contemporáneo se suele referir a la especulación de forma negativa: a transacciones peligrosas y arriesgadas, y a afirmaciones que no pueden demostrarse en el lenguaje cotidiano. En filosofía, supone una manera de generar conocimiento cuando los métodos tradicionales alcanzan sus límites: su sentido original era «observación»; la interpretación latina derivaba de la palabra griega para designar la «teoría». Esta noción del término se opone a su uso predominante actual.

La noción que prefiero procede de mi abuela. Era una bohemía en el sentido geográfico, no de estilo de vida. Era granjera y muy práctica. En vez de «Tengo que pensar en algo», decía «Tengo que especular sobre ello». Al mismo tiempo miraba al techo, como si pudiera ver y comparar mentalmente distintos escenarios a los que acercarse o alejarse, rebobinar o avanzar, examinar, cambiar y reordenar con todo detalle. Al imaginar (imagineering) y prever opciones de futuro, seguía una línea de pensamiento y evaluaba sus efectos. Adoptaba un enfoque iterativo para llegar a un cierto tipo de experiencia, y elegir así una opción en la que se basar a continuación sus acciones de una manera segura. Combinaba así racionalización y pensamiento creativo, de forma comparable a lo que ahora denominamos «investigación-acción».

Palabras clave

archivo, enfoques especulativos, arte digital, esquemas categóricos

“Beyond limited reasons”

Alfred North Whitehead stated that “the speculative reason is in its essence untrammelled by method. Its function is to pierce into the general reasons beyond limited reasons, to understand all methods as coordinated in a nature of things only to be grasped by transcending all method” (Whitehead 1929, p. 65). Whitehead, of course, was not referring to media art but to systems and categories in general. However, as many of the issues relating to media art database archives arise from this complex, his ideas can be mapped onto our area of interest. Challenges abound in the field of digital archiving and media art preservation. Traditional methods have led to a dead end when it comes to finding adequate solutions. I therefore suggest speculative archiving as a way of creative thinking that is based on our vast knowledge and experience of failure. Speculation is as risky an approach as anything to do with archiving media art. The difference is that *conceptually* it includes the possibility/likelihood of failure. Leaving behind the secure foundations of traditional, non-digital strategies that are inadequate for media art, it is an attempt to develop archival strategies, concepts and experiments that come from within the realm of digital culture. It also means that core archival assumptions, definitions and practices need to be rethought. As Whitehead pointed out in the above quote, imaginative or speculative thinking needs to be non-dogmatic, should not be restricted by pre-established categories and needs to be curious and,

of necessity, open-minded. But it also requires a stable foundation to start from. I will take this as a starting point in this essay. One aspect of this process is to lay open the context-dependence and historicity of database archives by deconstructing their descriptive meta-data, which, represented as unambiguous facts, seem to exist somewhere beyond time and place.

An analysis of descriptive meta-data

Let us time-travel to somewhere between the end of the 1990s and the mid-2000s – a high point in time for media art database archives. An important component of archives established during this period is their descriptive meta-data – data about data that is not generated automatically but consists of interpretations (by a person or group of experts or perhaps even “common knowledge”). It is important to note the difference between an interpretation among equally adequate ones and the reduction of interpretations to a single, truth-indicating one.

In creating their descriptive meta-data, all five database archives compared below followed different approaches. Some chose a standard terminology such as the Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus as their base, others created their vocabulary from scratch and yet others included participatory practices in their terminology. In any aspect of naming and ordering by names, the groundwork is laid out

for that which forms how and what we know and also what we do not know. The givers of names create worlds of knowledge, determine what is in them and how everything is related. Therein lies massive power, even more so than when naming is connected to structuring. Database archives do not simply name. They create systems of public knowledge. By excluding and structuring, they assert and incorporate power. Their interpretations undergo a qualitative shift. In the technological environment of the database, interpretation becomes hard fact that appears to be discovered, natural = truth rather than a context-dependent cultural construct. The difference is that the first implies nature's laws and essences, whereas the second shows choice, culture, authorship and one particular view among many. A hegemonic power play is conducted with words. Such an approach has been attacked by deconstructionists for decades and is reinstated in archival systems that neither technologically nor theoretically must be based on unambiguous hierarchies. This combination results in a closure of the system and has often proven to be an obstacle to growth and necessary change – any newly added project will challenge and, sooner or later, contradict, the system's unambiguity. In a still emerging field such as media art, this poses a significant problem regarding sustainability and, thus, regarding one of the core tasks of an archive. The fate of the database archives is that of all closed systems: they develop towards a state of maximum entropy and “suffer from inadequacy and incoherence” (Whitehead 1985, p. 6). A mismatch develops between the closed structure and developing content. Aloha the second law of thermodynamics.

I would like – very briefly – to summarise the outcomes of what was an in-depth analysis of the five database archives (Wenhardt 2010). My research investigated how the descriptive meta-data were conceived and structured and what they included and excluded. It therefore gravitated around questions of a speculative base for alternative approaches.

For my analysis I collected research data between 2006 and 2010 for the following five database archives: V2_, the Daniel Langlois Foundation, the Rhizome ArtBase, the Database of Virtual Art and netzspannung.org. Note that, since this research was undertaken, many of these archives have been discontinued or changed significantly.

The first problem encountered was that some of the archives failed to articulate how their vocabulary was created. The exceptions were V2_ (and via their deliverables it was also possible to obtain some information about the creation of the Daniel Langlois Foundation's vocabulary) and the Rhizome ArtBase. The second challenge was to access the full list of terms. To give an example: in the case of netzspannung.org, their vocabulary could be accessed with the “archive browser” tool.¹ This flat list of 1,700 terms did not indicate, however, which were created by netzspannung and which were

created by users. Nor did it provide insight into the internal structure of netzspannung's terms. The only way to find out was to submit a project to their archive, as the project entry mask offered the only way to see the netzspannung terms, a 120-word vocabulary split into three categories: technique, format and topic (of the 40 terms in the technique category, 11 are different versions of “tracking”). The rest of the 1,700 words, not all of which make sense (*aaa, sdafsd, sxjhk, hfjk, asfjk*), were created by users. The netzspannung archive applies a mix of own and user-generated terms, of flat-list and slightly structured terminology.

The Database of Virtual Art thesaurus was easily accessed by expanding all of its categories at once, making the vocabulary and its structure of up to four levels of subcategories visible.

The Rhizome ArtBase took a very interesting approach with their flat and dynamic vocabulary. At the time of the research, this consisted of one set of terms provided by the editors (stable), another created by the artists who submitted projects (highly dynamic) and a third set, called “active terms”, representing a pool of the 100 most used terms over a period of time.

The Daniel Langlois Foundation's vocabulary consists of a flat list of terms, based on Getty's Art & Architecture Thesaurus. V2_ also chose to incorporate this structure, with as many as nine subcategory levels.

To summarise, my analysis found that each database archive used different structural approaches: flat lists, hierarchical taxonomies and mixed approaches.

As the scope and content of the vocabulary of these archives varied greatly, one of the buzzwords was “interoperability”, technologically as well as in “terms of terms”. In relation to terminologies, the “lack of a standard vocabulary” was considered a main obstacle to establishing connections between archives: everyone was using different labels for similar things, sometimes for the same artworks (V2_ 2003b, p. 9). The hope was that interoperability between the archives would be enhanced by merging and consolidating terms. But is it really desirable to have a standard vocabulary and to flatten possible interpretations by selecting a single preferred vocabulary? My research showed that only ten terms were shared by all databases, including *artificial life*, *surveillance* and *virtual reality*. Many were quite unspecific or very general (*animation*, *performance*, *television*, *collaboration*); others reflected more on digital archiving itself (*archive*, *database*, *history*). At the other end of the spectrum, terms that were specific to a single database archive only provided insight into the focus of that individual archive. I found these terms, however, to be much more interesting than the shared ones. Moreover, juxtaposing the different attributes selected by each archive contributed to a richer understanding of an artwork. The non-shared terms offered the opportunity to identify certain interpretations, such as – for

1. See: <<http://netzspannung.org>>.

example – those corresponding to the Daniel Langlois Foundation or the Rhizome ArtBase. This shifted the anonymous, truth-indicating notion of a single archive's terminology back into perspective as being just one interpretation of several other equally adequate ones. Such a perspective was missing at the level of an individual database's specific terminology. This type of insight would also not have been possible if a standard terminology had been applied that rendered the terms uniform. On the speculative meta-data level that I created, a multitude of relations and comparisons could be drawn; thus, a kind of interoperability was achieved that was simultaneously based on overlaps as well as differences.

Categorial schemes and the reduction of complexity

I would like to return the focus of this comparative discourse to singular database archive categories. Categories are a way of gaining an overview of a system. Mapping the territory of an archive in this way reduces complexity and provides a benefit at the macro-level; the effect is the opposite at the micro-level, where the same strategy conceals information. The question is how both goals – providing an overview as well as detailed information – can be combined within the same structure. Thinking in terms of essential qualities simplifies matters. A prerequisite of a system that believes in and is based on hierarchically structured categories is that all essential qualities are presumed to be already known in advance and that everything in the (media art) world can be sorted into these categories. Categorically closing a system's structure therefore assumes that no further essential qualities will ever be discovered. The future is suspended in such concepts. Conducting a little thought experiment: if these media art database archives had existed from 1985, what categories would they have included? And how would they have dealt with net art, in other words, how would it have been possible to add something so different to the system later on?

The exclusion principle found in database archives is twofold. Semantically, interpretations (that is, disambiguation and chaos) are excluded to create order. The result is “de-riched” knowledge and asserted power. Structurally, the principle prescribes a very limited number of possible relations and one place for one thing only. “The categorization scheme is a response to physical constraints on storage and to people's inability to keep the location of more than a few hundred things in their mind at once,” writes Clay Shirky, who continues: “If there is no shelf, then even *imagining* that there is one right way to organize things is an error” (Shirky 2005). A categorial system implies truth, which is qualitatively very different from interpretation. These internal contradictions also meet external ones: in a database archive, knowledge follows the creator's logic. But when the user searches for something, they probably will not

go to these archives first but will use a search engine. And most likely what they type in will not match with the database archive's expert terminology. In this sense, the search term is already a simple, unsystematic type of descriptive meta-data. It might not be a term an expert would choose, but it is an aid to searching and to the initial shaping of thought. The user's and the expert's simple search terms communicate via the artwork. When I became interested in media art, I wanted to find information about a work where “a bald man on a bicycle was riding through a virtual environment made out of letters”. And there it was among the search results, Jeffrey Shaw's “The Legible City” (1989).

Adventures in the clarification of thought

In the end, all naming means exclusion of contingency and assertion of power. As Donna Haraway wrote: “Linnaeus may have known himself as the eye of God, the second Adam who built science, trustworthy knowledge, by announcing at last the correct names of things. And even in our time [...] scientific debate is a contest for the language to announce what will count as public knowledge” (Haraway 1991, p. 91). What at some time might be the “new paradigm” of contemporary science is still not absolute. Naming and public knowledge through naming is always historical and context-dependent. There is no such thing as the “correct name”.

Categorial schemes put principles in place *before* they discover facts. “The aim at generalization is sound, but the estimate of success is exaggerated” and results in “misplaced correctness. (...) There are aspects of actualities that are simply ignored so long as we restrict thought to the categories” (Whitehead 1985, p. 7). It is not the initial clarity of these first principles that should be sought, as Whitehead suggests; rather, they should emerge as the result of such an effort, or should co-create each other. Categories function as fixed rules. Such a structure is inadequate for a world that is still developing, as it will lead to incoherent results and to the collapse of the closed system. Achieving ultimate accuracy through language is an ideal. Ludwig Wittgenstein, through his concepts of family resemblance and language games, paid tribute to these realities and developed a model of relating and ordering content that is not based on essentials and with rules that are made up and changed throughout the process – “as we go along. [...] And is there not also the case where we play and make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them as we go along” (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 33-83).

“Rationalism is an adventure in the clarification of thought, progressive and never final” (Whitehead 1985 p. 9). For areas where knowledge is generated out of language, speculation offers a way of working with approximations, of showing that knowledge is always context-dependent and an open-ended dynamic process. According to

Whitehead, such imaginative rationalization combines a rational side and an empirical side, or coherence and logics with adequacy and applicability (Whitehead 1985, p. 3). Its universality depends on its ability to communicate. Any stability reached is temporal and a source for further questioning that lays out new paths for investigation. Instead of only seeing change and openness as obstacles to stability, sustainable systems should be conceived as ongoing processes. Given that digital archiving is still a very young discipline and its methods and strategies have not yet been consolidated, we have the unique historical advantage that everything is still in transition, that we can take any presumed (pre-digital) stability into question and rethink our knowledge bases from scratch. Why not enjoy this adventure a little more instead of just dreading it?

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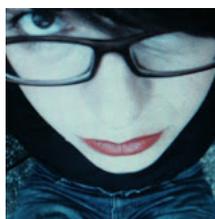
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