

# WORDM4G1X. OR HOW TO PUT A SPELL ON MEDIA ART ARCHIVES

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Aaa, sdafsa, sxjkh hfjk asfjkl. What reminds of onomatopoeia or a poem by Ernst Jandl, are actual tags found as descriptive metadata in online Media Art archives. I call these words magical because they conjure up works and knowledge from the depths of the archive. Magical also, because who but a magician would know about the “spell” sxjkh hfjk asfjkl?

What and if we actually find something in an archive significantly depends on the quality and accessibility of the descriptive metadata assigned to the artworks. “Word magic” provides insights into ways of capturing ephemeral Media Art via descriptive metadata and creating a system of order.

The objects of investigation of this paper are database archives for Media Art. As such I define databases that are mainly documentation archives and have in large parts taken over the role of the classical archive for the field of Media Art; archives that do not necessarily refer to a parallel physical storage/collection, but the (online accessible) documentation archive that can also exist on its own. For in Media Art, what is left to archive very often only consists of documentation material. Such a database archive is about creating order by managing sense, by making statements through this order, by creating a “Grammar of New Media”.

Database archives for Media Art can vary greatly in scope and focus. Some collect physical assets like artworks or documentation material, others just describe them; some include their own institution's projects only, others group their archive around research topics. The database archive typically makes intensive use of language to manage and describe the assets. For the system itself, a term is just functional, an index to correlate the assigned data with. On the human (input and output) side, these words also have meaning. The differences in meaning for humans are what make the words such a crucial issue. In these database archives, knowledge and histories are not only stored and managed, but also created and constructed. Because of this, there needs to be a thorough consideration of the processes involved and of how these systems are created. In addition to describing content, a database archive also manages assets and creates order by naming and relating. Most databases are still organized in the manner of a shelf, although no physical constraints force them to re-implement what was only meant as a metaphor in data-space. “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.” [1] What might have been useful at a time when digital storage was new – using a metaphor to have something familiar around – now proves to be a real obstacle for the sustainability and further development of the archives: “Now it means that the user has to adopt to the creator's specific view of the world, it has become a dogma. It seems that the GUI and all its metaphors has come into our way. It *seems* natural. How terrible.” [2]

## The Lack of a Standard Terminology

One of the major problems discussed in the context of descriptive metadata is most widely known as “the lack of a standard terminology” for describing Media Art, as defined in “Capturing Unstable Media” by Sandra Fauconnier and Rens Frommé from V2\_ [3]. I question whether this really is a problem or if the observed “lack” offers the key to a new concept for “capturing” and describing Media Art. A lack generally means an undesirable condition. Something is missing, and therefore something else is impossible to achieve. The lack has to be removed. In other words, without a standard terminology, it is impossible to correctly and comprehensively describe Media Art. Over the years, several attempts have been made not only to describe Media Art, but also to capture the correct terms and their interrelations; attempts to settle the preconditions for any valid definition hence on. As of now, the goal has not been reached; and looking back at the histories of these attempts, it can legitimately be assumed that it never will. For good. No final standard terminology could ever be assumed, as no final point of knowledge can ever be fixed. However, the problem addressed in the “lack of a standard terminology” is a question of language, the necessity of using it, the observation that the existing methods are not sufficient for the task at hand, the fact that language is an unclosed system, and the difficulties arising from dealing with this fact.

Terminologies do more than just name objects and stick labels on them. By not just being assigned to the artworks, but also being ordered themselves, they create structures, a “Grammar of New Media”. The goal of a standard terminology is to find the agreed meaning of a term and its unique place in this world, of the correct assignment between an entity and a term (i.e. a manual for correct application) in order to decrease semantic heterogeneity. The term is treated like a physical object. The standard terminology should make meaning and order clear and self evident - “natural”, not to be doubted, but being attributed universal validity, truth value, true or false, following a bivalent logic, black or white, no gray in between, good or bad – it is, in short, a simplifying model that is achieved by a reduction of complex situations. By offering a limited number of preferred ways of naming and ordering, by creating unambiguity, by erasing doubt, belief in this “god” equals belief in the creator of the database archive. The creators are interpreters of the existing sources. For the descriptive metadata, their selection is based primarily on their own interpretations (fact is dealt with separately). Essence and interpretation are both problematic when it comes to creating order, because they *appear* to be natural instead of culturally constructed. The resulting system is absolute.

Semantics on the other hand consist of creating a dense network of interrelations, of having multiple – even conflicting – relations, of creating meanings through nets of relations and of revealing sense and meanings on a context-dependent base. A standard terminology would erode multiplicity and density that are necessary ingredients of semantic networks in favor of *the* preferred way of reading. Homogeneity instead of heterogeneity, hegemony instead of free and open choice, creation of one for many and not of many for many, static instead of variable media through static instead of variable language. In the end, this is a question of exercising power and authority; it becomes, *it is* political from the very beginning.

## Dealing with Diversity

The “lack of a standard terminology” does not mean that there are no terminologies. As a matter of fact, many different vocabularies are in use, in different database archives, created by different authors, covering different aspects, etc. The problem of the “lack of a standard terminology” is a matter of how to

deal with diversity of expression, of perception and interpretation. And it has various effects: the process of perception is influenced by multiple factors, like previous knowledge, the culture of the interpreter, awareness, different goals and contexts, just to name a few. Different interpreters perceive different aspects and name them differently. The same term can have multiple meanings for different people or in different disciplines and contexts. Diversity is a matter of meaning, of the use of language. As previously discussed, in a database archive words not only have a naming function, but these names/labels are structured and structuring. Terms are functionally implemented in the database archive, language becomes a technicality. The result is that out of technological necessities of the database models applied, the many meanings and places of a term are often reduced and narrowed down so that preferably only unambiguity remains. This is then called the “preferred way of reading”. The impacts on openness, the character of the resulting knowledge base and finally its sustainability are massive and therefore need to be analyzed critically.

To briefly summarize an analysis of current database archives I created for my Master Thesis shows that the challenges and problems identified in current database archives are:

1. **Rigid hierarchical structures** that very often are one-directional and exclusive and hard to change once they are implemented. This specifically poses problems for the further development of a database archive, which is unavoidable. Each new category challenges the system as a whole.
2. **Faking fixed meaning** ignores that one word can mean different things and have different connotations in different disciplines and contexts (incommensurability, terms used are relative to a scheme) and also ignores that Media Art draws elements from a variety of disciplines. A model of fixed meaning results in a narrowing down of these many perspectives, roots and influences, which can in the best case be described as incomplete, in the worst case it leads to wrong results.
3. Vocabularies follow the the **internal logic of their creators**. This poses a very real and practical problem: as people mostly do not enter a database archive from where its creators plan, namely the platform's start-page, but from a search-engine, they will rely on the words and associations they come up with. The logical consequence for database archive creators should be to respond to their users and to incorporate as many different associations, meanings, ways of spelling, synonyms, maybe even typos... they can think of. Even if the creators would succeed in finding the perfect expression, how would the users know how to find it? How would they convey their word magix to their audience? Creators of such database archives need to address these semantic and interpretation issues, if they successfully want to build and sustain their projects.
4. **A standard terminology for Media Art contradicts itself**. Media Art feeds from various disciplines, crosses boundaries and unites them, resulting in not just a mix of the latter, but also in additional new meanings (“the sum is more than its parts”). Currently applied terminologies reduce the many dimensions to just one (over simplification) or mix what shouldn't be mixed (incommensurability).

I suggest that Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of Family Resemblance offers a viable model to avoid the problems caused by current approaches.

## Ludwig Wittgenstein's Concept of Family Resemblance

“The idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation.” [4] In Wittgenstein's own *Philosophical Investigations*, he introduces a new paradigm for ordering. The concept is easy to explain: Instead of finding one assumed core element that is necessary and common to all members of a class, they are connected by a whole series of criss-crossing and overlapping features. Not by identity, but similarity. This kind of relationship is what Wittgenstein calls Family Resemblance. It offers a solution to what cannot sufficiently be defined by a class-system or – as Wittgenstein wrote - to avoid "the bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language." [5] With this concept, Wittgenstein rejects all taxonomic classification as essentialist and shows the limitations of any hierarchical system built on words: That reaching final accuracy in language is an ideal.

A class is defined explicitly by a core element, a family on the other hand is described by its rules. And – as he continues in his concept of Language-Games [6] – these rules are not fixed once and for all, but made up and modified “as we go along.” [7] They are the (temporary) results of a common activity, and to be effective and meaningful they have to be agreed upon by the “players”. While the traditional classification system was not correct, but effective in pre-computer times, nowadays Wittgenstein's model of a non-essentialist ordering system provides a real alternative for descriptive metadata and ordering systems. What does Wittgenstein mean by “rules” and how could this concept be weighed against the concept of classes?

The importance of rules or of following rules is one of Wittgenstein's main interests in his analysis of games. Rules are conventions. They are not right or wrong in a logical sense; they are just useful. The meaning of a word is the result of following rules. So to fix the meaning of a word by linking it to a thing is just one particular view, not *the* view. What makes a rule different from a definition is that it describes an action, a move, gives direction, but remains flexible. A definition on the other hand cements the flexibility of a rule by locking the meaning. To fall under a definition, necessary and sufficient characteristics have to be fulfilled. A rule on the other hand is much more open. The members of both family and class are interlinked with each other. But instead of resulting in a hierarchy, a fixed order, a non-extendable model and ideal based on mental entities, a family is a network that can grow by sharing and passing on parts from one member to the other, remixing characteristics and adding new ones. To paraphrase the parent-child metaphor of class-subdivision: Unlike in a traditional classification, in the model of Family Resemblance, reproduction can happen naturally: sex instead of in vitro fertilization. Isn't that more realistic?

Assets are connected and sufficiently ordered by the connections that are established by Family Resemblance. This is radically different from the essentialist tradition. Precisely defined classes are not necessary to understand what something is or what relations it can have. To follow a rule is an action and an expression of a specific view of the field. As there are many ways of interpretation, there are also multiple families something can be part of, multiple connections that can but need not be shared by all members of a family. “And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.” [8] What still makes the prospect of a standard terminology so attractive is its relative lack of complexity. It reduces the different perspectives to just one, something simple and easily comprehensible and takes away the burden of making a decision. Family Resemblance on the other hand results in a complex network and is rhizomatic. It shows a huge number of connections between things, very general as well as

very particular ones; it does not weigh what is important and what is not. This is a subjective decision and thus part of the process of filtering (on the user side).

In Media Art archives we sort knowledge that is already present. The order is not implemented to discover new relations, new qualities, but the result of pre-perceived classes and pre-assumed relations between them. New things have to fit in an already established world order, which is created and manifested in technology before the assets are filed in. The effect is that we order what we have known before. We remain in already established Language-Games, that have not been developed for Media Art. [9] Instead of developing its own language, Media Art archives play pre-existing Language-Games. This does not mean that the order created is entirely wrong. What *is* wrong is that it presents itself as the only true way of looking at Media Art when it is in fact only one perspective. Only one dimension is highlighted while most information remains in the dark. It is in the nature of such models of (a piece of the) world, that they demand universal validity. We have to remind ourselves that with descriptive metadata we are dealing in the realms of language, something that is not precise. Again, Wittgenstein reminds us of this when he writes: “We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order with a particular end in view; one out of many possible orders; not *the* order.” [10] Because of this limitation of perspectives, archives are filters. In current archives, filtering and thus reduction is part of the data-entering phase. Filtering is an important part of getting qualified information. The crucial question is: when does this filtering happen? To avoid a narrowing down of possible perspectives, this process should be an option that is up to the user. Applying the concept of Family Resemblance would allow as many connections as possible in the dataentering phase. The filtering process as a temporary closure would be better suited to being an option for the user.

## Conclusion

If the hierarchical structure of vocabulary means a limitation – as Toni Peterson pointed out [11] – why has this remained the building principle for so many database archives' terminologies? I want to recall what Petersen wrote: “The semantic network of a hierarchical structure stretches just over broader and narrower terms and through synonyms and near variant lead-in terms. Building a network of related terms [...] takes on additional significance, especially for the representation of knowledge in a field.” [12] Hierarchies cannot just be turned over into semantics without a significant amount of additional effort. Semantics and density of the net are a result of bringing together actual uses of language, from merging vocabularies and allowing multiple relations for each term. A standard thesaurus for Media Art and a semantic net are therefore, in my opinion, two oppositional and conflicting concepts. The semantic net can inform a lexical corpus, but a lexical corpus will not result in a semantically dense net. This investigation is centered around the question of a standard terminology for Media Art or what the lack of such a terminology means for the field. It showed, that contrary to expectations of a solution, a standard terminology poses new and even more severe problems by narrowing, excluding meaning and thereby closing the concept of art. The impact of a decision for such a model is underestimated, as descriptive metadata not only have a naming/labeling, but also a structuring function in the knowledge base. When the weight of a whole system is put on a rather arbitrary choice of words, when meaning is fixed and the number of the building blocks closed, one can not endlessly build upon the resulting structure without experiencing the limitations of the weight it can bear. To avoid limited and limiting database archives, I argued for an alternative model of structuring and labeling, an open framework instead of a closed and rigid structure, one that is based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of Family Resemblance. With an open concept of art and a polythetic approach to descriptive metadata, we comply with the constant changes in and the interdisciplinary nature of Media Art. A network of relations frees us

from the threats of collapsing, overstrained hierarchical systems. Applying and adapting the concept of Family Resemblances values and sustains the conceptual openness and rhizomatic interconnectedness of Media Art. We need to get rid of apriori schemes all together and shift from a fixed corpus to an open framework to develop a sustainable model for descriptive metadata.

### **References and Notes:**

1. Clay Shirky, "Ontology is Overrated: Categories, Links, and Tags," *Clay Shirky's Personal Web Site*, 2005, [http://www.shirky.com/writings/ontology\\_overrated.html](http://www.shirky.com/writings/ontology_overrated.html) (accessed June 6th, 2011).
2. *Ibid.*
3. Sandra Fauconnier and Rens Frommé, "Deliverable 1.2. Documentation and Capturing Methods for Unstable Media Arts," 2003, <http://bit.ly/rsTCOW> (accessed June 6, 2011).
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 17.
5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 41e, §119.
6. *Ibid.*, 4e, §7: "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, a 'language game.'"
7. *Ibid.*, 33e, §83: "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."
8. *Ibid.*, 27e, §66.
9. For example by adapting existing standard terminologies like the Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus (ATT), [http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting\\_research/vocabularies/aat/](http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/vocabularies/aat/) (accessed June 6, 2011).
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 43e, §132.
11. *Ibid.*, 27e, §67.
12. *Ibid.*, 10e, §23.