

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies
Copyright © 2006 Sage Publications
London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi Vol 12(4): 375–381
DOI: 10.1177/1354856506068315
<http://cvg.sagepub.com>

CONVERGENCE

DEBATE

My Future is Your Own Aim

Alan Sondheim

Dear Tenure Committee,

In order to fulfil my duties pursuant to full-time employment without fear of censorship (something all too often in our country, alas!), I will answer the following excellent questions which you have posed, to the best of my ability, directly, I appreciate the time you have taken to develop them, in relation to the more general theme of the direction of future literature, if there is a future, if there is literature. Please excuse this format, since of course there is no tenure committee, no tenure, no holdfast in the fast-forward sea of media/information flow. And of course committees are nowadays temporary at best, designed on the fly to handle particular problems that appear, perhaps disappear or transform before adjournment.

Comparing writing practices from the years 1995 and 2005, what do you see as being the most significant historic development(s) in writing(s) in, for and with digital environments in the past decade?

This of course depends on what is meant by 'writing.' Writing per se has not changed; what has changed is mechanics, performativity, technology. Probably most of the writing world-wide is currently within the worlds of blogs, Wikis, online gaming, and so forth. In 1995, almost everyone online, AOL users excepted, was familiar with the command-line interface to some extent. Being online often meant dealing with unix shells (today, linux shells). This created a sense of being close to the bone, literally, in relation to the net itself; when I'm online (as now) in the unix shell at panix.com, I can enter a command such as 'who' – and I will get a list of everyone on now, as well as what software they're using; for example, are they sending email, working in the emacs or vi editors, and so forth. This community, one might say, communality, is always in the background, even though I rarely hear from these people. The computer is always already shared. I'm aware I'm writing electronically within a network. Today – and this started with the dumping, by AOL, of around two million users onto the Net a decade or so ago, most people are shielded from the undercurrent, what I've called the 'darknet' (before this term was taken over by the media for other uses). Today, being online usually means working with GUI, graphic user interfaces, which are well- and sometimes over-designed. The number of commands available are less with a GUI editor (the full number of unix commands runs to over 1800). The code – the protocols at work – is increasingly invisible, and the Net is

increasingly taken for granted as an appliance, just as the Mac is appliance-oriented in relation to the 'under the hood' approach to the PC.

So writing has moved more and more towards graphics dynamisms, beyond javascript and dynamic html in general, even beyond flash, towards Java and other encodings. And with this, there has been a counter-movement which is extremely interesting – that is, more and more people, from a very young age, are now engaged in modifying programs, working with the bare-bones of the GUI or programmatic level. A good example is the increasing use of Machinima, a collocation of programs that allows one to create narrative and experimental film within and through games and game engines – the result is the ability to work directly with avatars as if they are actors in a script as perfect as you can make it.

Another major change lies in the demographics; there are now close to a billion on the Net (which means five billion not on it, not connected in any way), and within this enormous quantity, there must be tens of millions of writers and artists. New work appears daily, hourly, from just about everywhere. Students in the industrialized countries often have access to online, if not broadband; many of them are doing fascinating Net art, Net writing, what have you. The days of 'net art' as a category defined by a few (paralleling, say, the NY gallery system), are long since gone; we're dealing now with massive social change, massive creativity.

How have this/these development(s) influenced your own artistic practice?

I learn from students whenever and wherever I speak. I use available technologies as much as possible. I'll leap from operating system to operating system; the days of 'Mac versus PC' or linux, etc., are over. I still tend to work in unix shells, because they're bare-bones, fast, incredibly supple, fun to explore, easy to program, but I'll also use motion-capture equipment when I can, as well as any audio/video/etc. programs that come along. For example, I work a lot with AudioMulch, which creates soundworks through 'granular synthesis' – a form of particulating the aural dimension, literally working with grains of sound, particles, instead of sound-waves. The results are fast and at times wildly discontinuous. The program runs in WinXP, and has its own networked interface which is both fun and exciting – you think different through tools like this. As far as writing is concerned – I don't care whether or not I'm writing/sounding/visualizing; it's all a mix, all developed cross-application, cross-platform, cross-technology, cross-output devices. I've got a show coming up in Los Angeles, and I'm busy collecting as many monitors, computers, transducers (specialized speakers and microphones) as I can find; it will all run together, on what would appear to be a neural level, metaphorically.

How would you characterize institutional support for and institutional reaction to these writing(s), and to your art practice in particular?

Well, first of all, there's money; I've got to be an equipment junkie to some extent since I'm always upgrading; at this point I probably have half a terabyte or so of finished work. There's considerable backup involved; there's also real problems with data and knowledge management. I find peripheral institutional support; in other words, I'm not really salaried, I can't find employment, but I do get access to tools, conference stipends, and the like. My work gets around. On the other hand, my health-care is mediocre, and if it

wasn't for my father, I'd have none. Most of the artists I know have managed teaching jobs in English or Art or Art History or Computer or New Media or Modern Culture and Media Departments; I haven't been so lucky, which I'm sure is partly the result of my somewhat anti-authoritarian personality – but also the result of institutions being unable to classify exactly what I do, and where they see me fitting in, to already established genres/disciplines.

What role has trAce played in facilitating the developments and the reactions identified above? What role has trAce played in facilitating your own practice?

This is also difficult to answer; trAce has turned out to be as fragile as so many other online institutions (which is related of course to the sea change brought about by the dot.com era and its demise). trAce put me in touch with a community, and gave me the opportunity to work with other practitioners and programmers; it also allowed me to work in an extended diary form, which I hadn't explored before. On the other hand, the core of my work was impervious; I think it would have developed in the same manner in any case. For example, I've been working for a long time on the phenomenology of the analog and the digital in relation to each other and the way they 'meet' at the limits – this started, say, two decades ago, and is currently resulting in a series of articles and pieces.

In relation to the first question, I don't think any institution really has facilitated or hindered the developments indicated – these are driven more by technologies and demographics, by micro-institutions and micro-managements, not by any particular group. It's a sea change; trAce was part of it, and for that matter, we're all part of it. trAce provided an 'intensification,' a TAZ (Hakim Bey's 'temporary autonomous zone,' a loose gathering that comes together, later dispersing, much like flash mobs) – for me, panix did as well, as did the School of Visual Arts and the New School here, etc. It's a melange; it's no longer the world of 'movements' and manifestos, unless one is blind to anything and anyone but a small group of peers. We're riding the riding of knowledge management; we're all part of Google, in other words, part of the roiling databases that constitute our world.

Do you see the developments and reactions you have identified above having a lasting impact upon art, literature and wider culture in the 21st Century?

I'm not trying to avoid responsibility, ethical or metaphysical, in these answers. I've taught courses in futurology, and am so aware of the difficulty of prediction in any case. The Net and information explosion – really an implosion in terms of human/cultural subjectivity – is moving far too rapidly to make predictions. A few years ago, for example, push technologies were all the rage; no one hears of them at this point.

When we talk about 'wider culture,' are we talking about the five billion who are not online as well? About the violent wars that increasingly dominate life on the planet? About mass extinctions which are slated to kill off all megafauna within, say, the next 50 years? I think instead we're talking about a relatively secure (for the moment) enclave within the educated classes of industrialized nations, at least those which permit a degree of freedom of expression.

We're simply at a loss here. There were earlier models – if you look at the early history of radio, for example, you find that kinds were hacking receivers, that transmission was

a do-it-yourself phenomenon, until everything got absorbed by corporate and bandwidth concerns. Money was there to be made and the powers-that-be clamped down.

If you look then at the early Net, the shell-driven darknet, you find the same thing; one reason the Net is so vulnerable to attack, is that it was never meant to be completely secure; there wasn't any reason. The Morris worm of 1988, among other things, changed that. Before that, there was community and whole cultures – for example, newsgroup cultures – that have disappeared for the most part, just like the early text-based MOOs and MUDs have mostly disappeared.

So we have this model – darknet – and we can find predecessors, but these weren't recognized at the time, and the scale/scope of the thing is so qualitatively different as to make comparison more or less useless. The same is true now; it's just the beginning of the 21st century (which, for humans, may well be the last), and we have no idea what will occur in any field. (Look, for example, at the world in 1905 – air travel just beginning, radio in the development stage, no WWI, WWII, atomic power, atomic bomb, the flu epidemic hadn't yet hit, no computers, Net, no information grid – information theory hadn't yet been born, and so forth. For that matter, communism hadn't really taken hold, the planet's flora and fauna seemed eternal, etc. Quantum theory was largely unknown, Einstein was just working on special relativity, and our view of the cosmos was largely classical, in spite of minor disturbing anomalies.)

So back to the question – yes, all of the above will have a major impact on art, literature, culture, in the 21st century. But I have no idea what that impact will be, in what direction. Certainly multiculturalisms will be increasingly foregrounded; the planet appears smaller and smaller (we have to remember it isn't). We're approaching the carrying-capacity of the earth, that is, its ability to sustain (mostly human) life given increasing population levels. This, more than anything, will effect things. We can expect religious and other ideological fundamentalisms to rise in popularity and violence; as humans become more desperate, salvation often appears just around the corner. How will the arts react to all of this? What will constitute the class (or mob) of cultural workers? We know that things will change, but we don't know how.

Two forces: On one hand, ensuing chaos (J.G. Ballard is a prescient model here), and on the other, the enormous inertia of the human species: for example, the world recognizes the need for heavy and immediate cutbacks in industrial emissions/pollution, yet the USA will do nothing. Or again, 'everyone' recognizes that megafauna are disappearing, yet close to nothing is happening to change that. People live within their habitus; the human motto is more or less 'not in my back yard' (NIMBY) – and that goes to explain a lot.

Does contemporary digital writing(s) fulfill the claims made for 'new media writing' during the course of the last decade?

I'm not sure what these claims are. The concept of 'new media' has been around far longer than the phrase; new technologies almost always carry signs (if not posters!) of overcoming. Will new media writing replace the standard book/page? Judging by demographics and usage, hardly. Will e-books replace the book? Again, unless electronic paper really gets off the ground, hardly. A physical book is a personal object that carries the

marks of its being-read, from owner to owner; there's no indication that this will be replaced. With temporary print media, on the other hand – newspapers, magazines, handouts, etc., the opposite is true; offline newspaper readership is going down quickly, while online is rising. There is also the issue of authority/authorization; blogs are rapidly becoming news sources themselves, particularly conservative blogs, which are often quoted by conservative talk-show hosts. One can imagine that rumour and innuendo will become increasingly prevalent in this regard, just as Wikipedia seems to be experiencing growing pains as biased writers have used it as a platform for particular ideological viewpoints (not that neutrality etc. isn't an ideological viewpoint).

So . . . That new media will replace the old? No. That new media will augment the old and vice versa? Definitely. That it's becoming increasingly difficult to even discern what 'media' are? Absolutely – are blogs media? MOOs? Online games? The tcp/ip protocol stack running the Net in part? Particular technologies such as immersive game couches? It's difficult to even discern where one 'medium' ends and another begins; the definitions are in the minds of the beholders/users, those who subscribe, in both senses of the word, to one or another outlets for their community, communality, creative expressions.

Now I will refer to your list of discussion topics, again commenting on them, however briefly, however tenuously; I hope I remain available for continued employment at this institution:

The institutional settings of new media writing(s): These are primarily universities, software houses, web design companies. Independent new media writers (if such remains a category) have a difficult time of it. On the other hand, institutions such as West Virginia University's Center for Literary Computing, have been generous in granting archival/presentation space for writers. In my own case, I use both WVU and a commercial host; the latter gives me ongoing statistics concerning the distribution of my work. But one of the advantages of online writing is the ability to work with nothing but a computer, at home, with a local web page or even ftp site; you can still develop a world-wide audience.

The relationship between academia and new media writing(s): My immediate response is I'll go crazy if I read yet another paper on the exigencies etc. of hypertext. Forgive me for being cynical here, but online work of any sort is ideal for academic theorizing, presentations, since it almost never involves anything but being online; it's easier to become politically engaged (or to feel oneself politically engaged) through online production, than to actually march in the streets. Much of the work I value – much of the code- or experimental-work I think is breaking new ground – is produced entirely outside the academy. Conferences are both a leveler in this regard, and a barrier, since few independents can afford to attend them.

Art policies and development strategies for new media writing(s): This topic is a bit frightening for me; I think of say Blake or Rimbaud or Ginsberg or whomever in relation to 'development strategies.' I hope there aren't any. If you're speaking about strategies of teaching or production within an English or New Media Department – that's something else again, a pedagogical issue. To answer the latter briefly:

1. Immediate personal online production – websites, blogs, Wikis, email lists.
2. Immediate access to computers possessing adequate software for image/text/video/sound production.
3. Access as much as possible to computers off-campus.
4. Exposure to as many sites as possible.
5. Visiting artist programs which give students the opportunity to speak with practitioners directly.

The audience for new media writing(s): Unfortunately mostly new media writers (and academics) look for different demographics with videophones, text messaging, Internet Relay Chat, the old CuSeeMe, Instant Messaging, pagers, and so forth.

The economics of new media writing(s): There are numerous economies at work. The first is bandwidth, which is a political economy, the dispersion of carrier usage, home broadband or dial-up terminals, etc. At one point I taught files should be under 30k in size; now my own sometimes reach 30M, a thousand times larger. The second is simply making a living, which can be extremely difficult; new media writing, outside the limited teaching or performing venues, brings in nothing. The third (I've written of all of these above) is again technology. My own performances require up to 12 Quicktime video/audio files playing simultaneously, and I've had to buy a laptop which can handle these.

The historical context of new media writing(s): This opens up a can of worms (I like worms). I think the roots of any sort of inscription are too numerous to relate vis-a-vis 'historical context.' I've seen new media theorized as originating in film; in writing; in books; in technology; and so forth. I wouldn't bother looking for an origin; there isn't any. Instead one can talk about discourse networks, interpenetrating discursive formations, 'epigenetic landscapes,' and so forth. Reductionism doesn't work. For myself, I tend to emphasize ruptures over flows – that new media writing, which relies on the performativity of language (i.e. language as active interaction with user and technology), is a collocation, a heap, of breaks with the past. In this sense, history only gets in the way; I think its main use might be in the (re)consideration of aesthetic criteria. (Production has become largely micro-situational: what works here, now, in relation to such-and-such tools, such-and-such potential audiences, etc.)

The relationship between new media writing(s) and other digital arts: The former is embedded in the latter, and vice versa. The former is concerned with symbolic inscription, graphemes, written and spoken language, and the latter can be anything. They overlap in numerous ways.

Conclusion

On one hand, there isn't any. On the other, the very tenor/tenure of my remarks above (and they are remarks, not theoretical explication, although any remark is theory-embedded) emphasizes a deep inexplication of new media, writing, and new media writing. I'm not arguing for anything primordial – only that, given the ongoing slaughters, etc., occurring on planet earth, given the limited energy and life-sustaining resources

available, and given the fast-forward changing of human demographics and technologies, predictions become highly problematic. We are caught in the midst of flux we barely understand; for example, from an ecological point of view, the extinctions we are engendering are greater than those of the Precambrian or the 'age of dinosaurs). We have created the greatest communications network the world has ever known, and the first waves of world-wide communities and communalities. We have created these with the most fragile devices, redundancy notwithstanding. We have the opportunity to reach out to each other, to witness and participate in multiculturalisms to such a great degree that the Other is now ourselves. New media writing contributes to this; it does not stand alone as a cultural manifestation or style. It is a way of electronically witnessing the world, creating or recreating the world.

trAce is an early and important example of community. Writers and new media practitioners have been brought together from around the world – not only online, but through the Incubation conferences as well. To some extent the trAce community is now dispersed or dispersing; this is the case with all networked communities, I believe. I hope there are archives.

I hope there will be someone around to read them.

Relevant URLs

<http://www.asondheim.org/>

WVU 2004 projects <http://www.as.wvu.edu/clcold/sondheim/files/>

recent related to WVU <http://www.as.wvu.edu:8000/clc/Members/sondheim>

trAce writing projects <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/writers/sondheim/>

Alan Sondheim *is an artist/thinker. Much of his work from the past decade explores the philosophy, psychology, political economy, and psychoanalytics of Internet (computer) communication. It focuses on virtual subjectivity, sexuality, community, and all aspects of computer interfacing.*

Address [email: sondheim@panix.com]

