

1-1-2000

Interview with Creative Disturbance

Matt Mays

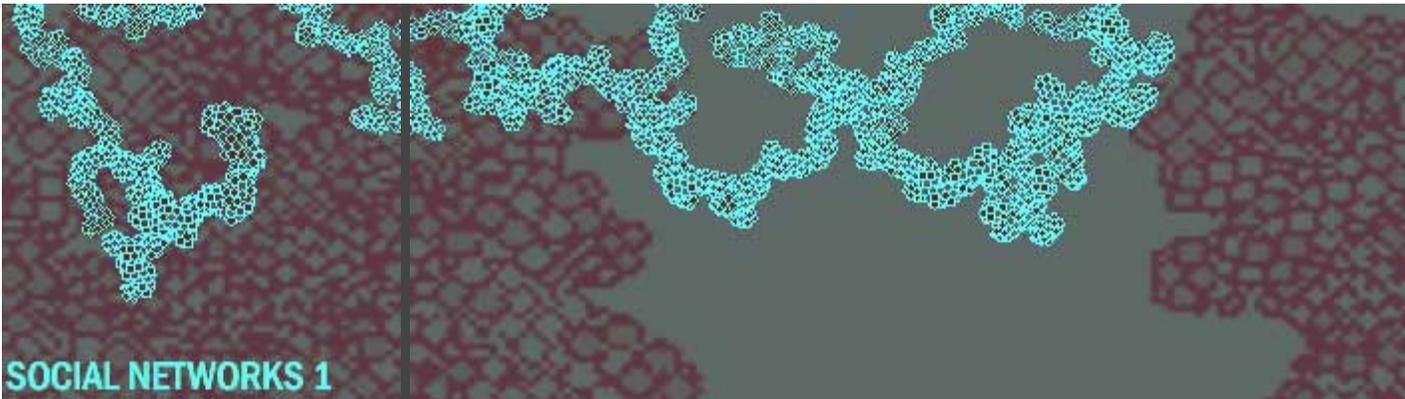
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Recommended Citation

Mays, Matt (2000) "Interview with Creative Disturbance," *SWITCH*: Vol. 15 : No. 1 , Article 4.
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SOCIAL NETWORKS 1

Interview with Creative Disturbance

Matt Mays on Jan 1 2000

issue 15

As the new media arts in the U.S. enter the next century, artists are continuing to draw on corporate sources to fund their creative endeavors. Being that us Nader-loving folk like to avoid direct connections to the slaves of shareholder value, several organizations are coming to our rescue by offering to run interference between our artistic side and capitalist guilt. One such organization, Creative Disturbance, also hopes to profit from it.

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Creative Disturbance hopes to connect artists and patrons by creating a virtual community where artists can showcase their works, and patrons and service providers can offer assistance. By making these connections, Creative Disturbance hopes to foster innovation and create wealth where none previously existed. But how are art and corporate R&D related? What makes them different?

Mark Beam is CEO of Creative Disturbance and founder of beaming. Having been an institutional securities investor, trader and youngest ever Executive VP of Sanwa Bank, Mark knows how to exploit patterns in emerging systems. He's also a writer, film producer, and curator of the New Minds lecture/performance series. The interview was conducted via email in November and December of 2000.

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During the Creative Disturbance seminar at Xerox PARC on October 10th you mentioned that you wanted to avoid the term "art" in the discussion. Do you see the works facilitated by Creative Disturbance as art, and if not, what are they? What relation do they have to art?

At times I find the word "art" disruptive in discussing the creative process, mostly because of the history and baggage it carries. At the same time, work that arises from the collisions between art, science and technology can powerfully impact the aspects of culture that art usually deals with (i.e. aesthetics, power, meaning). The boundaries between disciplines are rapidly dissipating and so I prefer to characterize the collisions as creative work or experience, leaving "art" to be decided retrospectively by art critics and historians.

I do think there are large pockets of creative people (especially artists) that must have a much greater role and influence in the development and deployment of technology. Broadly speaking, most mainstream or ubiquitous applications of technology are designed by engineers for engineers. I want to see technology employed in a much more human-centric way, not a machine-centric way. This requires an infusion of unique approaches, diverse cultural biases and underrepresented social experiences. As

Murray Gell Mann says, "Innovation is an 'emergent phenomenon' that happens when there is interaction between different kinds of people, and disparate forms of knowledge." I think this is a big part of what Creative Disturbance is all about.

As to the projects we see and their relation to art? I see rampant experimentation and rapid prototyping driven by vision and passion. Artist-led projects are sometimes characterized as art and sometimes as product. But these characterizations can be irrelevant. Benjamin Weil, the new curator of new media at SFMOMA, will argue that Jenny Holzer inspired the first advertising banner. Does this mean her work should not be considered as art?

What of self-expression?

Exactly.

Funding of the arts in Europe is often seen as a role of government, but in the United States art funding is often tied to corporate patrons. Creative Disturbance takes this a step further by implying a practical application should be derived from the creative process. Since all parties are drawing from the same talent pool, do you see traditional government and corporate funding of the arts as competition?

No in fact, just the opposite. Our focus is on supporting the creative process and the development of creative work. At any given time or stage in the development process, the source of that support can be derived from a grant, an award, a consulting fee, royalties from a commercial license or in the form of a pure investment. We actively seek partnerships with both grant-making and corporate institutions and believe we can be more efficient in catalyzing their own process as an outsider looking in.

Practical application need not be derived from the creative process, just as practical application need not be derived from basic science research. Yet, practical applications of creative work and processes occur all the time and have enormous benefit to commercial R&D. There is a new generation of artists who are fluent in the use of sophisticated technology and who are revolutionizing their application.

Creative Disturbance divides the realm of "wealth creation" into three categories: "Artists and Innovators," "Investors and Patrons," and "Resource Providers." How did you go about defining these categories? Must an artist innovate to create art? Should creativity be measured in terms of return on investment?

Actually, we have identified these categories as key human factors to wealth creation, broadly defined: Creative potential, money and distribution expertise. It's not rocket science. Let's not forget, most of our real wealth creation is never monetized, it is simply goodwill. Goodwill emanates from magnanimous self-interest. That is, a self-interest in sharing time and energy to learn or acquire resources that may be redistributed. An artist innovates every time and no time. Everything is repurposed, recontextualized, reconfigured from something else. Yet at the same time the environmental or cultural stimuli provoking the artist is never the same and so the repurposing that takes place is unique and innovative. There are various perceived levels of innovation, but then what seems important in one time period might not be informative or innovative in another. This is why documentation is so critical.

Finally, as long as "return" is broadly defined and not limited to monetary sources, then measuring return on investment is just as relevant to a museum curator. If ROI is equated to impact or attention, then Napster had an enormous ROI especially in a macro-environment in which the meaning to noise ratio is fading into oblivion. Its monetary ROI is still speculative.

What role do you see peer-to-peer networking technologies such as Napster or Gnutella serving in a self-organizing system such as Creative Disturbance?

There's a huge role for distributed file sharing. It makes total sense and perhaps will be as world-changing as the Web itself. The trick is in the metadata - the organizational structure and tagging system that accurately describes the underlying data. In physical communication between humans there is vast capability to transfer incredibly rich and deep information with just the slightest glance or the most subtle nuance. We should aim for clairvoyance in our augmented realities. God knows we transfer enough information about ourselves to our PC's, laptops, and PDA's. These instruments are incredibly stupid however. Imagine what might happen when biosensors register our body temperature and our line of sight is mapped and matched to previous motion patterns? There may eventually be hundreds of experts with access to 'my files' and who are capable of dramatically extending my senses and capabilities. Of course this can also be quite annoying and invasive, and we may not want to know or have these

powers. Ignorance is bliss.

As we speak, something else is evolving in place of the Web as we now know it. It won't have the same conceptual feel. When most people visualize the Web, they go into this dumb, blank space and wait for the next thing to appear on the screen. The next One will feel much more alive. You'll contemplate it on macro and micro scales and picture it very graphically. Natalie Jeremijenko's work elucidates this. Her "Livewire" piece is essentially just an electronic cord strung in an open space between two posts. But, it writhes in response to traffic volume on the Web. You can see, hear and feel the Web.

Your past lives include institutional securities executive, investment banker and trader. What inspired you to get involved in the world of artists and innovators? Have you ever created what you consider to be a work of art?

I'm also a writer, have been involved in film production, and curated a lecture/performance series at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. I grew up in a creative environment. The interesting thing is that I went into business at all. Maybe it was the environment of the 80's. Nevertheless if given the choice again, I would pursue the same path. The world's most sophisticated marketplaces are extraordinary environments in which to learn how the world works. To put your hands in the spokes of world financial markets and to play with the dominant factors of economic wealth creation is something I would not trade.

My art is pattern-recognition and collage. I am obsessed with experimenting with fluid pattern recognition models and with assembling collaborative relationships that exploit fleeting opportunities for creating economic and social wealth in temporal space. It is an extraordinary moment in time to express this kind of art. I view Creative Disturbance in this way. Sign up as a member, look around. It's a collage of living intelligence and expression just waiting to be realized. It is pure potential in various stages of repose.

There seems to be a connection between your art and your past life with markets. Do exploitable patterns exist in raw asset pricing data, or does the Efficient Market Hypothesis (EMH) preclude any model predictions?

It's all cycles of pattern recognition, learning and performance. If a system is alive it is moving and unpredictable. As efficient as markets seem, they never are. That element of surprise and openness is always there. That's partly why capitalism is so seductive. It is an incredibly efficient model for exploiting temporary patterns fairly profitably. But then egotism typically gets in the way. You begin to believe your intelligence is more perfect than the evolving pattern. The same system that raises your ego, tears it apart. Large organisms like corporations are constrained in their ability to adapt. The larger the organism, the more likely it is to overlook something important - something that at first seemed irrational or unimportant. The irrational variables need to be plugged into the model not ignored, especially since we humans are so irrational. If this were not so, we would tread more lightly on the earth, learn from history and have quality T.V. .

Many sites offer job listings with an associated community of employers and potential employees. While your site has a different spin, your Codex interface seems similar to these other services. What less tangible assets does your company bring to the table? The relationship with Leonardo comes to mind.

Rarely does an inventor grasp the full significance of their work, nor the killer application. Our model assumes "none of us is as smart as all of us." It invites multiple perspectives, yet demands meaningful connections to the other factors of wealth creation.

Creative Disturbance supports professionals coming from a wide range of disciplines and their ability to develop project teams with complimentary skill-sets. It also recognizes that creative work and innovation in HCI is occurring outside traditional institutional hierarchies, in independent studio-labs around the world. In this context, Creative Disturbance acts as "process hub" - a central platform through which problems can be solved dynamically. The efforts of individuals and groups who can produce the parts of work necessary to invent better human-computer interfaces will interact through that hub.

Leonardo is the longest living archive of the modern collision between art, science and technology. It's worth is only beginning to be understood. Documentation of the process will still be around long after the hardware and software used to create this work becomes obsolete. Our relationship with Leonardo is foundational as we move to connect networks of research enterprises like C5 around the world.

Yet, the real power of virtual communities like this one lies in their own self-productive

behaviors. People are innovating in ways they couldn't have before. MIT's Michael Schrage puts it this way: "increasingly innovation is the by-product of the way people behave around the prototype ." While we have not yet amassed the resources to fully implement our vision in this regard, we intend for Creative Disturbance to have a pronounced self-organizing nature. We hope to create incentives for members to take a personal interest in the success of the network. That means expressing talents in collaborative fashion to bootstrap the network's own collective intelligence in ways its founders could never achieve alone.

Currently Creative Disturbance requires a minimum commission of \$1,000 dollars per transaction that results of interaction deriving from your organization. How can Creative Disturbance help innovative, brilliant students such as myself generate capital?

Brilliant and modest students such as yourself can have access to the factors of wealth creation immediately and are only limited by your own ingenuity and powers of persuasion. The minimum commission of 10% for a for-profit transaction assumes you have received funding of \$10,000. We think this is a minimum threshold for funders who devote their time and energy to reviewing projects. It also encourages more well thought out projects and visions. This may change as our transactional costs decline. However, this does not prevent you from gaining resources and intelligence from the diverse pool of collaborators and resource providers who will have access to your vision. We value the work of students very highly and believe they have much to offer this network. Growing up with digital tools allows for a more facile and natural mastery of their potential. Your participation adds to the disparate forms of knowledge and vision represented in the network.

Does the future of new media arts funding depend on convincing the ascending Technology CEO/Patron that they too are artists?

No. But, before a more sophisticated new media patronage arises en masse, as it did in other new media, the most visible work (i.e. the work getting the most attention/exposure) will continue to be supported by commercial funding sources. More and more work will arise in "Napster " or open source style, however. Creative people in new media can and do have more immediate influence and impact on more people in a single stroke than those working in other mediums. Attention draws investment.

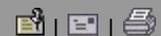
If an artist or innovator reading this article is interested in working with your organization, how should they go about becoming a member of Creative Disturbance?

Please go to <http://www.creativedisturbance.com>, click on signup, use your password to link to your own Codex and add your project. Projects are regularly reviewed by individual and institutional members.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about my art :-)

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Matt Mays is a freelance interaction designer/programmer and graduate student in the CADRE program. More on his various endeavors can be found at <http://www.cosmodrome.com>.



::CrossReference

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