

c pozzi, creative computing, Aug 2015

It happened sometime in the winter of my freshman year on probably a depressingly average (and therefore non-memorable) winter's afternoon in Pittsburgh. My studio commenced like every other day--slightly after 8:30 am, filled with black outfits, sleepy designers, and half-drunken coffee cups--when our class, as usual, got on a tirade about some perspective in our field. This particular morning we were gushing about the beauty and potential of new technology (and although we didn't know it, new media). At this point, I can only imagine our professor feared for our education; he realized we were six months too far into being initiated into a philosophy Carnegie Mellon preached to us from the start: programmable technologies were the ways of the future. My professor decided to redirect our class; he quietly stopped us and asked us reflect on questions of our own lives, 'what is your favorite book?, what memories do you remember from your childhood?, what event from history would you have liked to witness? what is your favorite object?'. He took us on a remembrance of the things in life we cherished and valued, and then told us that all these things, along with the purpose of life itself, are about people connecting with other people. Before concluding class, he issued a great warning for where we were headed, that design gets too wrapped up in technology and forgets about what it truly means to be human.

When I reflect on my own beliefs for the field of design as well as the beliefs I carry as a person, there are moments where I find it very difficult to explain how new media fits into the idea of being better, more connected people. Of course, taking my professors idea that humanity is about connection, one could easily argue that new media has allowed the incredible and undeniable benefit of sharing and accessing limitless information. This helps us share with others and feel connect to what is around us. But why doesn't this feel enough? Is it because so much of new media distances a user? Is it because fundamentally human-computer interaction replaces human-human interaction? These ideas could be talked about forever on their own separate essay. However, I want to offer an addition to this theory.

In my own reflections I realized so much about humanity is not just connecting with others, but connecting with yourself. Interpersonal relationships are equally as important as the quieter presence of being intrapersonal, or self-actualized. So how does new media help us connect with others *and* ourselves? On the surface it does; as Manovich suggests, new media helps us "externalize and objectify mind's operations" which could clearly be a step towards self-learning. But what Manovich also suggests, in way that confuses and scares me to the core, is his belief that programable media only creates a facade of uniqueness; that new media is so carefully mapped in order to create the sensation of being unique when in actuality it is only using the "structure of somebody's else mind for our own." Is customizable media allowing me to be my own person or is it simply reinforcing my own beliefs I, or somebody else, already has? How do I even begin to connect with others when I am distanced from myself as well?

So where do we go from here? Should I be wary and warned from computers replacing my human-human interactions, or worse, turning me into a pre-programed person? No, it would be too easy to forsake the field as a whole. I do not suggest moving forward we give up on new media, but perhaps we should be more careful considering new media in the perspective of our greater human-context. How does it *really* help us connect? How does it genuinely teach us about ourselves, not just reinforce ourselves? We should change the question from how do humans interact with computers to how to computers interact with humans. Then we get back to what it really means to be human, by connecting human to human, or perhaps connecting human to computer to human.