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**Seeing Double: Bifocal Collaborative Tactics**

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Seeing Double
Bifocal Collaborative Tactics
Ron Goldin on Feb 1 2002

Collaborators can seek a specific goal or orient themselves toward the discovery of the unknown. The result of networked collaboration is a self-reflecting circle of Babylonian vertigo and trompe l'oeil.

Collaboration is a decision to move the decimal place over---a fundamental change in unit. The figure looks similar, but the scale changes exponentially. The switch from individual to collaborator expends energy like a chemical reaction.

The transformation involves the reconsideration of the fundamental characteristics of the individual: the presence/absence of identity, the distribution of power, ownership of production and ideas, the consequences of authorship, style, and other subjectivities on a final product, as well as the adoption of an identity by a group, which may or may not supersede that of the individual member. Individuals are tenaciously reluctant to compromise the self except when two types of need arise.

Cookbooks [without blindness]

A collaboration is in part an economic solution--a battle with Quantity. One of the main challenges to anyone working with new media is to conceive new harvesting methods for a crop which towers above its own farmers--Information. Visualizations and systems form the skeleton of the new media artist's Babylonian Tower, an architectural structure which deliberately distances the perceiver from the perceived. As the distance is increased, details become more hazy, replaced by hyperopic outlines of organization and pattern. The problem of data excess is being tackled from many different angles by both curators and artists.

From "1,200+ net.art links" to the Rhizome ArtBase (stats), the collision of the rapidly expanding quantities of content with new models of organization and filtration is an active, highly collaborative goal, especially on the Web. One new curatorial model is a Curatorial Machine, which devises methods of automating the process of selection and contextualization, which in Rhizome's case, is a fluid process, determined by the artists whose very representation as rivets in the Machine results in the self-curation of their work.

Digital media is in part born of a kind of reaction to static systems. Object-oriented programming, the "New Wave" of problem solving (in actuality several decades old but only recently popularized) is a good illustration of a collaborative model adopted across disciplines.

Improvising a recipe on a whim is useful when you don't know what to cook and you
are limited by ingredients. A cookbook becomes important when you want your cooking to make sense in a larger context (appetizers, entrees, desserts), so you can consider dishes as they would constitute meals. A cookbook also standardizes the dialect for cooks to understand one another (Unified Modeling Language) and can apply knowledge about one food to those with similar attributes (inheritance).

It is no longer rational or pragmatic to approach problems on a case-to-case basis, given their complexity. For this reason structural programming, which uses a more linear approach to problem-solving, can be awkward for large projects that require group collaboration. Object-oriented programming works under the premise that every step of a design is collaboration-compatible. The actions of an individual member in a group are localized. Each object is responsible for its own share of tasks. It also keeps track of its own contents. At the same time, information in these isolated objects are used throughout the system by passing information, a collaborative protocol of communication. The advantage is that we do not need to know how particular individuals do their duties, but we know how to communicate with them to accomplish a greater goal.

Object-oriented programming is a metaphor for one type of collaborative model whose primary goal is to break down a large problem whose goal can be explicitly described. A task is divided into its smallest components, commonalities and differences are observed. Familiar patterns are noted and made accessible to future collaborations. In a sense, the recombination of these previous histories, observations, and paradigms are not dissimilar to the role of inheritance in OOP. The traits of a plural number of objects are additively configured, or overlapped, into a single entity which has the inherited characteristics of its predecessors.

The strategy of recombination is integral to new curatorial models. Although an art object carries its own weight, the consequences of every new artwork is a rethinking of the network of categorizations, and the entire paradigm is reconfigured. The individual artwork reshapes the context while the context shapes the artwork.

Not surprisingly, science and art have similar methodologies in this respect. Unless a great Scientific Revolution is on the verge, all normal scientific research is a collaborative environment, with small nodes of inquiry and a general directional flow, dictated either by economy, politics, or occasionally, genuine curiosity. The shift in current is subtle. The status-quo routine is an adoption of succinct theorems with elegant experimental evidence as support, and the result is a standard conceptual framework assumed by the entire community. Like an art endeavor, a scientific experiment does not live in isolation, and each development will slightly shift the collaborative tide. Likewise and even more so, the global scientific paradigm steers the research.

"... cumulative acquisition of novelty is not only rare in fact but improbable in principle. Normal research, which is cumulative, owes its success to the ability of scientists regularly to select problems that can be solved with conceptual and instrumental techniques close to those already in existence. [...] Unanticipated novelty, the new discovery, can emerge only to the extent that his anticipations about nature and his instruments prove wrong." (Thomas Kuhn, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions", 1970)

History follows a similar trend. We learn from the past by presuming that the future will follow similar logical patterns. Colliding the elements of the past leads to new relationships and either amends assumptions or reinforces them. The romantic notion that everything in science and history will be known in due time has undergone heated re-evaluation in this century partly because we are only beginning our understanding of problem-solving in the face of blindness. In other words, a different attitude towards collaboration, one that is less confident in the linearity and inevitability of fact, may be necessary.

New Colors [with blindness]
In a Red-Green-Blue system of additive light, there is no yellow. It takes the overlap of two distinct, predictable units, Red and Green, to produce something previously non-existent.

A goal-blind collaboration is heavily reliant on malleability and sensitivity. Not only do Red and Green have to shift direction and attend to new surfaces (an appropriate routine only if they know what to find), but they also need to understand that when they discover yellow, it is a valuable find. A group of collaborators, whether they are artists, historians, or theorists, share some mutual conceptual terrain. Where paradigms do not overlap, there is the mutually exclusive terrain that makes an individual useful in the collaboration. Without the former, this is no communication; without the latter, the collaboration does not take advantage of the variations which make such a collaboration more powerful than executing the blind search in solitude.

One interesting approach involves interface and history as a collaborative method, demonstrated in a project by Lev Manovich and Norman Klein, the Freud-Lissitzky Navigator (project, history). The site itself positions the authors as both archaeologists and curators of history. Looking at the FLN software as art, Manovich and Klein are authors by selecting a particular route of history. The imaginary artifact then serves as a protocol for its surrounding events. The particular collision of eclectic historical events in the history of one product, whose existence makes sense in the hyperlogical context of the frame attributed to it by its designers, starts to resemble the task of a curator. The documentation of the collaborative data mining, and the interface to the documentation itself, are integral in blueprinting the strategies and history of the project.

Another approach, which has become more popular with the increased use of the network as a curatorial domain, is the creation of software environments rather than discrete art objects. Typically executed by artists, they create a set of restrictions on the creative process--aesthetically, in limiting the art to a particular medium, conceptually, by forcing a work to recognize its place within the context created by the author. The “curator”, defined here as the initiator of a project, is attributed part-authorship in every resulting artifact. By describing a set of rules in which creation must take place and simultaneously describing a context for the project, the semantic space creator has embedded an identity in each resulting object. The participants, micro-authors, provide diversity in the creation process, adding another authorial stamp to the final product.

Trompe l’oeil

The network is the extreme, utopian implementation of the new media artist/curator collaboration. The art of the net is made of itself. From the artist’s point of view, content has taken a back seat. The objet trouvé is data, and the Web is an infinite junkyard. In addition, the network is self-consuming. The artwork, the artist, curators, and context all lie in the same place, at the same time, of the same bits. At best, the artist’s atelier is a URL. The network invites the artist to become a curator, since there is no physical boundary or otherwise to prevent the creation, distribution, and contextualization of a piece of art. All of this happens instantaneously, where for the first time in history, it might be the case that the history of art is ahead of the art itself because the contextualization is pre-packaged with the work.

New models of curation, which do not exclusively restrict themselves to the network but are certainly born of its influence, recognize elements of collaboration in both the selection process and distribution of art. After all, every net.art link can be traced in a circle back to itself--there is no degree of separation. The boundary is blurred between artist, curator, and audience (new media artists simultaneously consume and produce). This kind of curatorial model is trompe l’oeil painted on mirrors. It gives the illusion of space when it is flat, but the perceived depth still reflects the real.

The establishment of a collaborative environment means the adoption of a currency. The consequence of actions are distributed across the players, as are the rewards.
Playing collaboration involves a gain/loss matrix--- a "Prisoner’s Dilemma". An individualistic mindset and a collaborative mindset result in two dramatically different consequences in such a game. The individual reward is tempting in itself, says the skeptical prisoner. However the reward could be much greater if the collaboration is mutual, but it requires that the individual relinquish the selfish orientation, even though if collaboration is truly beneficial to all participants, self-interest is still a motivation for wanting to collaborate. This paradox suggests that collaboration is more likely about reinterpreting, disguising, or converting the self than it is about subverting the self. Collaborators are inherently involved in a complicated relationship of interdependence on multiple levels. Identity is much more reflective than it is given credit for.

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